

Attachment I

Freeway Signs

Proposed Revisions to the
City of San Jose Sign Ordinance
November, 2009

Freeway Signs Proposed Revisions to the San Jose Sign Ordinance

Existing Regulations

The current Sign Ordinance allows freestanding signs based on the length and number of street frontages of a developed parcel. For this purpose, “street frontage” does not include a freeway. The Ordinance allows attached signage based on building “occupancy frontages”, which are frontages that abut a parking lot, street or plaza but, but not a freeway. In addition, signs are generally precluded from facing a freeway except where a street, parking lot or plaza is located between the parcel and the freeway. These regulations prevent many businesses adjacent to freeways from implementing freeway-oriented signage and do not allow the large “pylon” shopping center freeways signs that are visible along Bay Area freeways in other cities (see Figure 1 for examples). This has raised concern that San Jose businesses in general, and major shopping centers in particular, do not have adequate means to identify their location and the types of goods and services they offer to passing motorists.

Community Input

The issue of large pylon signs for shopping centers was discussed extensively in the public outreach process. Although some participants felt these signs were unnecessary, or unsightly, the overall response to this type of large shopping center sign was positive. People pointed to the way-finding benefits of shopping center signs in identifying not only the location of the center, but also the major tenants. In viewing a variety of photographs of large pylon shopping center signs located in other California cities, participants expressed preferences for signs that can be read clearly and that include creative design features. Responses to electronic/digital pylon signs were slightly more positive overall than responses to static pylon signs.

The Internet Visual Preference Survey indicated a strong acceptance of freeway pylon signs for shopping centers. A majority of respondents, 54%, found them completely acceptable (rating them 7 on a scale of one to seven) and 70% found them largely acceptable. The survey showed slightly different results for digital pylon signs than the community outreach meetings. When asked to choose between side-by-side photographs of static and digital signs, 50% preferred the static sign as compared to 38% who favored the digital sign (the Serramonte sign as shown in Figure 1).

Both the Internet Survey and the community outreach discussions indicated a strong general preference for on-site signage (signage that provides information about what is available at a specific location) over off-site signage. Community residents and business representatives pointed to the practical way-finding benefits of on-site signage and the benefits such signage provides to local businesses. Representatives of large San Jose retailers also indicated a preference for on-site advertising, suggesting that a sign operated by a shopping center for the benefit of the center would promote quality signage and effective maintenance.



Height: 100 ft. Area: Approx. 1,100 sq.ft.



Height: 120 feet (Area Not Available)



Height: 60 ft. Area: 450 sq.ft.



Height: 50 ft. Area: 360 sq.ft.

Figure 1. Freeway (Pylon) Signs

Analysis and Recommendation

As summarized in Table 1, staff is recommending that the Sign Ordinance be revised to allow greater flexibility for way-finding signs along freeways. Existing San Jose businesses and new businesses seeking to relocate to San Jose have provided strong feedback regarding the importance of signs that identify their business location to adjacent freeway travelers. The proposed revisions seek to address this concern by eliminating the restriction on signs facing a freeway and ensuring that building frontages located immediately adjacent to a freeway qualify for signage. These provisions will allow all buildings adjacent to a freeway to display signage similar to what is currently allowed for properties separated from the freeway by a parking lot or driveway, provided that such signage conforms to all other provisions of the Sign Ordinance and to state regulations. Generally, state regulations prohibit off-site advertising within 660 feet of, or within view of, a landscaped freeway. More information regarding state requirements for signage proximate to a freeway is provided in Attachment IV.

Table 1. Freeway Signs

	Current Regulations	Recommended Regulations
Signs on Freeway Frontages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, signs may not face a freeway unless there is an intervening street or driveway. • Building frontages immediately adjacent to a freeway do not qualify for attached signage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate restriction on signs facing freeways. • Allow building frontages on freeways to qualify for attached signage.
Freeway Signs For Large Shopping Centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freeway frontages do not qualify for a freestanding sign. • Signs generally not allowed to face a freeway. • Maximum area of a freestanding shopping center sign is 120 sq. ft. and maximum height is 20 ft. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow 25+ acre shopping centers located within 200 feet of a freeway to display one freestanding sign oriented to the freeway: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Height: maximum 60 ft. -Size: maximum 400 sq. ft. ; -Programmable display elements may comprise up to 50% of the total sign area. -Develop parameters for traffic safety. -Allow on-site or non-commercial messages only.

