



City of Seattle

Department of Planning and Development

D. M. Sugimura, Director

**CITY OF SEATTLE
ANALYSIS AND DECISION OF THE DIRECTOR
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Application Number: 3012034
Applicant Name: South Seattle Community College
Address of Proposal: 6000 16th Ave. S.W.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION

Land Use Application to remove two existing 4 ft. by 8 ft. illuminated, double faced signs and replace with two 4 ft. by 8 ft. illuminated double faced electronic signs on existing monopoles for an institution (South Seattle Community College).

The following approval is required:

Variance - to allow a changing image sign for a Major Institution.
(SMC 23.69.021.A.2)

SEPA DETERMINATION: Exempt DNS MDNS EIS

DNS with conditions

DNS involving non-exempt grading or demolition, or
involving another agency with jurisdiction.

BACKGROUND

Site and Vicinity

South Seattle Community College (“the College”), a public college, is located on a very large parcel of land in West Seattle. Two reader board signs currently exist along the 2,564 feet of frontage the College has along 16th Ave. S.W. These are located at the northernmost and southernmost vehicle entry points.

Sixteenth Ave. S.W. is an arterial in this area with a medial planting strip. The College is on the east side. On the west side are found predominantly single family structures at a lower elevation than the street level; approximately 10 feet lower across from the northern sign and approximately 16 feet lower across from the southern sign.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes to replace two existing 4 ft. by 8 ft., double faced, illuminated signs along 16th Ave. S.W. with two identically sized ones which would include changing image capability. One sign would be next to the northernmost vehicle entrance to the College and one would be next to the southernmost vehicle entry.

As explained by the applicant, the current signs, in addition to being in need of repair or replacement, have reader boards which must be changed manually and, as a result, the messages are not changed as frequently as it is desired they would be. The further explains benefits the electronic reader boards would provide to their local community and neighbors. Surrounding neighbors would benefit from having new, more aesthetically pleasing signs which are easier to read while driving by and more timely notification of events on campus. The community would also receive important and timely information about key dates for registration, start of classes, special events as well as information about continuing education and lifelong learning opportunities.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

One letter was received during the public comment period which ended on March 9, 2011. Concerns raised included: 1) distraction of drivers on the adjacent street; 2) incompatibility with surrounding residential uses; and 3) questioned the wisdom of a budgetary expenditure on new signs in these hard economic times.

ANALYSIS

Sign Code

Changing image signs are prohibited within Major Institution Overlay Districts in SMC 23.69.021

Definitions

A **reader board sign** is defined in the City of Seattle Sign Regulation Handbook (2005) as “A sign that displays identification, public service or commercial messages by using characters that are changed or arranged in a manual fashion.”

An *electric sign* is defined in the City of Seattle Sign Regulation Handbook (2005) as “any sign containing electrical wiring but not including signs illuminated by an exterior light source.”

A *message board sign* is defined in the City of Seattle Sign Regulation Handbook (2005) as “an electric sign which has a reader board for the display of information, such as time and/or temperature, or public service or commercial messages, which can be changed through the turning on and off of different combination of light bulbs within the display area.”

A *changing-image sign* is defined in the City of Seattle Sign Regulation Handbook (2005) as “a sign, including a sign using a video display method, which changes its message or background by means of electrical, kinetic, solar or mechanical energy, not including message board signs. A video display method is a method of display characterized by real-time, full-motion imagery of at least television quality.”

Variance Analysis

As provided in SMC 23.40.020, variances from the provisions or requirements of Seattle Municipal Code Title 23 shall be authorized only when all of the facts and conditions stated below are found to exist:

- 1. Because of unusual conditions applicable to the subject property, including size, shape, topography, location or surroundings, which were not created by the owner or applicant, the strict application of this Land Use Code would deprive the property of rights and privileges enjoyed by other properties in the same zone or vicinity;***

The College is on a very large parcel of land and its buildings are set back more than 260 feet from the street front property line and in areas uphill from the level of the street. This physical condition acts to separate the Community College from the community around it. The appearance of the College from 16th Ave. S.W. is of driveways, parking lots and buildings at a distance.

A few changing image signs have been previously permitted for public and private high schools in residential zones, as described below. (Applications for signs not meeting development standards which are accessory to public schools go through a departure process described in the Land Use Code at SMC Chapter 23.79. This process is not available for private schools or major institutions therefore; a variance per SMC 23.40.020 is required.)

The following chart describes the conditions found for other similarly permitted signs at schools.

