

SUBJECT: ZONE TEXT AMENDMENT AND SUNSET SPECIFIC PLAN AMENDMENT TO MODIFY STANDARDS FOR OFF-SITE SIGNAGE IN THE SUNSET SPECIFIC PLAN AREA

INITIATED BY: PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT
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STATEMENT ON THE SUBJECT:

The City Council will receive an Initial Study/Negative Declaration, and draft Sunset Specific Plan Amendment and Zone Text Amendment, to update the City's off-site signage policy and adopt new standards for billboards on Sunset Boulevard. The purpose of transmitting the documents at this time is to provide the report and draft ordinance with additional time for Council and public review. The City Council will hold a public hearing for this item on March 18, 2019 to make a determination on the policy.

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive and file.

BACKGROUND / ANALYSIS:

The proposed Sunset Specific Plan Amendment and associated Zone Text Amedment ("policy") establishes a new vision and creates a decision-making framework for the future of off-site advertising signage on Sunset Boulevard. The amendment to the Sunset Specific Plan includes new standards and guidelines to regulate the distribution, size, location, and operation of new and modified billboards and tall walls. It includes Design Principles and an associated evaluation system that will ensure high-quality signage projects that are creative, contextual for Sunset Boulevard, and sensitive to adjacent land uses. The amendment also guides the delivery of public benefits, including arts programming, and improvements to the public realm. The policy for off-site signage in the Sunset Specific Plan area is designed to provide a strong, but flexible framework to guide future proposed off-site signage projects – new signs and improvements to existing signs - to positively contribute to the character of the Strip.

Prepared with extensive analysis and input from staff, technical consultants, industry experts, and community stakeholders, the proposed policy (Attachment D) carefully balances the concerns and interests of multiple stakeholders. The proposal is

responsive to the direction initially established by the West Hollywood City Council by addressing sign quantity, creativity, aesthetics, new technology, and the relationship of signs to land use. The topics of flexibility, design expectations, public benefits, implementation, and operational standards have been refined and updated. The policy reflects and balances the input of adjacent neighborhoods, property owners, billboard operators, local businesses, and the broader West Hollywood community.

A. POLICY OBJECTIVES

The City Council established the initial objectives for this project, including – setting the appropriate quantity of new signs, ensuring creativity, improving aesthetics, accommodating new technology, and preventing undesirable land use balances. The proposed policy addresses these objectives in the following ways:

Setting the Appropriate Quantity of New Signs: The proposed policy allows approximately 20 new billboard faces to be installed on Sunset Boulevard over 15 years, distributed among seven defined geographic zones to complement the linear nature of the street. The signs may be permitted as part of larger projects, including new development projects as well as existing buildings that undergo a significant upgrade to their façade, interior, or address a required seismic retrofit; conversion of existing signs to digital may be allowed on designated cultural resources. The City also has the ability to consider exemplary alternative projects that don't fit in the previous categories.

Ensuring Creativity: The policy encourages project creativity by establishing a flexible framework of Design Principles rather than prescriptive measures. The design of signage is encouraged to be responsive to the unique conditions of each site, taking into account existing or proposed architecture, open spaces, topography, street curvature, and neighboring parcels. New signage will be encouraged to be both contextual and creative by utilizing non-standard billboard materials, formats, and sizes such as curved or multi-planar surfaces, and creative architectural lighting. The policy will allow digital signs that provide creative content and coordinated arts programming.

Improving Aesthetics: The policy seeks to improve the aesthetics related to the design and operation of signage on the Sunset Strip. The proposed Design Principles and standards emphasize aesthetic improvements in a number of ways. Developers are encouraged to integrate signs and architecture in a manner that is innovative and also complements surrounding features. Lighting and operational standards control brightness, glare, and light spillover to support the safety and comfort of drivers, pedestrian, and surrounding neighbors. Major upgrades to existing buildings (such as remodels and façade improvements) are encouraged by creating opportunities for those

sites to pursue new off-site advertising signage. The policy also allows and encourages aesthetic improvements to existing billboards, tall walls, and large video screens.

