

DIRECTOR’S REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Downtown Sign Code Amendment

Introduction

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is proposing to amend the Land Use Code to allow placement of wall identification signs in certain downtown zones at heights above sixty-five feet when tenants have a lease in effect for a minimum of 200,000 square feet of floor area in a single building. Similar to the existing approval process for hotel and public building signs above sixty-five feet, signs would be approved by the Director of DPD as a Type I decision subject to certain criteria, including dimensional standards, design criteria, and limits on illumination. Already-existing prohibitions against rotating signs above 65 feet, flashing signs, and roof signs would be retained. In addition, when reviewing permit applications, DPD would consult with the Seattle Design Commission when assessing how the signs relate to the overall architecture of the building.

Background and Analysis

Currently, the Land Use Code allows business establishments to erect on-premise signs below 65 feet. In the Downtown zones, only hotels and public buildings are allowed to erect on-premises signs at heights above 65 feet (23.55.034.C.5). Originally, the on-premise signs were prohibited at heights above 65 feet. In 1996, the Council amended the Land Use Code (Ordinance 118414) to allow hotels and public buildings to erect on-premise signs at heights above 65 feet. Downtown buildings with existing signs above 65 feet include the Sheraton Hotel (6th & Union), the Westin Hotel (5th & Stewart), the Hilton Hotel (6th & University), and 1600 Bell Plaza (1600 7th Avenue).

In Seattle, wall signs above 65 feet are allowed in Neighborhood Commercial, Commercial, and Seattle Mixed zones with height limits greater than 65 feet. Many of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown, such as First Hill, have zoning designations that allow upper-level signs not allowed downtown. Several cities allow on-premise wall signs above 65 feet in their downtown zones. San Francisco allows wall signs up to 100 feet above grade. Salt Lake City and Denver allow wall signs without regard to height. Recently, the City of Bellevue amended its sign regulations to permit “upper-level high rise” signs for a single tenant occupying more than 180,000 square feet regardless of height.

Downtown Seattle has established itself as a location for banking, insurance, legal and financial services, health care, research and development, electronic merchandising and the production and sale of software. These are economic areas in which the city and the downtown have a comparative advantage in attracting new tenants and employers. Allowing on-premise wall identification signs above 65 feet will assist in creating conditions that help attract and retain large-scale office tenants and jobs to downtown. In October 2009, the downtown office vacancy rate was near 20%, the highest vacancy rate in the past twenty years. The vacancy rate is predicted to rise to 25 percent in the next year. Building signage visible from a wider area than the surrounding streets below a building is a desired element for many large-scale businesses.

Signs that are well-designed, constructed, and placed in a manner consistent with the structure's architecture and materials will help address concerns that these signs will clutter and commercialize the skyline. To help ensure these signs do not detract from the city's built environment, wall identification signs over 65 feet in downtown zones for buildings other than hotels and public buildings would be permitted if the following conditions are met:

1. The tenant would be required to have a lease in effect for at least 200,000 square feet of gross floor area within the structure on which the signs are proposed.
2. The signs would have to identify the tenant and not exceed 324 square feet in area or eighteen feet in height. For buildings 500 feet in height or taller, a second option is proposed, in lieu of the four signs each limited to 324 square feet, a qualifying tenant would be permitted no more than two signs that (together, if two signs are proposed) do not exceed 648 square feet in area.
3. No structure would be allowed to have more than four of these signs and no more than one per façade.
4. Signs would be located within the highest 25 percent of the tallest portion of the façade.
5. Signs would be required to relate to the architecture of the building through their design, materials, scale and location while preserving the brand design of the establishment. Signs would also have to be (a) attached to the building with a mounting system that is not visible beyond the edges of the sign elements, and (b) not project above the top or beyond the edge of the wall surface to which it is affixed.
6. Sign illumination would be limited to halo lighting with a white light that is no brighter than the equivalent of 30 milliamp neon tubing behind a diffuser panel. Internally illuminated signs, within the same lighting limit, would be allowed when the building surface is glass or other reflective material.

The amendments would apply to all downtown zones except Pioneer Square Mixed (PSM), International District Residential (IDR) and International District Mixed (IDM) zones, and portions of Pike Market Mixed (PMM) zones located in a Historic District. In areas of PMM zones not located in a Historic District, the provisions of the Pike Place Urban Renewal Plan apply. Signs in the PSM, IDR and IDM zones are regulated by the provisions of Chapter 23.66, Special Review Districts.

In reviewing all building identification sign applications, DPD would consult with the Seattle Design Commission in making the determination that the proposed sign positively relates to the architecture of the building.

Recommendation

The Director recommends that the proposed amendments to the Land Use Code allowing on-premises wall identification signs above 65 feet in downtown zones subject to certain criteria be approved. The criteria for sign approval will effectively protect the aesthetics of the Seattle skyline, while enhancing the city's ability to retain and attract large businesses and employers to fill downtown office buildings, add to local employment, and further enhance the economic vitality of the region.