TABLE 1

Previously Approved Changing Image Signage

	O’Dea High School	Ballard High School	Rainier Beach High School	Ingraham High School	Blanchet High School
Zone	High Rise /HR 185 ft. to the Commercial zone to the north and across the street from the Major Institutional overlay to the east	L2/ Neighborhood Commercial (split zoned property)	Lowrise/L-3 Commercial zone to the south and west and L-1 to the north	SF7200 C2 zoning begins 172 ft. west of the campus	SF5000 Multifamily (L-3) zoning begins approx 500 ft. to the south west (transitions to Commercial zoning approx. 1,000 ft. away)
Permit Status	Issued	Issued	Issued	Issued	Approved, not yet issued.
Location	Mid point along east prop line across from Major institutional overlay (MIO) and from a Commercial zone	South façade of the building closer to the sw corner of the site, in the commercially zoned portion of the lot	Proposed along south prop line closer to the sw corner of the site,	Along arterial (N. 130 th), closer to the sw corner of the site,	Mid-point along north property line and approx mid-block along the arterial (N. 85th St.).

The O’Dea sign is located in High Rise (HR) zone, the most intensive multifamily zone, and is across the street from a Major Institutional Overlay District and just south of a Neighborhood Commercial (NC) zone. The Ballard High School sign is on the commercially zoned portion of a split zoned lot, and the proposed sign for Rainier Beach would be located on the portion of a multifamily zoned lot that is directly across the street from a Commercial zone. The changing image signage for Ingraham is located in a single family zone, on an arterial, mid block, approximately half a block from a Neighborhood Commercial (NC) zone to the west.

The strict application of the Land Use Code would not allow a sign with an electronically controlled changing message, which the applicant states is needed for enhanced visibility due to its location and surroundings, and would deprive the school of rights and privileges enjoyed by other schools with changing image signs.

2. ***The requested variance does not go beyond the minimum necessary to afford relief and does not constitute a grant of special privilege inconsistent with the limitations upon other properties in the vicinity and zone in which the subject property is located;***

To allow a changing image sign on two signs being replaced in their existing configuration with a changing image capability would allow the College to obtain a level of convenience and effectiveness in its communication with the community around it and of its own staff and students now commonly enjoyed by educational institutions. It would not be a grant of a special privilege.

The minimum necessary for this function would be an image which is static in its content, without scrolling or flashing and which adjusted its light intensity to respond to the ambient light level, becoming significantly dimmer after dark, and which is off between 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. each day.

3. ***The granting of the variance will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to the property or improvements in the zone or vicinity in which the subject property is located.***

Conditions to limit movement, the use of video display, daytime versus nighttime illumination levels, and hours of operation, mitigate the potential detrimental effects to motorists, pedestrians and nearby property owners. As conditioned, the sign will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to the property or improvements in the zone or vicinity in which the subject property is located.

4. ***The literal interpretation and strict application of the applicable provisions or requirements of this Land Use Code would cause undue hardship or practical difficulties;***

Advances in sign design and construction mean that changing the message on a reader board can now be done electronically, however the Land Use Code does not allow for electronic “changing image signs” in MIOs. The applicant asks to allow an upgrade to the existing manually changed reader board which would address the practical difficulty of message maintenance on the existing sign by allowing for messages to be changed from a computer terminal inside the building as opposed to sending someone out to take down and repost letters manually.

5. ***The requested variance would be consistent with the spirit and purpose of the Land Use Code and adopted Land Use regulations for the area.***

The Land Use Code provides for a Variance process for relief from conditions and situations that the rules of the Code could not anticipate (such as advances in technology), to evaluate specific site conditions and to consider conditions for like uses across the city (i.e. schools in residential zones). At the same time code provisions

prohibiting the use of changing image signs intend to limit the amount of distraction and intrusion of signs into the lives of those around them. Conditioning to limit the use of the changing image function of the proposed signs aids in reconciling these two considerations.

NOTE: Code Requirement

Message content must comply with definition of 'on-premises sign' in the Seattle Municipal Code.

DECISION – VARIANCE

Based on the facts and conditions stated in the numbered criteria of SMC 23.40.020 and the findings and analysis of this decision the Variance is **Approved with conditions.**

CONDITIONS – VARIANCE

For the Life of the Project:

- 1) Size - Maximum size 30 sq. ft. each face (two sides) for the electronic message portion of the sign. Overall sign dimensions are limited to 60 sq. ft. each side.
- 2) The signs shall be operated as text only display signs with no flashing (or light level or color changes that mimic flashing), with no streaming, no picture images, and no video display.
- 3) Daytime illumination levels shall be timed to automatically dim at night and during inclement weather and shall also account for seasonal light level fluctuations.
- 4) Hours of operation are limited to 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. with the message portion blank in other hours.

Signature: _____
Scott Kemp, Senior Land Use Planner
Department of Planning and Development
Land Use Services

Date: June 2, 2011