



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Planning Division

m e m o r a n d u m

TO: Urbana Plan Commission

FROM: Matthew Rejc, Planning Intern

DATE: October 31, 2014

SUBJECT: Plan Case 2244-T-14: an amendment to Article IX of the Urbana Zoning Ordinance to allow electronic message board displays on signs in the CRE, Conservation-Recreation-Education zoning district.

Introduction & Background

This case is requested by the Zoning Administrator for a text amendment to the Urbana Zoning Ordinance to allow operation of electronic message board displays on signs in the CRE, Conservation-Recreation-Education District. Per Section IX-4 of the Urbana Zoning Ordinance, electronic message board displays are limited to the B-3, General Business Zoning District, and are subject to a series of requirements. The proposed amendment would allow electronic message board displays in the CRE District under similar restrictions.

Electronic displays are commonly used by park districts and schools in other communities and are currently in use at Urbana High School and Urbana Middle School. This amendment would permit users operating within the CRE district to take advantage of the benefits of using electronic displays to communicate messages.

Discussion

Many institutions that operate facilities within CRE districts often host events and activities that are of interest to members of the public or parents of schoolchildren. Traditionally, these facilities had message boards that were manually changed every week or month to update students and the community of school or parks events. Electronic displays are now an effective and widely practiced means of transmitting information about those events to a broad audience. Messages shown on electronic displays have greater visibility especially during the evening. During the winter, reduced hours of sunlight may inhibit travelers at peak times from clearly seeing messages shown on traditional display boards. Electronic displays can show multiple

messages, so schools and parks would no longer be limited to two or three short lines of text. And these signs can be updated quickly in the case of changes to events or other important messages such as school closings.

Section IX-4 of the Zoning Ordinance places the following restrictions on all electronic displays:

1. *Area.* The maximum area of electronic display shall not exceed 50 percent of any sign area.
2. *Animation.* Electronic displays shall not be animated as defined by this article, including a display change frequency of no more than once every three minutes.
3. The sign, including electronic display, shall meet all other design standards in this Article.
4. *Illumination.*
 - a. Electronic display signs shall be equipped with automatic dimming technology which adjusts the sign's illumination level based on ambient light conditions.
 - b. The maximum illumination level of an electronic display shall be 0.3 foot candles above ambient light levels.

Electronic displays have already been installed at Urbana High School and Urbana Middle School. Urbana schools fall under the jurisdiction of the State Architect and do not obtain building permits from the City. However, city zoning requirements for site improvements still apply. The proposed amendment would bring the Urbana schools signs into conformance with the Zoning Ordinance. Both of these signs comply with area and setback limits. Both facilities are within a CRE district, and no complaints or ill effects of the electronic displays have been noted by neighbors or members of the public.

In other communities, electronic displays are commonly used by public institutions similar to many of those found in CRE districts to publicize events and information. Currently, the Urbana Park District is proposing to add an electronic display to its sign at the Philips Recreation Center. This sign would replace the existing sign, and would conform to the proposed standards.

Allowing electronic displays in CRE districts would also permit their use by private entities. For uses allowed in CRE districts with a Conditional Use Permit or Special Use Permit, the reviewing body could place limits on or prohibit signs with electronic displays if they are found to cause a nuisance or impact the character of the surrounding area. These uses include Camp or Picnic Areas, Bait Sales, and Church, Temple or Mosque.

The following uses are permitted by right in the CRE district, and would be allowed to install a sign with an electronic display with appropriate administrative review:

- Agriculture, Cropping
- Agriculture, General
- Elementary, Junior High School, or Senior High School
- Library, Museum, or Gallery

- Municipal or Government Building
- Nonprofit or Governmental, Educational and Research Agencies
- Park
- Public Maintenance and Storage Garage
- University/College

Size, setback, brightness and change time restrictions outlined in Section IX-4 of the Zoning Ordinance that apply to currently allowed electronic displays would help to minimize potential impact of the displays. Given the benefits that facilities in the CRE district could gain from the use of electronic displays and the lack of reported problems, staff proposes allowing such displays within CRE districts subject to similar requirements as those currently in operation in the B-3 districts. The area would be limited to 50% of the total sign area. Freestanding signage in CRE district is limited to 32 square feet (50 square feet for monument signs). This limit would not be expanded; therefore the largest area for an electronic display as part of a freestanding sign would be 16 square feet (or 25 square feet when signs from two or more frontages are combined or in the case of a monument sign). For wall signs in CRE, the total sign area cannot exceed 8% of the wall area, with a maximum area of 300 square feet. The largest area for an electronic display as part of a wall sign in the CRE district would be 4% of the wall area. As a part of this text amendment, staff is proposing a limit of 50 square feet for wall signs.

