

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

Project Name: Downtown Sign Code Amendments  
Applicant Name: City of Seattle - Department of Planning and Development  
Address of Proposal: Downtown zones

**SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is proposing to amend the Land Use Code (Title 23) to allow building identification wall signs within certain size limits and in locations above 65 feet from ground level; and to allow ground located signs for multiple business centers in certain Downtown zones, excluding the neighborhoods of Pioneer Square and the International District that have their own sign regulations and the Pike Place Market vicinity.

The following approval is required:

SEPA - Environmental Determination - Chapter 25.05, Seattle Municipal Code.

**SEPA DETERMINATION:**       Exempt     DNS     MDNS     EIS  
    DNS with conditions  
    DNS involving non-exempt grading, or  
   demolition, or another agency with jurisdiction.

**Background**

The subject area consists of Downtown Urban Center neighborhoods that range from central office and retail cores to mixed-use areas such as Belltown and the Denny Triangle. The subject area excludes Pioneer Square and International District neighborhoods that have distinct sign regulations that would not be affected by this proposal.

The existing zoning allows a wide range of signage per individual use, but includes limits on the number of permitted signs and details about the varieties, combinations and features of signage that are permitted and prohibited in various parts of the city. This includes regulations specific to Downtown zones. As is common in many cities, and as likely permitted in past decades in Seattle, some Downtown buildings have signage that may identify the building's use (such as a hotel's name), and some buildings may have

signage on upper portions of facades. This can help identify a destination for a passerby, and it can also contribute to a distinctive visual character of the Downtown vicinity. The proposal for ground signs would add to the options for signage that would help identify business tenants occupying a multiple business center.

### **The Proposal**

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is proposing to amend the Land Use Code (Title 23) to allow building identification wall signs within certain size limits and in locations above sixty-five feet from ground level; and to allow ground located signs for multiple business centers in certain Downtown zones.

Business identification wall signs would be permitted as follows:

- only one major tenant per structure may have identification signs above 65 feet;
- such signs would be limited to 324 square feet in area and 18 feet in height;
- such signs would be limited to a maximum of four signs per structure with only one sign per façade;
- such signs would be required to be located within the upper 25% of the façade on which the sign is located; and
- such signs would be required to relate to the structure's architectural style.

Amendments would also allow multiple business centers (such as food courts) to have the option to locate signs on the ground, in addition to other types of signs currently allowed.

### **Public Comment**

Proposed changes to the Land Use Code require City Council approval. Public comment will be taken on the proposed amendments at a future City Council Public Hearing.

### **ANALYSIS - SEPA**

This proposal is an adoption of legislation, which is defined as a non-project action. This action is not categorically exempt (SMC 25.05.800). A threshold determination is required for any proposal that meets the definition of "action" and is not categorically exempt.

The disclosure of the potential impacts from this proposal was made in an environmental checklist submitted by the applicant dated April 20, 2010. The information in the checklists, the Director's Report and Recommendation, other information provided by the applicant and the experience of the lead agency with review of similar projects form the basis for this analysis and decision.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

Adoption of the recommended Code amendments would result in no immediate adverse short-term impacts because the adoption would be a non-project action. The discussion below evaluates the potential long-term adverse impacts that might conceivably result from future actions relevant to the proposal.

### **Built Environment**

#### **Land & Shoreline Use, Aesthetics, Historic Preservation, Light/Glare**

Future signage newly accommodated by the proposal would generate only a minor potential for adverse land use compatibility impacts generally related to changes in visual aesthetics.

For the proposed signage type on upper building facades, elements of the proposal include criteria to require new signage to fit in with the visual and architectural character of the affected building, and limit the size and location of potential signage. These would help ensure there are not inappropriate signage outcomes with significant adverse visual aesthetic impacts. Under the proposal, a large tenant would be able to be identified in a sign of a limited size in the upper portion of a building, similar to what may be present in older buildings in Seattle or in other cities. Within the context of the Downtown Urban Center location, no significant adverse impacts related to compatibility are identified from this type of sign.

