

GENERAL INFORMATION

Applicant: City of Bloomington

Request: Amend City Code to Establish Billboard Standards

PROPOSAL

The City of Bloomington's existing billboard regulations do not adequately control the variety of commercially available electronic changeable message signs and animated displays, particularly in light of emerging technologies. Based on input from the City Council, a Focus Group comprised of sign industry professionals, and a literature review staff has prepared a draft ordinance that would regulate the operational characteristics of electronic changing message and video display signs on billboards. The proposed ordinance is attached.

BACKGROUND

The City Council approved a three-month moratorium on June 19, 2006 on rapidly changing image signs and animation displays. The Council directed staff to create new standards related to these types of signs. Staff performed a nation-wide literature review of traffic studies, policy documents, and zoning ordinances relating to electronic message boards. On August 23, 2006 staff convened a Focus Group comprised of sign industry professionals to gather input on a draft version of the proposed ordinance. New electronic sign and video display standards were adopted by the City Council on October 9, 2006.

OBJECTIVES

This ordinance aims to minimize and mitigate the level of distraction from billboards utilizing electronic signs. Existing billboards within Bloomington are located along high-speed, heavily trafficked roadways. Different types of electronic signs present varying levels of distraction to motorists and must be regulated accordingly.

ANALYSIS

Advanced electronic outdoor display signs have become more technologically advanced and less costly. The advanced technology, particularly with respect to the more practical and economical light emitting diode (LED) video display signs, has the ability to produce electronic displays that rival photographs and television programs in quality and clarity.

Existing standards

The current sign ordinance addresses electronic changeable message signs and video displays. However these regulations do not apply to billboards. Existing billboard standards prohibit animation but do not address illumination, timing, or other characteristics of electronic displays.

Driver distraction

While video display signs create mood, interest and energy in pedestrian oriented entertainment districts, serious highway safety questions have been raised concerning this visual medium by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington and Wisconsin Department of Transportation. A complete listing of these and related reports is found in the bibliography section of this staff report.

All of the studies conducted reveal that driver distraction continues to be a significant underlying cause of traffic accidents. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that at least 25% of police-reported crashes involve some form of driver inattention. Driver distraction is one form of inattention and is a factor in over half of these crashes.

Because there are many different technologies that can be used to create the image that is seen on a large video display sign, it is not feasible to develop technology based sign regulations, rather the regulations must address operational characteristics, capabilities and functions. The proposed ordinance would prohibit animation, video displays, flashing lights, and displays imitating motion.

There are currently six billboards within the City of Bloomington; they all front heavily trafficked Interstate Highways. Due to the increased driver workload required by the characteristics of Interstate Highways the proposed sign change frequency for billboards is 20 minutes. Assuming a billboard is visible to each motorist for 30 seconds, a 20 minute dwell time would subject five percent of passing motorists to the distraction of anticipating and viewing a message change. To the other 95 percent of motorists, the billboard would closely resemble the static billboard image motorists are already accustomed to. The following table represents the percentage range of motorists who would view a message change on an electronic sign based on the time frequency of change and its visibility:

PERCENT OF PASSING MOTORISTS WHO WOULD SEE SIGN CHANGE

Frequency of sign change	Time sign is visible to each motorist (dependent upon traffic speed/general conditions/etc.)		
	10 seconds	20 seconds	30 seconds
10 minutes	.9%	1.7%	2.5%
20 minutes	1.7%	3.3%	5%
60 minutes	0.6%	1.1%	1.7%

Location

Billboards are only allowed in the General Industrial (I-3), Freeway Development (FD-2), and Commercial Service (CS-0.5 and CS-1) zoning districts and are governed by Temporary Conditional Use Permits. There are currently six billboards within the City of Bloomington, all of which front Interstate Highways.

Bibliography

Staff considered the following references in preparation of the proposed ordinance. Copies of these references can be acquired from the Planning Division.

- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), *Research Review of Potential safety Effects of Electronic Billboards on Driver Attention and Distraction*, Sept. 11, 2001.
- FHWA, *The Role of Driver Inattention in Crashes: New Statistics from the 1995*.
- University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, *The Role of Driver Distraction in Traffic Crashes*, May 2001.
- University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, *Distractions in Everyday Driving*, May 2003.
- Wachtel, Gerald, Veridan Group, *Video Signs in Seattle*, May 2001.
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), *Synthesis Report of Electronic Billboards and Highway Safety*, June 10, 2003.
- City of Seattle, Ordinance Number 120466, August 6, 2001, amending Municipal Code Sections 23.55.003, 23.55.030, 23.55.034, 23.55.036, 23.55.040, 23.66.160, 23.66.338, 23.69.021, 23.84.036 and adding 23.55.005.
- City of Fayetteville, Ordinance Number 4100, June 16, 1998, Amending Code, Sections 98.12 – 98.99.

RECOMMENDATION

In Case #10000F-06, staff recommends approval of the attached ordinance to modify billboard standards.

ATTACHMENTS

- Proposed Ordinance
- Focus Group meeting minutes

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