

TO: Secretary, Planning and Operations Committee
FROM: General Manager, Community Services Department
DATE: June 7, 2010
SUBJECT: Official Community Plan and Zoning Bylaw Review
Sign Regulations Review: Electronic Message Centres – (Digital Signs)
FILE NO: PL. 4005 - 12

RECOMMENDATION: that a report be submitted to City Council recommending:

- 1) that the report be forwarded to the Municipal Planning Commission for information; and
- 2) the Administration be instructed to circulate the report to appropriate sign industry and business community stakeholders, and report back to City Council, through the Municipal Planning Commission, with possible City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw) amendments.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main goal of the City of Saskatoon's Sign Regulations is to allow businesses and other organizations to advertise their offerings, while at the same time, maintain reasonable standards of public safety and community aesthetics. Recently, new forms of signs, including digital signs, are challenging this goal. As a result, the Planning and Development Branch is currently reviewing the Sign Regulations as contained in City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw). This report introduces the issue of digital signs and proposes some regulatory amendments to pro-actively address this issue. The report also discusses related issues associated with billboard signs and mobile advertising.

BACKGROUND

As part of the review of the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8769 (Official Community Plan) and City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw) (Capital Project No. 2167), the Community Services Department is examining the issue of digital signs in Saskatoon. Digital signs involve displays that use incandescent lamps, Light-emitting display (LED), Liquid Crystal Display (LCD), plasma or related technology, and whereby the message can be altered by electric or electronic means. Messages can involve letters, words, graphics, animation, video, dynamic text, or can be static.

The popularity of digital signs is likely to increase significantly as this technology becomes more affordable. As a result, new development standards are proposed to address traffic safety, aesthetic, and sign conflict concerns that sometimes arise with this type of dynamic sign.

REPORT

The current Sign Regulations contained in the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw) define digital signs; however, the regulatory treatment is similar to other types of signs and does not consider the broad potential impacts of digital signs. The City of Saskatoon Bylaw 7200 (Traffic Bylaw) also plays a role in regulating digital signs by prohibiting distracting devices. All applications for digital signs, as well as billboards, are reviewed to ensure compliance with the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw), and referred to the Infrastructure Services Department to address traffic safety issues.

Since neither the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw), nor The City of Saskatoon Bylaw 7200 (Traffic Bylaw) provide regulations specific to digital signs, it has become apparent that an enhanced review process is required to adequately address issues of traffic safety, community aesthetics and potential conflicts with other land uses such as residential areas.

By placing regulations in the Zoning Bylaw, the process will become transparent. Sign companies, businesses and the general public will know how permits for digital signs will be evaluated, and how these signs will be operated in the city.

Digital billboards present a further unique challenge due to their size, and the likelihood they will be located next to major arterial and high speed roadways. This creates potential land-use conflicts with residential areas (if nearby) and potential traffic safety issues as animated images may distract drivers.

1. Proposed Framework for Digital Signs in the Zoning Bylaw

The Planning and Development Branch proposes that digital signs be divided into three distinct categories based on the delivery mechanism of their message. The three categories include:

- a) Date and Time Digital Signs;
- b) Electronic Message Centres; and
- c) Static Digital Signs

The regulatory framework for digital signs must address the three categories across the various types of signs (e.g.: freestanding signs, billboards, portable signs, etc.), and must be identified for every zoning district.

i) Date and Time Digital Signs

A Date and Time Digital Sign is a monochrome sign that depicts date, time, temperature, petroleum prices, hotel rates, or related numerical messages. These signs usually depict a static number and do not contain a scrolling or flashing component. The digital portion of the sign is limited to 1.0 metre in height.

Since Date and Time Digital Signs are monochrome and are of limited size, the Planning and Development Branch is of the opinion that these signs should be permitted in all commercial and industrial districts. The development standards would require the numbers to be static for a minimum period of time.

ii) General Issues for Electronic Message Centres

An Electronic Message Centre is a variable message sign that utilizes computer-generated messages involving letters, words, graphics, animation, video, or dynamic text. These signs include digital displays using incandescent lamps, LEDs, LCDs, plasma, or related technology, and whereby the message can be altered by electric or electronic means. A wide array of graphics and presentation options are available with this type of sign.

Electronic Message Centres can be located on a wall, roof, or as freestanding signs, depending on the zoning district. Electronic Message Centres are permitted on all commercial and industrial properties, providing significant opportunities for this type of sign throughout the city.

There are currently 24 Electronic Message Centre signs in Saskatoon. The majority of these signs are located along major roadways, such as Circle Drive, Idylwyld Drive, and the Downtown. These locations tend to be in areas with high volumes of traffic and where off-site advertising is permitted. There have been minimal complaints about these signs to date; the most common complaint being the brightness of the sign. Brightness is easily adjusted if dimmers are installed.

iii) Maximum Size of Electronic Message Centres

Electronic Message Centres are made up of several electronic modules which can be arranged in virtually any dimension. As such, there are no standard sizes for Electronic Message Centres. The Planning and Development Branch recommends that the maximum permitted size for an Electronic Message Centre should be 15 square metres (161 square feet). A maximum sign face of 15 square metres would accommodate all but one existing sign and would ensure no Electronic Message Centres would ever be larger than those already being installed around the city.

Also, in order to minimize distraction to passing motorists, it is recommended that Electronic Message Centres be raised at least 3 metres above the ground.

iv) Electronic Message Centres on Billboards

As previously noted, there are potential land use conflicts and traffic safety issues associated with animated billboard images. Standard billboard signs are between 18.58 square metres and 23.23 square metres (200 square feet to 250 square feet).