Accommodating New Technology: The policy places an emphasis on use of state of the art technology in signage projects. This will ensure that signs utilize the highest quality digital display that are adjustable to meet operational standards, are aligned with the city's sustainability goals, and can be coordinated for public arts programming. The policy encourages adaptability for future technological innovations and use of durable materials to extend signage lifespan.

Preventing Undesirable Land Use Balances: The policy supports the continued economic development of the Sunset Strip and addresses the undesirable land use patterns that can be driven by signage. New signage is targeted for projects that meet additional City policy objectives. Parcels that contain existing off-site advertising retain rights to existing sign area when redevelopment occurs. The policy discourages development designs that are driven by signage through a focus on architectural integration and minimum development thresholds for new projects that include off-site advertising signs. Existing buildings must undergo major remodels, seismic retrofits, or façade improvements in order to qualify for new signage. Existing tall walls and billboards are allowed to modify their design and location to respond to changing land use configurations.

B. TOPICS ADDRESSED

The proposed policy has evolved since the initial public draft, and a history of City Council and Planning Commission actions, along with City Council staff reports, are provided in Attachments E - I. Since the last presentation to the Council in Fall 2018, staff held a series of meetings with industry stakeholders, the Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission, and other interested parties to refine the topics of flexibility, review process, lighting thresholds, enforcement, public arts integration, and cultural resources. Following direction from the City Council and input from these stakeholders, the proposed amendment to the Sunset Specific Plan addresses the following topics:

Design Expectations

The Sunset Specific Plan Amendment establishes clear and elevated design expectations for new and modified off-site advertising on Sunset Boulevard. Regulations for the size, location, distribution, and operation will ensure contextual, high-quality, and neighbor-friendly design of new off-site advertising signage. The City will administratively adopt an evaluation system and implementation strategy based on criteria identified in the policy related to design excellence, innovative design, contextual and compatible design, adaptability, sustainable practice, economic development, and

community benefits. These will define the broad criteria that will be used to evaluate each new off-site advertising project.

Implementation Strategy

Following adoption of the proposed amendment, the City Manager will establish the procedures for processing new off-site signage applications. The specific details of the competitive application processes will be developed in consultation with stakeholders. The anticipated implementation process is summarized as follows:

- Establishment of a project review submittal schedule, submittal requirements, and the initial number of project applications that can be approved for the new development, significant upgrade, alternative, and cultural resource project categories.
- Scoring criteria will be developed based on the Design Principles section of the policy (Attachment J). Staff will work on weighting of the broader categories as well as the individual criterion. Consideration will be developed for different categories of projects, with special attention given to projects in the pipeline and for the unique conditions inherent with Cultural Resources.
- Evaluation of submittals by an expert panel including representatives such as an architecture/urban design professional, an advertising/billboard professional, a West Hollywood resident or business owner, and a historic preservation professional (when including a cultural resource).
- The top-scoring qualified submissions may be granted a concept award for the sign proposal, valid for a 2-year window, and then have the opportunity to apply for a project development agreement.
- The anticipated implementation process including subsequent review windows and procedures is described in further detail in Section D.

Flexibility

A flexible framework has been proposed that will inspire creative, innovative, technologically-advanced, and adaptable off-site advertising projects. The following changes have been made to the policy to address City Council direction provided at the hearing on the topic on September 4, 2018:

- Many of the prescriptive and objective design requirements proposed in the original draft policy have been reformulated as Design Principles that will allow for creativity in project design to meet the elevated expectations for sign projects.

