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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
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June 12, 2012

The Honorable Mary Hynes
Chairman, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chairman Hynes:

At its May 2012 meeting, the Arlington Economic Development Commission (EDC) received a presentation from staff on the proposed changes to the sign ordinance. The EDC appreciates that the County Board will hear many opinions about the proposed changes to the sign ordinance prior to deliberation and final adoption. Therefore, the EDC would like to convey its thoughts on the sign ordinance – specifically as it relates to the business community and the economic sustainability of Arlington.

Superior Business Environment. In Arlington’s Framework for Prosperity – Economic Development Strategic Plan (“Plan”), a plan adopted by the EDC, four all-encompassing goals articulated, at the highest level, the desired economic development outcomes for a successful community. Underlying the first goal – Arlington will be recognized for its superior business environment which includes world-class facilities, infrastructure and systems – the Plan states that “economic development is accomplished in a competitive marketplace. Localities that can offer an excellent climate for businesses to grow and prosper will indeed experience that growth and prosperity.” The Plan also acknowledges that “[o]ffering prospective businesses – and existing businesses – a stable and predictable regulatory climate is fundamental to providing world-class service.” Signs and sign regulations are a part of this climate. A sound and comprehensible sign ordinance is one element required for a superior business environment. Therefore, the updated sign ordinance must provide clarity and ease for the business community while balancing the needs and desires of the broader community.

Economic Importance. One implementation strategy suggested by the Plan is providing win-win strategies. “The judicious, strategic and careful use of incentives to enhance Arlington’s competitive position for key business investments can significantly augment the diversity and strength of our business base as well as facilitate the growth of existing businesses and the success of important business locations.” One incentive that Arlington can offer businesses is the placement of an illuminated sign at the roofline. Signs, visible from both within and outside of Arlington, communicate Arlington’s success in attracting leading companies, universities and institutions. Businesses value such prominent signage as a way to give them a regional and national presence. These signs – and their visibility – enhance Arlington’s competitive position and can give Arlington a key advantage.

In addition to identifying tenants, signs must also convey availability of space within buildings. The vacancy rate in Arlington's office buildings is increasing – within the last year countywide vacancy has risen more than three percent to 12.7 percent and more than six percent in the Crystal City submarket to 16.4 percent. Property owners are feeling the implications of BRAC as large spaces, and in some instances full buildings, are vacated. It is anticipated that vacancy rates will remain elevated over the next 5 – 10 years as buildings are repurposed, refilled and redeveloped. In order to maintain Arlington's competitive position, temporary leasing signs – that provide ample and legible information – are necessary.

Community Enhancement. The fourth goal in the Plan states, "Arlington will enjoy high quality places that ensure an exceptional quality of life and offer amenities that are valued by residents, businesses and visitors." Signs can enhance the experience of the community – visually showcasing the variety of businesses, services and amenities found within Arlington. Signs can provide opportunities to differentiate Arlington's urban villages; demonstrate Arlington's diverse retail mix of shopping, dining and entertainment; and allow businesses to display their distinct personalities. Legibility, creativity and expression matter and the sign ordinance must accommodate all of these elements. Although not contemplated within the most recent draft, sign overlay districts may enhance Arlington's ability to distinguish urban villages from each other and to create special areas that have a different look and feel. Arlington should have the ability to create a "Times Square" environment, on a more modest scale, as part of a comprehensive placemaking effort within one or more of the urban villages.

As elaborated above, the EDC wants to ensure that Arlington is recognized as a superior business environment; maintain Arlington's competitive position and its economic importance regionally, nationally and globally; and enhance our community. Therefore, we make the following specific comments pertaining to the sign ordinance.

Section 34.3. Modifications

The EDC appreciates that the most recent draft addresses the need, albeit limited, for modifications to the standards by the County Board. Reducing the number of requests heard by the County Board for modifications to sign regulations is important and one of the guiding principles of this update. Staff has successfully codified 90 percent of the typical requests. However, the EDC is uncertain if the proposal fully addresses the creativity and innovation of our businesses and how they wish to promote themselves through the use of signs. Ensuring that new sign types, not permitted within the ordinance, would be promptly reviewed and considered for inclusion as an amendment to the ordinance is important. Such flexibility and adaptability allow for our business community to remain nimble and allows for a superior business environment.

Section 34.7.O. Additional sign area for specified uses (formerly referred to as "Rooftop Signs")
The ability to place certain signs above 35 feet without County Board approval is a paradigm shift for which the business community welcomes. The EDC is generally supportive of the language, including a graduated sign area allowance, drafted by staff with the following recommendations:

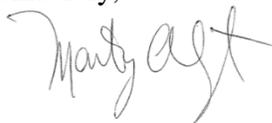
- Additional sign area should be considered for residential buildings over 70 feet in height.
- Additional sign area (1.5 x building width at height of sign) should be considered for buildings over 300 feet in height.
- Permit greater flexibility within the sign band – it is uncertain if 80 percent of the sign, including logos, will fit within the six foot height limit while maintaining legibility especially on taller buildings.
- Option B with the following caveat: additional lighting restrictions for signs facing single family “R” districts are appropriate. There should not be additional restrictions on signs facing residential uses within multifamily and mixed use districts.
- Option C (no additional restrictions) for the illumination and placement of signs placed above 40 feet. However, the EDC recognizes that in many recent approvals the County Board has limited the hours of illumination to between 8 am to 10 pm (Option D). The prohibition or further restriction of signs facing the monumental core, George Washington Parkway or Arlington Cemetery, as suggested in Options E and F, would drastically limit signs in Rosslyn and Crystal City – two of Arlington's key economic hubs – and eliminate one of Arlington's core competitive advantages.

