



**City of Tacoma  
Planning Commission**

May 18, 2011

HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL,

On behalf of the Planning Commission, I am forwarding our recommendations regarding changing the sign code to allow digital billboards in exchange for the removal of a large number of existing traditional billboards. Enclosed you will find our "Findings and Recommendations" that summarizes the draft amendments that were circulated for public review, public comments received, and the Commission's recommendations.

The Commission emphatically urges the Council to say no to digital billboards. Nearly 350 community members spoke against allowing this new form of signage in our city. We understand the Council's reluctance for prolonged litigation and the laudable goal of ultimately reducing the visual blight from existing billboards by instituting an exchange program, but the price to do so, as outlined in the settlement agreement, is too high. In 1988, this community and the Council declared that billboards are undesirable and capped the number of billboards that could be allowed. In 1997 the community and Council confirmed and strengthened this policy statement by instituting an amortization program designed to eliminate all billboards that were too big, too tall, too crowded together, or located too close to residential or shoreline districts, schools, parks, religious institutions or historic districts.

The proposed terms of the settlement with Clear Channel Outdoor would reverse these decisions and this long-standing policy. The departure from this policy, as outlined in the settlement agreement – which would not only eliminate the amortization provision but would also allow for new billboards that are digital, larger, and in areas where they have long been prohibited – does not mesh with the Commission's understanding of Tacoma's long-term vision to become a more attractive and livable city. The many citizens that testified to the Commission were very passionate and articulate in their opposition to allowing digital billboards and the terms of the settlement agreement. Many noted their dislike of existing traditional billboards and their wish for these signs to go away.

The Commission overwhelmingly believes that the prior decisions to prohibit billboards in most areas of the city and amortize existing nonconforming billboards remains the correct policy. The Commission has not been presented with any information that would indicate that the currently adopted policy and regulatory approach is not viable and in the best interests of this community. To the contrary, the Commission's understanding is that precedent exists to support amortization as a viable mechanism to eliminate non-conforming billboards. Ultimately, if it is determined that the 10-year amortization period adopted in 1997 does not represent reasonable compensation to the owners of nonconforming billboards, the Commission strongly encourages the Council to consider extending the amortization period for an additional five or ten years to ensure adequate compensation while maintaining and continuing to pursue the longstanding desire of this community to no longer have billboards in many parts of our community.

We therefore are recommending that the sign code maintain the current limitations on traditional billboards and clearly prohibit digital billboards anywhere in the city at this time. We are also recommending minor amendments to clarify and correct existing provisions, improve the definition for

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billboards, make the nonconforming section more consistent with other sections of the code, and strengthen the requirements for aesthetics and maintenance of existing signs.

Citizen testimony also highlighted numerous concerns about digital billboards including light pollution, energy usage, compatibility with urban design and other policies, and most notably, concerns about public safety through increased driver distraction. The Commission concurs with many of these concerns. We attempted to modify the draft code that was circulated for public review to address these concerns but, in the end, felt that the proposed code changes to implement the settlement, even with modification, was not supportable at this time. We also are providing this modified code which represents the culmination of our limited and unfinished study and review so that the Council can evaluate for itself the difficulty in reconciling the many objections and conflicting information that emerged through the public review. We note that safety studies regarding driver distraction are inconsistent and inconclusive and more time is needed to study and gather expert testimony (expertise which may not be available) before a fully-informed recommendation can be made about performance standards for digital billboards, particularly on lighting levels and static image time. Lastly, the public testimony also highlighted many similar concerns regarding on-site digital signage, which is not well regulated by the current code. We recommend that any further work on sign regulations include an examination of on-site digital signage as well.

In conclusion, the Planning Commission strongly recommends that the City of Tacoma explicitly prohibit digital billboards and modify the sign code to clarify this prohibition, retain amortization and, if deemed necessary, extend the amortization period to provide adequate compensation. We respectfully request the City Council adopt the enclosed amendments to *Tacoma Municipal Code* 13.06.520 and 13.06.521, as recommended by the Planning Commission, and commit to their full implementation.

Sincerely,



JEREMY C. DOTY  
Chair

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Enclosures