



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

POTENTIAL REVISIONS TO THE SIGN CODE FOR BILLBOARDS

GENERAL

What are we doing?

The Tacoma Planning Commission is reviewing potential revisions to the City's sign code and how it addresses billboards. The primary change being considered would be to allow for the installation of digital billboards in the city in exchange for the removal of a substantial number of the existing standard billboards.

Why are we doing this?

The goal of the changes being considered is to reduce the overall quantity of billboards in the city. The last major changes to the sign code were made in 1997, when the City adopted new rules for billboards which included a requirement that all nonconforming billboards had to be removed by 2007.

When the City started enforcement of this requirement in 2007, the owner of most of the billboards in the city challenged the City in court claiming that the code was unconstitutional. After more than two years of negotiation, the City Council determined that a legal settlement that brings the lawsuit to an end and substantially reduces the number of billboards across the city may be in the City's best interest. The terms of that agreement provided a framework for the proposed revisions to the sign regulations the Commission is now reviewing.

Why would we allow digital billboards at all?

We do not have to allow digital billboards in the city. However, there are currently 253 standard billboards in the city and, based on the draft code under review by the Commission, allowing the installation of digital billboards would result in a substantial reduction in the overall number of billboards in the city.

Why can't the City just remove all billboards?

When the City capped the number of billboards in 1988 most of the billboards that existed at the time became nonconforming (also commonly known as "grandfathered"). These nonconforming billboards, like any other nonconforming sign in the city, have rights to stay where they are, the way they are. If the City were to force the removal of any nonconforming sign, it's likely we would have to pay the owner for value of the sign.

How many billboards will be removed, and where?

Within the first five years, 78 standard billboard faces will be removed in exchange for allowing 10 new digital billboards. The first 54 billboard faces to be removed have been determined and are located throughout the city. There's a map of the first 54 billboard faces to be removed on the Planning Division website.

Who decides which billboards will be removed?

The first 54 billboards slated for removal were agreed upon by the City Council and the owner of the billboards, Clear Channel Outdoor. The next 25 will be the choice of Clear Channel. The remainder would be prioritized with ones closest to residential areas, churches, schools, shorelines, and parks being removed first.

DIGITAL BILLBOARDS

How is a digital billboard different?

Standard billboards are made from paper or vinyl adhered to a background board or structure. They are changed by hand and usually only change every few weeks (or sometimes the same billboard will stay for months). Digital billboards are like large electronic picture frames. The image changes several times a minute.

Are these like movies or big televisions?

The proposed regulations include restrictions to ensure that nothing on the signs will move. The signs would only be allowed to display static images and then only change them every 8 seconds.

Are these like the billboards I can see from I-5?

No. The digital billboards that are proposed to be allowed in Tacoma are smaller and less bright than the signs visible from I-5 near the Emerald Queen Casino. Those signs are not regulated by the City.

Are they safe for drivers?

There are a lot of studies about billboards in general, as well as about digital billboards, which are inconclusive about the effect these signs have on safety and driver distraction. Limits on brightness, size, location relative to intersections and traffic lights, and image timing are all proposed to help ensure they don't create a safety hazard.

Do digital billboards operate all night long?

The proposed regulations include a restriction that all billboards be turned off from 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.

Where can a new billboard go?

A billboard can go into a "receiving area" – a location or zone where billboards are allowed. There are four zones where billboards are allowed: "C-2" General Commercial, "M-1" and "M-2" Industrial, and "PMI" Port Maritime Industrial. Also, there are 18 "special receiving areas" defined in the proposed code, which are located throughout the city. You can see maps of the "receiving areas" and "special receiving areas" on the Planning Division website.

Will a new billboard be put into my neighborhood or near my house?

Maybe. It depends on if you live near or within one of the "special receiving areas". Otherwise, the proposed regulations include a restriction that digital billboards will have to be at least 250 feet from any residential zone.

How large can a digital billboard be?

The first 10 digital billboards can be up to 672 square feet, or about 14 feet by 48 feet (for comparison, this is similar to the size of the existing static billboard located at 6th & Sprague near the "It's Greek to Me" restaurant). Under the proposed regulations, any other digital billboard (beyond the first 10) will be limited to 300 square feet.

How tall can a billboard be?

The proposed regulations would limit digital billboards to 30 feet high, except in the "PMI" Port Maritime Industrial zone where the height limit would be 45 feet.

How bright will digital billboards be?

The proposed regulations include specific limitations on how bright digital billboards could be. No digital billboard may increase the amount of light in an area more than a very small amount. Also, digital billboards will be required to be adjusted throughout the day – that is, they'll be brighter in the daytime and dimmer in the nighttime hours.

Where can I find the draft regulations for the billboards?

Additional information, including a project overview, background materials, maps, the settlement agreement, and the project schedule, is available from the Community and Economic Development Department at the address below, and on the City's Planning Division website:

www.cityoftacoma.org/planning then click on "Billboard Regulations"

If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact:

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How can I comment?

You can comment in writing through the mail, or by electronic mail. You can also attend the Planning Commission public hearing on March 16 at 5:00 p.m. in the City Council Chambers (747 Market Street – first floor). A question and answer session with staff will be held on March 9 at 6:00 p.m., also in the City Council Chambers.