

**CITY OF NORWALK
ZONING COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING
JANUARY 19, 2010**

PRESENT: Jackie Lightfield, Chair; James White; Andrea Light; Michael Mushak; Adam Blank; Bob Keyes; Michael O'Reilly

STAFF: Mike Greene; Mike Wrinn

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Lightfield called the meeting to order at 7:30 pm.

II. ROLL CALL

Mr. Greene took the roll call.

III. DISCUSSION OF SIGN REGULATIONS

Mr. Greene commented that staff was waiting to be informed about signage issues outlined at tonight's special meeting.

Mr. White pointed out the glaring changeable copy sign at an area beauty parlor.

Ms. Lightfield emphasized the importance of focusing on land use issues related to signage. She added that brightness remained a concern but also that it was important not to limit the upgraded technology for purposes such as way-finding. She stated concern about a tendency to attach advertising to such signage.

Mr. White stated that he opposed all advertising on changeable copy signs, because he considered it blight, as well as a distraction.

Ms. Lightfield discussed the visual impact of color combinations. She provided examples of ordinances regarding Electronic Digital Signs from San Jose and pointed out that foot-candles were now the industry standard. She discussed limitations on the area of the sign that can be changed electronically, the address itself as indicated on the sign, and the avoidance of electronic signage near residential areas.

Mr. Keyes pointed out Detroit's prohibition of flashing, motion, and video-streaming signs due to concerns about interference with traffic safety.

Mr. Greene said that the Commission should consider whether to allow changeable copy signs at all and if so, how frequently they could be changed.

Mr. Wrinn reminded the Commission that there was a difference between flashing and changeable copy signs. Ms. Lightfield stated that the distinction between programmable and changeable copy signs should be written out clearly.

Ms. Lightfield discussed the notion of the kiosk as part of changeable copy signage. She added that the updated technology was in the near future and that the Commission's regulations needed to be ahead of the curve. She also pointed out the benefit of the revenue for towns and schools.

Mr. Blank expressed concern with the strip-malls with numerous, mismatched individual store signs. He also discussed the advantage of externally lit signs over self-illuminated ones.

Mr. White discussed the distinction between changeable copy and programmable signs. He reminded the Commission that Boca Raton had no electronic signs.

Ms. Lightfield stated that the Commission did have discretion regarding illumination of signs.

Mr. Blank discussed the issue of uniformity of hanging signs, as well as changeable signs in gas stations.

Ms. Lightfield stated that the gas price signs were a good example of programmable signage put to good use.

Mr. White said that the Commission could control the brightness of those signs.

Mr. Blank asked about how the Commission would enforce sign regulations such as foot-candles.

The Commission discussed the details of lighting and hours of illumination.

Mr. Mushak added that light intensity from signs could cause problems with distraction. He said that temporary illuminated signs in New Jersey were prime examples of very distracting signage.

Mr. Wrinn asked if the Commission, as a group, opposed changeable signs. Mr. White said yes. Ms. Lightfield discussed programmable signs.

Mr. O'Reilly stated that different regulations should be considered for non-for-profit organizations.

Mr. Blank agreed, pointing out that gas stations or performing arts facilities ought to have a different allowance than schools or non-for profit groups.

Mr. O'Reilly asked what the Commission opposed most vehemently. Mr. White said that he opposed any advertising on the signs.

Ms. Lightfield noted the difference between event management and actual shopping.

Mr. Blank discussed regulations related to limitations on commercial speech as opposed to limitations of free speech.

Ms. Lightfield pointed out how Norwalk High School's changeable copy sign could be considered as setting a precedent for other such signage in Norwalk.

There was a discussion of the pink and yellow Aitoro sign.

Ms. Lightfield stated that the Commission needed to reach a consensus about signage colors in commercial areas.

Mr. Blank asked whether the objection was to the color or the brightness of the sign. Mr. White said the color was a problem and also that streaming video was objectionable in that it degraded the area and was likely to spread quickly to many areas of the City.

Mr. Mushak discussed changeable copy signage in relation to a down-market and an up-market environment.

Ms. Lightfield said that if the Commission allowed programmable signs, it needed to address what was allowed on them, as far as frequency of change, brightness, location, and area of the signs.

Mr. Wrinn said that any applicant that came before the Commission would be required to make a new case for changeable copy signage; he reiterated that the Commission had not set itself up for negative consequences by approving the Norwalk High School sign.

Mr. Greene stated that there were two definitions for changeable copy signs, one manual and one programmable. Ms. Lightfield said that the manual copy signs looked terrible.

Mr. Blank pointed out the trend of parking vehicles with signage on them in lots for long periods of time. Mr. Greene noted that this was a difficult issue, as the truck could in fact say anything and that the parking spots were perfectly legal.

Mr. Blank addressed the idea of how to reasonably divide signage among strip malls with multiple tenants. Ms. Lightfield noted the issues with such signage, especially for way-finding purposes, at the Webster Street lot.

Ms. Lightfield said that ground signs in the East Avenue Village District, for example, could be amended to include wood signs with black letters only.

Mr. Keyes addressed the difference between way-finding and advertising on the signs.

Mr. O'Reilly asked what issues retailers considered most important for signage. The Commission agreed that retailers generally supported large, bright flashing copy signage.

Mr. Blank said that "Vegas-style" lighting did have a place and that a developer could potentially propose something attractive involving such lighting. He encouraged the Commission to avoid placing too many restrictions on signage and to allow room at least for a text amendment in such cases.

Mr. Mushak said that Providence, RI had established a standard that allowed for hanging signs with a retro appearance, one which could be adjusted to suit a Historic District.

Mr. Blank said that Darien's uniformity of lighting and the use of gas lamp style lighting in San Diego helped to create a consistent look or individual neighborhoods.

There was a discussion of paper signs in windows.

Ms. Lightfield emphasized that the loophole should be closed regarding placing changeable copy signs on public property as a means to circumvent regulations.

Ms. Lightfield addressed super-graphics signs. Mr. Greene said that they were not allowed currently and that one location in town had been granted a Special Exception for it from ZBA.

Mr. Mushak stated that the REI sign included graphics, which was not regulated by Zoning. Ms. Lightfield reiterated that the Commission needed to welcome new technology and get ahead of it so as to better control it.

Mr. Greene stated that no applicant had been turned away from the Commission due to wanting to put up artwork.

Mr. Blank raised the issue of audio advertising. Mr. Greene pointed out that this issue was related to the noise ordinance but was not a land use issue.

There was a discussion of art in public spaces

Mr. Keyes suggested that the Commission search online to review various municipal regulations regarding signage.

The Commission agreed to schedule another special meeting about signage.

IV. COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR

There were none tonight.

V. COMMENTS OF COMMISSIONERS

There were none tonight.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. LIGHTFIELD MADE A MOTION TO ADJOURN.
** MR. WHITE SECONDED.
** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:55 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Charlene Smith.