Permitting electronic displays in the CRE districts would allow for future government facilities or other buildings of the types noted above to reap the tangible benefits of those displays. The inherent issues presented by electronic displays will be minimized and managed through existing controls that have been effective in the past. This adjustment to the Zoning Ordinance provides the maximum benefit for facilities that are operating in the CRE districts without compromising the City's commitment to effectively manage the distribution and form of signage.

Text Amendment

The proposed changes to the Zoning Ordinance are indicated below with ~~striketroughs~~ indicating deleted wording and underlines indicating added wording.

Section IX-4, General Sign Allowances

- C. *Electronic Display.* Freestanding signs and wall signs authorized by this Article in the B-3, General Business Zoning District, and CRE, Conservation-Recreation-Education Zoning District, may include an element of electronic display when designed and operated to meet the following requirements.
1. *Area.* The maximum area of electronic display shall not exceed 50 percent of any sign area. Electronic displays on wall signs in the CRE District shall not exceed 50 square feet.
 2. *Animation.* Electronic displays shall not be animated as defined by this Article, including a display change frequency of no more than once every three minutes.
 3. The sign, including electronic display, shall meet all other design standards in this Article.

2. *Illumination.*

- a) Electronic display signs shall be equipped with automatic dimming technology which adjusts the sign's illumination level based on ambient light conditions.
- b) The maximum illumination level of an electronic display shall be 0.3 foot candles above ambient light levels, to be measured as follows. First, at least 30 minutes past sunset, and with the electronic display turned on, a light level reading in footcandles will be taken with a light meter aimed directly at the electronic display and at the following distance:

<i>Electronic sign size</i>	<i>Measurement distance</i>
0-100 square feet	100 feet
101-350 square feet	150 feet
351-650 square feet	200 feet

Second, with the electronic display either turned off, showing all black copy, or blocked, the light meter will be used to measure the area ambient light level in footcandles. The difference between the two readings shall be the electronic signs illumination level above the ambient light level.

Summary of Staff Findings

1. The proposed amendment to Section IX-4 of the Urbana Zoning Ordinance will amend the restrictions on electronic displays by allowing them in CRE districts as well as B-3 districts.
2. In furthering the Purposes (Section IX-1) of the Urbana Zoning Ordinance, the proposed Zoning Ordinance text amendment is intended to ensure effective transmission of important messages to the public while managing the spread of signage and preventing visual clutter.
3. The proposed amendment is intended to serve the needs of institutions that broadly benefit the residents of the City of Urbana.
4. The proposed amendment conforms to notification and other requirements for the Zoning Ordinances as required by the State Zoning Act (65 ILCS 5/11-13-14).
5. The proposed amendment would assist in administration of the Urbana Zoning Ordinance.
6. The proposed amendment would bring the electronic displays on signs at Urbana High and Urbana Middle School into conformance.

Options

The Plan Commission has the following options for recommendation to the Urbana City Council regarding Plan Case 2244-T-14:

- a. Recommend approval as presented herein; or
- b. Recommend approval as modified by specific suggested changes; or
- c. Recommend denial.

Staff Recommendation

Based on the evidence presented in the discussion above, and without the benefit of considering additional evidence that may be presented at the public hearing, staff recommends that the Plan Commission recommend **APPROVAL** of the proposed text amendment to the Zoning Ordinance as presented herein.

cc: Urbana Park District
Urbana School District

Exhibit A: Existing Signage



Existing sign with electronic display at Urbana Middle School.



Existing sign with electronic display at Urbana High School.