

SIGN ORDINANCE Q&A

Q: Does the revised ordinance allow new billboards and other types of "off-site" signage that aren't related to the business where a particular sign is located?

A: The new ordinance keeps the city's 2002 old ban on new off-site signs and modifications to existing off-site signs, including conversion to digital. That ban allowed exemptions for signs in sign districts and specific plan areas as well as signs erected pursuant to development agreements. The new ordinance eliminates the exceptions for specific plan areas and development agreements, so that new off-site signs can be erected only in approved sign districts.

Q: Doesn't that mean that billboard companies, developers and other outdoor advertising interests will eventually succeed in blanketing the city with sign districts, which defeats the purpose of the off-site sign ban?

A: The new ordinance limits where sign districts can be created. Off-site signs visible from the public right-of-way would only be allowed in sign districts in areas zoned "regional center" and "regional commercial." Right now there are 22 such areas in the city, which are developed or planned as high-intensity commercial and entertainment areas, such as the L.A. Live area downtown, and Universal City in the San Fernando Valley. The other type of sign district would be allowed in any commercial or industrial zone, but off-site signs could not be visible from the public right of way or outside the subject property. Both types of sign districts also require a minimum property sizes that would make it extremely difficult to establish such districts on a small parcel like an average commercial lot.

Q: Couldn't the city just rezone areas to regional center or regional commercial to allow more off-site signs like digital billboards?

A: Yes, although any such action would require revising community plans. This is an extensive process that requires community input and a number of public hearings.

Q: Short of that rezoning, is there any way a sign district allowing exceptions to the off-site sign ban, such as digital billboards visible from the public right-of-way, could be located outside those 22 zones?

A: Unfortunately, yes. The original version of the new sign ordinance approved back in 2009 by the City Planning Commission "grandfathered" two sign districts that it had previously approved, but hadn't been voted on by the City Council. The Council's PLUM committee, under pressure from lobbyists for business groups and developers, expanded that list to twelve sign districts located outside regional center or regional commercial zones. None of these had been approved by the planning commission, and some were nothing more than a City Council member's motion. They include an extensive part of Koreatown and the USC area, among others. For a full list, [click here](#).

Q: Are there any restrictions on the types of signs that can be put up in sign districts?

A: Essentially, no. Each sign district can establish its own regulations, a kind of min-sign ordinance, that will specify sign types, sizes, locations, hours of operation and brightness limits for digital signs, and so forth. There are a few restrictions, however, such as proximity of the signs to residential properties and to areas designated as scenic corridors.

Q: Allowing all these generally prohibited signs in sign districts is obviously a big boon to property

owners and businesses in those districts. Is there any benefit to neighborhoods and communities that will feel the impact of more outdoor advertising visible from their streets and sidewalks?

A: The ordinance approved by the City Planning Commission required the takedown of billboards in neighborhoods outside the sign district in exchange for the right to put up new off-site signage within the sign district. Those billboards would have to be removed at a ratio of more than one square foot of sign area for every square foot of new signage. Again, under pressure from billboard company lobbyists and others, the City Council's PLUM committee revised the ordinance to allow a "community benefits" program to be substituted for up to 50 per cent of the takedown requirement.

Q: And just what would those community benefits be?

A: They include such things as sidewalk widening and landscaping, undergrounding of utilities, streetscape and lighting improvements, public art installations, public parking structures, and building facade improvements. Each community benefits program would be administered by a city department designated as part of the sign district ordinance.

Q: In the recent past, there was much controversy over proposals to allow commercial advertising signs in city parks and recreation facilities. Does the new sign ordinance address this issue?

A: The new ordinance prohibits any off-site signage on properties zoned "Open Space" or "Public Facilities." This would seem to protect parks from the onslaught of commercial advertising threatened in the past. However, it is still uncertain exactly what kind of commercial messages could be contained in "donor signs" recognizing businesses that have contributed money to support parks and other public facilities. And the L.A. Zoo is specifically exempted from this prohibition.

Q: What about penalties for sign ordinance violations? In the past, it seems that some sign companies have put up illegal signs that bring in so much money that possible fines are looked at as just a cost of doing business.

A: The penalties in the new ordinance are significantly higher, and intended as a deterrent to illegal action by sign companies or property owners. While some sign company officials have said they think the penalties that can go as high as \$12,000 a day for the largest signs are unconstitutional, they are based on ones adopted by New York City and upheld by a federal appeals court.

Q: Would the new ordinance as it is now written affect the status of the 99 digital billboards in the city that have been turned off since April, 2013, by court order?

A: No. The court-ordered shutoff was based on a lawsuit settlement agreement the city made with Clear Channel and CBS Outdoor that was deemed illegal. Those billboards can be turned back on only if the City Council votes to specifically legalize them as an exception to the current off-site sign ban. The billboard companies have lobbied the city to do just that, but such action would very likely lead to a proliferation of digital billboards all over the city. The City Planning Department has recommended establishment of a "sign unit" to consider future regulation of digital billboards, including location, brightness standards, and other issues such as revenue sharing with the city. (Note: The Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight opposes allowing digital billboards anywhere outside sign districts.)

Q: The city's billboard inventory found that more than 40% of the approximately 9,000 off-site signs in the city either don't have permits on file or are out of compliance with their permits. Does the new sign

ordinance address this situation?

A: No. But the City Planning Department is recommending that the billboards for which permits cannot be found be “grandfathered” as legal, non-conforming uses. Signs out of compliance with their permits would be subject to citation by the city and removal if they weren't brought into compliance. (Note: The Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight opposes any wholesale “grandfathering” of illegal signs.)