Section 34.14. Temporary signs for construction and sale/leasing

We are encouraged by the draft language and commend staff for specifically identifying the purposes that support temporary signs – specifically for construction and sale/leasing. Further, changing how the sign area is measured for construction signs is significant and appreciated within the business community. Adequate and appropriate messaging to prospective tenants is paramount in decreasing vacancy rates within Arlington.

The Arlington Economic Development Commission would like to thank the County Board for its time and thorough deliberation of the updates to the sign regulations. The EDC would also like to thank staff for their work and understanding of the business perspective. In particular, the EDC commends Deborah Albert on her consummate professionalism and her ability to manage many and often disparate comments about signs in Arlington. If you should have any questions or require any additional information, please do not hesitate in contacting me.

Sincerely,



Marty Almquist, Chair
Arlington Economic Development Commission

cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Barbara Donnellan, Arlington County Manager
Members, Arlington Economic Development Commission

Arlington, June 13, 2012

To: The Members of the Arlington County Board

Comments on the RTA on Sign Regulations for the Board Meeting on June 19

During the past several months, we have closely followed the deliberations of the Zoning Committee regarding revised sign regulations, on behalf of the Crystal City Resident Community. We had the opportunity to convey some concerns at the Planning Commission meeting on June 4, and we would have liked to do the same at the Board meeting. However, your meeting on June 19 coincides with travel abroad for both of us, so we would like to convey our views for the record in this manner instead.

We appreciate a general effort to try to codify practices and to move much of the necessary decision-making to an administrative basis. However, we strongly believe it is inappropriate and detrimental to the community to attempt to do so with regard to signs and illumination above 40 ft on façades or on the roofline/rooftop. Proposals for such signage and illumination must remain under the exclusive purview of the County Board, through approvals of Site Plans or subsequent amendments.

We believe this principle and policy should apply throughout the County, but we see it as particularly important in a mixed-use district such as Crystal City (or Rosslyn). It would be totally unrealistic to anticipate and codify all the possible scenarios, in terms of juxtapositions of commercial and residential buildings with respect to alignment, relative height and angles. Each case would be different. Moreover, it inherently involves a resolution of a conflict of interests. It seems clear to us that the necessary effort to reach a reasonable compromise would need to rely on investigations by staff, a review by the Planning Commission, and an application of sound judgment by the County Board.

The location of Crystal City is prone to cause such conflicts of interest relatively more often, due to the strong consensus that near-by federal lands must be protected from the sights of signs and illumination. The revised regulations also capture, in one form or the other, a traditional protection for the neighborhoods to our west. By default, the result is that signs and illumination would then tend to face 'inwards' in Crystal City, thus maximizing the risk of impact on our residential buildings. We believe that a responsible and unbiased resolution in each case can only be achieved through Board intervention.

We also note that an absolute prohibition of signs facing west, 'option A' in the RTA, would de facto make faint views from miles away trump 'in your face' scenarios in Crystal City. This is not reasonable or justifiable. The scope for fair compromise solutions exists through a suitably strengthened 'Option B'.

We are certain that you fully share our conviction about the importance of making mixed-use districts thrive and become attractive to all tenants. This effort must be supported, not undermined, by the revised sign regulations. A sense of harmonious co-existence and mutual respect must be created.

Sincerely,

Judy Freshman and Christer Ahl (for the Crystal City Resident Community)

Input from the Civic Federation to the Current Draft of the Sign Ordinance June 5, 2012

Process for Gathering Input

The second major item on the agenda for the June 5th Civic Federation was a discussion of current draft of the sign ordinance, which began after 9:00 pm. The Planning & Zoning Committee first presented a review of sign ordinance input the Civic Federation provided in recent years and then led the audience through a consideration of nine items in the version of the June 2nd staff draft, hereinafter referred to as the “current draft.”

For each of the nine items, the P&Z chairs presented a description of the current proposal and some background about the rationale. Debbie Albert who is the County staff person leading the revision effort sat at the table and clarified several items.

After reviewing an item, delegates were asked to vote on the item by indicating their support for various options listed. This *straw poll* process was used instead of the resolution process that the Civic Federation usually follows because the content was varied and complex — and because the goal was to capture input about what members wanted rather than to craft a comprehensive recommendation.