Staff is recommending that shopping centers of 25 contiguous acres or more in size that are located within 200 linear feet of a freeway, be allowed one large freestanding sign with a maximum area of 400 square feet and a height of 60 feet. These dimensions allow signs at large sites near freeways at a scale that is proportional to the site area and appropriate to the freeway location (such signs might overwhelm a smaller local street). As indicated in Table 2, there are four shopping centers (three existing and one planned)

that are 25 acres or more in size and located within 200 feet of a freeway which would qualify for a freeway sign under the proposed regulations.

The proposed regulations for pylon signs provide a moderate level of signage for large shopping centers proximate to a freeway. Such shopping centers typically include multiple retail establishments, so that signage is needed to identify both the shopping center location and the presence of specific retail establishments located in the center. The proposed 400 square-foot maximum size for these signs is intended serve this function at a scale that is readable from the freeway. The maximum height of 60 feet ensures that the sign’s height is proportionate to its area and that it is clearly visible from the freeway.

The proposed provision for a programmable display component provides for a more efficient use of sign area by allowing messages to be shown sequentially rather than simultaneously, a factor that participants in the public outreach meetings felt would reduce clutter by eliminating the need for multiple static messages. The more visually intense nature of programmable display signage provides an appropriate level of way finding for these larger commercial sites. The programmable display portion of the sign is proposed to be limited to no more than 50% of the total sign area to ensure that the sign includes appropriate design features and a permanent way-finding component for the shopping center.

Table 2. Criteria for Freeway Signs Applied to Existing Shopping Centers

Name	Cross Streets	Within 200 ft. of a Freeway?	25 Acres+? /Acres
Almaden Fashion Plaza	Almaden / Blossom Hill	Yes	Yes (26)
Eastridge	Tully / Capitol	No	Yes (103)
El Paseo De Saratoga	Hamilton/Saratoga	No	Yes (32)
Market Center	Coleman /Taylor	No	Yes (33)
Oakridge Mall	Blossom Hill/Santa Teresa	Yes	Yes (48)
Plaza De San Jose	Story/King	No	No (15)
Princeton Plaza	Blossom Hill/Meridian	No	No (14)
Santana Row	Stevens Creek/Winchester	No	Yes (42)
The Plant	Curtner/Monterey	No	Yes (55)
Tropicana Center	Story/King	No	Yes (26)
Valley Fair	Stevens Creek/Winchester	Yes	Yes (71)
Westgate Mall	Hamilton/Saratoga	No	Yes (42)
@ First Center ¹	N.1st Street/Holger Way	Yes	Yes (26)

¹ This shopping center is approved but not yet constructed.

Staff is recommending that the proposed shopping center pylon signs be limited to on-site messages based on three considerations. First, community input generally indicated a strong preference for on-site signage and specifically suggested that the value of a freeway pylon sign lies in its way-finding function (i.e., in its ability to let passing motorists know what is available at that location). Second, the courts have supported the ability of local sign regulations to distinguish between on- and off-site sign messages due to the unique way-finding function that on-site signage serves. Third, the proposal to limit shopping center signs to on-site messages is consistent with Caltrans regulations which preclude off-site advertising near or within view of a landscaped freeway. As indicated in Figure 1 of Attachment IV, most of the freeway mileage in San Jose is classified as “landscaped”.

Programmable display signs along a freeway will need to be located and regulated so that they do not result in unsafe levels of driver distraction. Additional information regarding digital freeway signs and traffic safety is included in Attachment IV. Should the Council direct staff to incorporate the proposed shopping center signs into the Sign Ordinance, staff will work with the Department of Transportation to develop parameters for their location and operation to ensure that they are implemented in a manner that takes into account and does not negatively impact traffic safety.

Conclusion

The proposed changes to the Sign Ordinance allowing large freeway signs for a limited number of major shopping centers and providing greater flexibility for attached signs along freeway frontages further the City’s objectives for successful commercial businesses and visually vibrant development while providing appropriate parameters to ensure that these signs do not result in negative impacts.