

San Jose Sign Code Update
Meeting Notes

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Community Meeting Notes
3/26/09; 7:00 p.m.
6 attendees

Billboards and supergraphics

- Is there some thought that billboards should be allowed downtown? Because I think it is a bad idea. We don't need to clutter up our downtown with billboards. I think one of the best things the city ever did was to outlaw billboards.
- I think with the highrise towers there is going to be some energy towards supergraphics. If I were a developer, I would want that to help my sales.
- Haven't the newer developments done that to help their leasing? Is it in the code to allow that? It doesn't have to do with whether it's a billboard or supergraphic, it's about uniform enforcement. If it meets the needs of certain individuals, it gets passed. Like the Knight Ridder building, it seems there are certain things that are written into the code to allow for signs like that. But we are a small business and we have to work within the existing code. How do I play within the same guidelines as everyone else?
- I think the city is trying to upgrade and I think these are very tacky. The supergraphics are a little better because they look better.
- Are the supergraphics are temporary? Because I don't have a problem with those if they are temporary.
- Focus on the downtown core, billboards would be okay. But even doing that, it sets a precedent and it dominoes down the street. Code (enforcement) is very weak in San Jose so I don't know how we would stop that. So I am opposed to billboards anywhere because the city can't control it once it starts.
- Construction of new billboards is illegal in San Jose.

Electronic signage/ programmable displays

- Well the signs you have up there, I can live with those a lot better than billboards. Those seem to be okay with me.
- Are there any typical size considerations when you have an electronic sign versus a regular sign?
- It has to be on the property, I assume?
- The ones I've seen, I don't really have a problem with. The only problem is that they don't get so common and popular and the ordinance doesn't allow them to get too big.
- Is there a limit to the number of electronic signs that might be in an area? Like certain linear feet between them?
- I just think one sign blocking another person's business and that's not quite fair.
- I think their fine downtown and probably fine in some major commercial areas, but they should be limited to those areas and big institutions.
- Maybe they should be set back from the sidewalks and the freeway.

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- They're effective on the freeway, but traffic slows down when those things are up on the freeway.
- Does the current code specify in terms of size or are there other points as far as how you can have an electronic sign? In Campbell, they put a big electronic sign up and RV Cloud wanted to put up their own size. It's basically just a size limitation?

Freeway/pylon signs

- Have you every heard of anyone having a hard time finding a shopping center in San Jose?
- It's probably not where but what stores are in the center?
- Is there a digital piece in that pylon on the slide? I don't like that, people reading it while driving and that's just dangerous.
- Plus in the downtown area, a sign like that wouldn't fit in anyway.
- One of the things I really like about San Jose is when you're on a freeway, you get into San Jose and you don't see any signs. That to me is so wonderful and classy. I may not have a problem with this type of sign but not oriented to the freeway, maybe when you get off the freeway, but not on the freeway itself.
- Market Center is a good example of a sign that works, but is not visible from the freeway.
- A sign is appropriate as long as it is scaled to the size of the property.
- But how do you determine that?
- I think they think that business is lost but I'd like to know how many people can't find Valley Fair so they go somewhere else? Don't most cities in Santa Clara County not allow these along the freeways? If there aren't a lot, the competition is not there anyway.
- McCarthy Ranch allows these.
- I'm sure this has come up because of Valley Fair and there is concern that they will put up a big sign like this.

Appropriate amount of signage

- People like us who are trying to get people off the road to come to our business, we need the signs. We're not really a walking city, people have to drive and see where our location is.
- I think downtown probably has fewer illegal signs than it did at one time, or other areas outside of downtown. If you look at the legal signs, they're probably fine. The big problem with signs in San Jose is code enforcement because there is no enforcement. There used to be a design criteria and there must not be one anymore because the signs are getting ugly. Even outside of downtown, the legal signs are fine, but there is a lot of clutter. That's why we have to have a sign ordinance in the first place – the sign clutter got so bad because there were so bad and it was blighted and ugly. I would hate to see us work our way back to that.
- But there is another thing that everyone kid of ignores. If you look at the bus shelters – why are those allowed? Because they're revenue generators. Why is it okay for the bus shelters do that, but I'm a private business and I'm very restricted as to what I can do.
- Most of the signs I see I don't have a problem with. I have a problem with things that wave in the air and I think they're distracting and the a-frames on the sidewalk are really annoying.

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But the ones attached to the buildings I think are okay. You have to advertise your business, it's just part of being in business.