- The policy allows the City to approve alternative projects that don't fall into the other allowable categories. This allows for consideration of projects of an extraordinary design caliber that fall outside of the exact provisions of the policy but are otherwise consistent with the intent of the urban design vision, design and development requirements, guidelines, and standards. These projects require additional findings to ensure consistency with the intent of the Specific Plan, provide exceptional design, and extraordinary public benefits provided to the City.
- The new development project category has been expanded (a summary of all project categories is found in Attachment K). Projects deemed complete after June 1, 2012 now meet the definition. Also, the minimum development threshold for new development has been modified to 75% of allowable floor area for both the north and south side of Sunset Boulevard. This change was included in order to accommodate a wider array of potential projects under this application type.
- The policy allows existing tall walls to reapportion sign area to adjust to changing conditions on Sunset and to maintain visibility.
- The remodel projects category has been expanded to now include significant interior remodels and seismic upgrades, recognizing the cost and importance of reinvestment in existing buildings.

Public Benefits

The policy includes a focus on the delivery of public benefits from off-site advertising signage. Benefits are envisioned to be both local, including signage programming and physical improvements to Sunset Boulevard, and citywide, benefiting the City of West Hollywood at large. A key component of the policy will be the outdoor display of curated digital art that will be coordinated across all new digital signs. Additional benefits could include permanent public art, physical improvements to public spaces, preservation of historic buildings through cultural resource designation, and revenue sharing to support city services. Additionally, there is flexibility to address future identified needs. The following changes are included in the attached draft policy:

- Expanded the potential number of digital sign conversions in conjunction with preservation of cultural resources by moving to a pool of sign area as opposed to a strict number of projects.
- Reduced the art programming contribution rate from 25% to 17.5% of operational hours.

- Clarified scheduling and operation of arts programming on Sunset. Billboard owners and operators will be invited to participate in and provide input regularly as part of the curation and yearly programming of arts on digital billboards subject to final approval of the Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission.
- Allowed for buildings that are proposing required seismic retrofits or major remodels to be considered for new off-site signage to help recover the cost of important upgrades and needed repairs.

Operational Standards

A team of experts has guided staff and helped create signage operational standards that will control the hours of operation, brightness, and energy use to ensure that new or modified signs create an environment safe and comfortable for drivers, pedestrians, and neighboring land uses. Specifically, the refresh rate (how often digital sign images may change) was updated from 16 seconds to 8 seconds to align with standard roadway safety and advertising industry rates.

C. SUMMARY

The proposed policy will establish a vision that will allow for additional signage including digital and guide new innovative signage projects with accompanying public benefits to create an environment on Sunset Boulevard that is truly unique. High-quality signs will be creative, responsive to the special nature of the street, and sensitive to the surroundings. The policy is intended to deliver multiple benefits by creating new economic opportunities for property owners, generating improvements to the public realm, creating incentives for the preservation of cultural resources, and establishing a curated digital arts program.

D. NEXT STEPS

The evaluation process for determining which off-site signage applications will be selected will be determined by the City Manager after the policy is adopted. The Design Principles included in Section 2 of the proposed ordinance are the broad criteria and priorities that will be used for evaluation in the process to screen for design excellence. Following approval of this new policy, the City Manager will work with staff, industry stakeholders, technical experts, and other interested parties to begin the implementation process for new signage project opportunities. Pending Council approval of the policy, the anticipated next steps and timeline are as follows:

April - June 2019: Staff meets with operators, stakeholders and interested parties to seek input on draft scoring system for evaluation.

July 2019 – City staff finalizes scoring system and releases call for projects for new/digital signs. Initial call for projects will award opportunities for up to 12 sites:

- Approximately 4 conversions to digital on historic sites
- 8 new signs: upgrades, new development, or alternative projects

October 2019 – Submittals due. The composition of the review panel is expected to include:

- 1 Architecture/Urban Design Professional
- 1 Advertising/Billboard Professional
- 1 West Hollywood Generalist (resident or business owner)
- 1 Cultural Resources Professional (only for relevant projects)

November – December 2019 – highest-scoring qualified projects notified and initial projects may begin development agreement process.