The nine items and options for each covered during the meeting were selected by the P&Z Committee co-chairs based on:

- Prior input from the Civic Federation;
- Their analysis of what would be of most concern to the Civic Federation membership;
- The meetings they attended, including public meetings conducted by staff, ZOCO meetings, and the lighted sign bus tour;
- Specific requests from delegates; and
- The Planning Commission’s resolution, which passed unanimously the previous evening.

The process used for the June 5th meeting asked delegates in indicate support for as many items as they wanted. (“You may vote for more than 1 item.”) Only support votes were taken.

Straw Poll Results

The results of the nine straw poll items follow. At various points there were 37 or 38 delegates voting. The left column indicates the percent of those delegates who supported the options listed. The item with the greatest support is bolded.

1. Commercial Signs in the Public ROW

The description provided by the speaker suggested that ¼ mile would not be adequate.

0%	I want no commercial signs in the Public Right of Way.
27%	I support the current draft and the ¼ mile option.
92%	I support the current draft and the ½ mile option.
73%	I would like to revise the current draft to expand the times allowed based on the event timing.
8%	I support current draft with a 1-mile option.

2. Political Signs in the Public ROW

The description provided by the speaker reminded delegates of the prior difficulty associated with caucus and endorsement signage and also indicated the Planning Commission's suggested wording for expanding the definition of political event.

14%	I want no political signs in the Public Right of Way.
73%	I support the current regulations.
0%	I support revising the current draft to allow political signs in utility strips in R zoning districts as well as in medians.
81%	I support revising the current draft to allow "political" signs to include signs 31 day before a "party nominating caucus called by a political party registered in the State of VA"

3. 7-Day Signs in the Public ROW

The speaker reminded delegates that prior Civic Federation input asked for a way to announce community events and then characterized the 7-day signs as a creative solution. There was a question whether fund-raising activities were commercial events and thus not eligible. A clarification was needed that the organizations in question would qualify as non-commercial if they operated as not-for-profit entities.

3%	I do not support 7-day signs in the Public Right of Way.
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97%	I support the current draft.
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4. Neighborhood Conservation Signs

The speaker showed a drawing of the current NCAC standard for neighborhood signs and where temporary signs might be added. The speaker also explained that there were older signs that did not conform to the current NC standard as well as signs that had temporary attachments that did not conform to the rules in the current draft.

0%	I do not support adding any temporary signs to neighborhood conservation signs.
81%	I support the current draft.
86%	I would like to revise the current draft to allow existing neighborhood conservation signs to continue in their current form — and to grandfather their current practice of temporary sign attachment.
54%	I support revising the current draft to allow two temporary signs each with up to 2.5 square feet.

5. Signs for Permitted Park Events

The speaker explained that the current draft wording seemed to disallow signage in smaller parks, such as Lyon Village Park because the signage would be legible from the street.

0%	I want no signage in public parks, even for park events with a special permit.
11%	I support the current draft.
100%	I would like special events held at parks with permits to be allowed to place event signage in/near the park even if it is legible from a public right-of-way outside the park.

6. Institutional Use of Sidewalk Signs

The speaker indicated that delegates had requested this option. There was a question whether civic associations qualified as institutions.

0%	I support repealing the recently-approved use of sidewalk signs.
43%	I do not support increasing the use of sidewalk signs beyond what has already been approved.
76%	I support allowing institutions to use the sidewalk (A-frame) signs as their 7-day signs.

7. Signs on Utility Poles

The speaker explained that lost pet signs are posted on utility poles, that it was undesirable to make this a criminal misdemeanor, and that removing the ban from the ordinance language would also enable the current practice whereby DES posts use permit and variance notices.

0%	I do not support allowing any signs on utility poles except those installed by the utility.
100%	I support the current practice of allowing Arlington officials to place notices on utility poles.
51%	I support removing the current language that prohibits signage on utility poles.
100%	I support allowing 8.5x11" non-commercial signs on utility poles.

8. Roof Line Signs Above 40 Feet

The speaker mentioned several cities that do not allow roofline signs, as did delegates.

57%	I want no roof line signs above 40 feet.
5%	I want the County Board to decide all roofline sign requests.
19%	I support the language of the current draft with Option A.
32%	I support the language of the current draft with Option B.

9. Roof Line Signs Above 40 Feet Facing Public Lands

Additional restrictions for signs facing public lands

Delegates were given copies of the letter from the National Park Service (NPS). The speaker identified and distinguished the monument core in the current draft, the expanded list in the NPS letter, and the further expanded list in the Planning Commission's resolution.

16%	I support Option C, no additional restrictions.
11%	I support Option D, reduced hours of illumination — not between 10pm and 8am.
30%	I support Option E, no illumination.
59%	I support Option F, no signs above 40 feet facing public lands as defined in the Draft.
5%	I want the County Board to decide all roofline sign requests. 2
68%	I support adhering to the request made in the letter from the National Park Service.
76%	I support adhering to the request made in the letter from the National Park Service AND other national monuments such as the 9/11 Pentagon Memorial and USAF Memorial (which the Planning Commission unanimously recommended).