The suggested maximum sign face area of 15 square metres would eliminate the opportunity for billboards to be converted into fully animated Electronic Message Centres. However, if agreement can be reached on an appropriate time period for the image to remain static, electronic billboards with static images could be permitted. For example, a billboard with a static image change every five minutes or so will have less impact on traffic than an image that changes every few seconds. Productive discussions with industry representatives have taken place, including the possibility of a demonstration project to gauge public opinion on animated billboards.

Also, the separation distance between billboards, the height of billboards, and the brightness level at night are all variables that may negatively impact nearby residential areas. As such, a separation distance of 200 metres is recommended along major roadways and railways, as well as a height limit of 15 metres, with no stacking of billboards.

v) Static Digital Signs

As noted previously, a Static Digital Sign is an electronic message centre with a static image. The images remain on the screen for a determined length of time and then regenerate to a new image. These signs would follow the same development standards as Electronic Message Centres. However, since there is no motion or animation associated with this type of sign, Static Digital Signs may be an option for certain types of signs in certain locations, where fully animated signs would not be appropriate, such as billboards.

vi) Number of Electronic Message Centres on a Site

Since Electronic Message Centres can be located on a wall, or on primary and secondary freestanding signs, there is the possibility that more than one sign could be placed on a single site. Appropriate regulations should be in place to avoid sign clutter situations. A separation distance of 20 metres between primary and secondary signs is standard in the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw), and would be appropriate for this type of sign. Increased separation distances could be provided along freeways. Limits could also be placed on the number of Electronic Message Centres that can be located on a wall or roof of a property. For instance, a limit of one Electronic Message Centre per property could be established for roof and/or wall signs.

vii) Electronic Message Centres on Mobile Platforms

The technology exists for Electronic Message Centres to be located on mobile signs, either affixed to a vehicle or as a portable sign. The Infrastructure Services Department and Saskatchewan Government Insurance have indicated that Electronic Message Centres on a mobile vehicle would constitute a distracting device and are therefore, not permitted on public roadways. This prohibition could be reflected in the City of Saskatoon Bylaw 8770 (Zoning Bylaw) for clarification.

With respect to portable signs, the same development standards that apply to fixed signs should also apply to portable Electronic Message Centres, with the exception of the 3 metre minimum height requirement, which would be impractical for portable signs to meet.

viii) Electronic Message Centres in Proximity to Residential Areas

Electronic Message Centres are currently permitted in nearly all commercial and industrial zoning districts. Due to the potential proximity of such sites (for example B2 commercial) to residential properties, some further development standards for Electronic Message Centres are recommended. A setback of 15 metres from any adjacent residential property line, and the ability for the Development Officer to request a reduction of the brightness level, would reduce the possibility of negative impacts. It should be noted that there is currently one such sign in a B2 district, with no record of complaints.

2. Potential Development Standards for Electronic Message Centres and other Digital Signs

Along with the types of signs and where they are located, development standards should address potential traffic safety, aesthetic, and sign conflict concerns that may arise with digital signs. The Community Services Department and the Infrastructure Services Department have developed the following proposed standards which could be applied to Electronic Message Centres and other types of digital signs:

- a) date and time digital signs are to be permitted in Sign Groups 2 through 5 (most institutional, commercial, and industrial areas);
- b) that a new definition for Electronic Message Centre be developed, consistent with the terms contained within this report;
- c) flashing images or flashing lights shall be prohibited on all signs;
- d) live video feeds shall be prohibited on all signs;
- e) sound shall be prohibited on all signs;

- f) the face area of Electronic Message Centres shall not exceed 15 square metres and are, therefore, not permitted as a billboard or super board;
- g) all billboards or super boards shall have a height limit of 15 metres, with no stacking of billboards or super boards permitted;
- h) where permitted, no more than one roof sign may be permitted on a building, including conventional signs or electronic centres;
- i) electronic Message Centres inside buildings, viewable through windows, must comply with all requirements for Electronic Message Centres;
- j) electronic Message Centres must be at least 15 metres from an adjacent residential property line and be installed with a dimmer to be adjusted at the discretion of the Development Officer;
- k) electronic Message Centres must remain static on portable and mobile signs and must adhere to the same requirements as other fixed and portable signs, including off-site advertising requirements;
- l) messages on Mobile Electronic Message Centres must remain static while the vehicle is on city roadways;
- m) electronic Message Centres are only permitted on a site where a principal use has been established (e.g., not on railway line properties.);
- n) a person shall not install or keep installed any device in the City of Saskatoon which, in the opinion of the General Manager of Infrastructure Services, is of such a nature is so positioned or so bright that it will distract the attention of a vehicle operator and in so doing create a traffic hazard or interfere with the enjoyment of residential properties; and
- o) all Electronic Message Centres must participate in the Saskatoon Police Services Amber Alert program.

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION PLAN

The Planning and Development Branch is reviewing all current policies contained in the Sign Regulations, including digital signs. As part of this process, general information was provided to select sign companies and the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), soliciting comments. The Planning and Development Branch also met with two of the BID's and held a meeting with sign companies to gain further input. The direction provided in this report has been discussed with these stakeholders.

The Planning and Development Branch now intends to circulate this report to all relevant sign company and business community stakeholders. After gathering all comments and suggestions, a comprehensive report detailing proposed sign regulation amendments would be forwarded through the Municipal Planning Commission to City Council.

A further package of sign regulation amendments will be brought forward in 2011.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public Notice, pursuant to Section 3 of the City of Saskatoon Policy C01-021 (Public Notice Policy), is not required.

Written by: Paul Whitenect, Manager
Business License and Zoning Compliance Section
Planning and Development Branch

Randy Grauer, Manager
Planning and Development Branch

Approved by: “Paul Gauthier”
Paul Gauthier, General Manager
Community Services Department
Dated: “June 9, 2010”

Approved by: “Murray Totland”
Murray Totland
City Manager
Dated: “June 10, 2010”