- You mention Times Square and there are a lot of advantages to Times Square. It's known world-wide. You drive around San Jose and it's really boring – there is no energy and vibrancy in San Jose, just concrete buildings. Signs give energy to a downtown area. It's all brown buildings and nothing. I think it could be decent, I really do, to have a different look to downtown San Jose than some really tall buildings.
- There would have to be some business to go along with that because that's just not going to happen. Times Square has human energy that happens down there, signs don't just create that.
- I think this is an interesting discussion because it's a chicken and egg thing. Part of the trouble that's happening downtown is trying to get people down there and making it vibrant. Retailers need signs to make things vibrant and attract people there. I do business downtown and it's tougher than it should be. I think we've lost some retailers downtown because it's tough to do business downtown. We need to recognize that; we need to get people downtown. We need to relax a little bit, not to the point of bad taste, but give the business folks the ability to compete with other areas.
- The 88 downtown (new condo building on San Fernando) has the neon thing – which looks great. Maybe there could be a distinction made between signs, architecture and art

Placement of signage

- As long as everyone gets to play on the same level playing field, it's fine.
- I agree, the only other thing is as long as they stay on the building and not on the roof. Unless, one could do something on the roof that can be controlled for design.
- What about HP Arena – you have the HP logo – how is it that that got approved? It's a city building. Again, everyone needs to be able to play by the same rules – city or private business. I think it's cool that you fly over and can see HP; it's a great marker. I don't want to put Winchester House on the top of our business, but I'd like to have the option. It should be a consistent thing for everyone.
- The skyline signs that we are saying look fine is because they've all been done pretty much in good taste. They aren't tacky.
- Is there an architectural review committee that looks at signage? Perhaps signs of a certain size should be reviewed by the committee.

Quality of signs and materials

- There could be material requirements like no foam which breaks down and looks bad. Avoid the problematic materials and use durable, high quality materials.
- But one of the things we like is creativity, and if you limit things, everything gets boring.

Art displays downtown

- Can't you just define those art things as not signs?

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- The one over Adobe when they were doing their light display – was that a sign or was it art?
- When of the things we had to answer to determine whether it was a sign – if it had a function, it was no longer art. If it was advertising something, it is no longer art. We didn't choose to put the art there, it was an obligation as the developer to put something there. The city had oversight over what went up there.

Signage on news racks

- I think these are a good idea, but my objection is that they're pushed into the middle of the sidewalk. But I like getting rid of the individual racks.
- I do too, get rid of those individual racks.
- This is much better.
- How about graffiti?
- The new form of graffiti we're running into is they're etching things into the glass.

A-frames

- Looks junky
- Shouldn't be an obstacle.
- There should be some kind of enforcement – we do things and over time things get worse and the city doesn't have manpower to enforcement. They don't have any staff. As soon as you say something is okay, it gets worse over time.
- I don't think of any a-frame signs that are 4 feet.
- If you're driving, you don't want visibility blocked by a high sign like that.
- I would like to address the issue of different regulations for different parts of the city. I think that's entirely appropriate because different parts of the city have different functions. There is a difference between the downtown area and Evergreen Village. If Winchester is having some problems related to marketing itself, maybe that could be addressed with something like a-frames. Maybe business and residential communities around it can determine what is appropriate.
- Right now, it's okay to have a-frames in Willow Glen, but not the other NBDs. It's either allowed, or not.
- Who is responsible if someone trips and breaks their arm on an a-frame sign? The city for allowing the sign, the property owner who owns the sign or the person who tripped?

Other issues

- Neon signs – they're appropriate for downtown to brighten up things. Get some flashing lights.
- Historic signs – there should be a lot more protection for historic signs even as separate from the property. I'd also like to see a historic sign go with the business when its business moves. Like the Courtesy Chevrolet should have been moved with the business instead of staying on Santana Row.

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- It would be wonderful if there would be some way to encourage more creative signs, better quality, creative signs.
- I would add to that – not to restrict people in what they can do, but to be more environmentally friendly, sustainable – the right light bulbs. Maybe provide incentives. The human signs, are they regulated? (no)
- Vinyl signs – 3’ high and 6’ long and they’re tacked onto the side of buildings advertising Budweiser and tax consultants – banners – we didn’t talk about those. What is the current code on banners? (ok for individual storefronts or banners – 3/year for 30 days each and there are time limitations but it is difficult to enforce).
- Currently are garage signs or lost pet signs regulated? I would like to see those not regulated. Neighborhoods should deal with those.
- I was led to believe that as long as they weren’t attached to trees?
- Clutter and size of signs and the biggest one is code enforcement.
- A lot of what we’re talking about is equality according to the type of neighborhood and enough flexibility to allow businesses to promote themselves but some design and taste enforcement.
- Neon signs used to be a lot of fun and they got squashed somewhere along the way.