For the ground sign proposal for multiple business centers, this new signing capability could increase the presence of ground signs that would contain multiple business names, perhaps arranged in columnar fashion on a square placard or pillar on the sidewalk. Other sign arrangements might be possible but need not be described for this evaluation. Varieties of signage would continue to be possible, such that businesses might be identified with wall signs, awning signs, and/or ground signs, depending on the number of signs permissible under Seattle's regulations. The increased capability for ground signs would gradually lead to their increased presence in the Downtown environment. Aesthetically, this can be interpreted as incrementally increasing signage at street level and adding items placed on the ground, both of which could be interpreted as adding visual clutter. These are interpreted as adverse impacts, because even though an environment with many signs can be seen as vibrant and active, it can also be interpreted as an environment that is partly compromised in its visual quality. This relates to the purpose of a typical sign to attract attention and convey information, which usually necessitates "standing out" in a visual environment. Given the limited nature of the additional capability for ground signage, and the overall character in the Downtown environment, the proposal is not interpreted to have the potential to generate significant adverse compatibility impacts.

The proposal would not affect sign regulations in the historic Pioneer Square, International District and Pike Place Market vicinities. Due to the somewhat lower scale of many other historic buildings in the rest of Downtown, the proposed wall sign rules may only be rarely applied to historic buildings. However, with the intent to require that wall signs fit in with the character of the buildings, any potential new sign on a historic

building in main part of Downtown would need to be sufficiently compatible with building character. Therefore, significant adverse impacts to historic buildings are not anticipated from this proposal.

The proposal for ground signage also would generate a slight increase in the potential for light/glare impacts because the proposed signage could include backlit signage types. While such signage's lighting could generate added glare in their immediate proximity, the increased possible frequency of such signs is not interpreted to have the potential to generate significant adverse light/glare impacts. To the extent that a given sign might have notable adverse light/glare potential, it possibly could be altered through permitting reviews or eventual enforcement actions to remedy the problem.

### **Transportation, Public Utilities**

The proposal would not result in direct transportation or public service/utility impacts, but could indirectly result in slight incremental adverse impacts. By definition, additional signs of the types proposed to be permitted in many cases would be capable of attracting the attention of passersby, which is primarily oriented to pedestrians in the downtown zones. The nature of the attention would range from a fleeting visual recognition of an entity's sign as part of a broad or a partial skyline, to the similar possibility of recognition of an entity's sign at street level, primarily by passing pedestrians. In either case, there would be momentary attraction of attention that might conceivably contribute in some cases to decreased attention to driving. However, there is also the potential that many ground signs would be so small in their size and messaging that passing drivers would have difficulty visually spotting the sign or its message in the context of a quickly passing environment, thus essentially minimizing the potential for driver distraction. Such ground-related signs could be placed predominantly for the benefit of pedestrians, to notify them of a business in a multiple-business center inside an adjacent building. Attraction of pedestrian's attention is not identified as having any adverse impact potential, because they are not operating a motor vehicle and thus there is essentially no potential for traffic safety impacts. Given the probable minimal nature of the added potential for driver distraction and traffic safety impacts due to this proposal, no significant adverse traffic safety impacts are identified.

Potential utility impacts could include slight increases in demand for electricity, but the impact of such increases on city utilities would be negligible.

DECISION - SEPA

This decision was made after review by the responsible official on behalf of the lead agency of a completed environmental checklist and other information on file with the responsible department. This constitutes the Threshold Determination and form. The intent of this declaration is to satisfy the requirement of the State Environmental Policy Act (RCW 43.21.C), including the requirement to inform the public of agency decisions pursuant to SEPA.

- Determination of Non-Significance. This proposal has been determined to not have a significant adverse impact upon the environment. An EIS is not required under RCW 43.21C.030(2)(C).
  
- Determination of Significance. This proposal has or may have a significant adverse impact upon the environment. An EIS is required under RCW 43.21C.030(2)(C).

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Gordon Clowers, Urban Planner  
Department of Planning and Development