2020 – Staff begins processing entitlements for initial round of sign projects.

2021 – Application process for the review of new signage opportunities resumes.

CONFORMANCE WITH VISION 2020 AND THE GOALS OF THE WEST HOLLYWOOD GENERAL PLAN:

This item is consistent with the Primary Strategic Goal(s) (PSG) and/or Ongoing Strategic Program(s) (OSP) of:

- OSP-1: Adaptability to Future Change.
- OSP-8: Enhance the Cultural and Creative Life of the Community.
- OSP-9: Upgrade Existing Buildings & Infrastructure.
- PSG-1: Maintain the City's Unique Urban Balance with Emphasis on Residential Neighborhood Livability.

In addition, this item is compliant with the following goal(s) of the West Hollywood General Plan:

- LU-15: Maintain Sunset Boulevard as a regional, national, and international destination for entertainment, and the primary economic engine of the City.
- LU-16: Maximize the iconic urban design value and visual creativity of signage in West Hollywood.

EVALUATION PROCESSES:

Staff will carefully track and administer the screening process, the quantity of sign projects, development agreement negotiations, design quality, operational standards, and post-construction monitoring.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND HEALTH:

A CEQA Initial Study was prepared, which determined that the proposed policy would

not have a significant effect on the environment. Therefore, a Notice of Intent to Adopt a Negative Declaration was prepared and provided to the public, agencies, and the Los Angeles County Clerk. During the public comment period (April 6 to April 27, 2017), the City received 22 comment letters. Responses to these letters are provided in Section 5 of the Initial Study/Negative Declaration.

On September 4, 2018 the City Council provided additional direction which resulted in clarifications and updates to the amended policy. The revisions that have been made to the proposed policy would not result in changes to the impact conclusions in the Initial Study/Negative Declaration (IS/ND) such that recirculation is warranted. The environmental impact conclusions continue to apply to the revised version of the policy. These updates and additional CEQA analysis are outlined in Attachment B. Per CEQA Guidelines Section 15073.5, the City is not required to recirculate the IS/ND for public review.

In addition to conducting an environmental analysis that found no significant impacts under CEQA, the policy encourages sustainability by requiring that new digital signs be carbon-neutral, meaning that any additional energy required by a billboard must be from solar power generated on-site, be purchased from carbon-free sources, or demonstrate offsets to energy use through other means.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Community engagement was extensive for this project. Staff met with a large range of stakeholders and community groups. Public input helped to shape the final policy, with input from residents, property owners, billboard companies and other interested parties. Staff has met with the Chamber of Commerce Billboard Subcommittee on numerous occasions since the September 18, 2017 Council meeting, as well as meeting individually with a number of stakeholders who had questions or policy suggestions. Additional details on community engagement were provided in each of the attached staff reports. (Attachments G - I)

OFFICE OF PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY:

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT / LONG RANGE
PLANNING DIVISION

FISCAL IMPACT:

None at this time. However, the provision of off-site signage will result in future revenue for the City, to be determined on a project level basis. It is anticipated that review of signage projects will be expedited by a contract staff position, which is expected to fully cost recoverable.

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Proposed Resolution No. 19-_____ (CEQA Adoption)
- B. Initial Study/Negative Declaration
- C. Proposed Ordinance No. 19-_____ (Zone Text Amendment and Sunset Specific Plan Amendment)
- D. Proposed Sunset Signage Policy
- E. Summary of Prior City Council Actions
- F. Excerpt of September 4, 2018 City Council Meeting Minutes
- G. September 4, 2018 City Council Staff Report
- H. September 18, 2017 City Council Staff Report
- I. June 15, 2017 Planning Commission Staff Report
- J. Draft Design Principles/Screening for Design Excellence Criteria
- K. Summary of Proposed Categories for New and Improved Signs
- L. Inventory of Outdoor Advertising Signs on Sunset Blvd.