

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2E



Representing the communities of Burleith, Georgetown and Hillandale

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Filed by email to policy.ddot.ddot@dc.gov

December 6, 2012

Alice Kelly
Manager, Policy Branch
Policy, Planning and Sustainability Administration
District Department of Transportation
55 M Street, S.E., 5th Floor
Washington, DC 20002

Re: Proposed sign regulations

Alice,
Dear ~~Ms.~~ Kelly:

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2E, at a public meeting held on December 3, 2012, duly noticed, and at which seven commissioners were present constituting a quorum, unanimously adopted the following resolution relating to the proposed sign regulations requesting that for the Georgetown Historic District, the regulations be clarified and in some cases strengthened with regard to –

- Neon, LED and other electronically lit or electronic signs;
- Projecting (“blade”) signs;
- Show window signs;
- Master plans for signs in a complex with multiple tenants;
- Freestanding signs on public space;
- The role of the Commission of Fine Arts in reviewing signage for the Georgetown Historic District; and
- Temporary signs

COMMISSIONERS:

Ed Solomon, District 1 Ron Lewis, District 2 Jeff Jones, District 3 Jake Sticka, District 4
Bill Starrels, District 5 Tom Birch, District 6 Charles Eason, District 7

The ANC 2E resolution is as follows:

ANC 2E appreciates the opportunity to comment on the District of Columbia's proposed regulations issued with the intent to adopt a new title 13 (Sign Regulations) of the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations. The proposed regulations will contribute significantly to providing clarity and certainty governing outdoor signs.

In a historic district such as Georgetown, outdoor signs add to the character, vitality and identity of a neighborhood. At the same time, it is important to avoid the visual clutter that distracts and hides the architectural features and historic interest of that district. ANC 2E recognizes and appreciates the singular treatment afforded the Georgetown Historic District under these under these proposed rules. In view of our interest in preserving the unique character of this historic neighborhood, ANC 2E is pleased to offer the following comments addressing those provisions in the proposed regulations.

Sec. 306.1, PROHIBITED SIGNS, EXCEPTIONS: ANC 2E supports the listing of prohibited signs in the Georgetown Historic District. We read the prohibition of "electronic" signs to include LED and similar signs, and we support that prohibition. If clarification is needed, we support including a specific prohibition on "electronic signs, including LED and similar signs." We support a prohibition on flashing neon signs. We also support a prohibition on non-flashing neon signs except as follows: we support an exception in the regulations regarding "non-flashing" neon signs to be permitted under the same rules for all other signage and must comport with the D.C. Historic Preservation Office guidelines and the Old Georgetown Board (OGB) guidelines and practices, i.e. identify the business and serve as the single sign for the business, and meet the requirements and review process of placement, size, design, and color applied to any other type of sign. Such a requirement would then prohibit the proliferation of multiple neon signs at a single business and eliminate all but those neon signs serving the single purpose of identifying the business.

Sec. 305.1(a) PERMITTED SIGNS AND REQUIREMENTS/Projecting Signs: ANC 2E urges that for the Georgetown Historic District, the D.C. government adopt in these regulations the standards applied by ANC 2E on proposed projecting signs, which have been developed and are imposed in the interest of minimizing visual clutter in the Georgetown historic district: Projecting signs (or "blade" signs) are only permitted 1) on the principal commercial streets Wisconsin Avenue NW, M Street NW, and K Street/Water Street NW) in the case of identifying a business located above another business on the street level, or 2) to identify a business located on a side street off one of the principal commercial streets.

Sec.305.1(c) PERMITTED SIGNS AND REQUIREMENTS/Show Window Signs: ANC 2E supports the provisions in Section 305.1(c) limiting the size of signs in windows to the lesser of 25 square feet or 20 percent of the window area. The District's building code requires that signs painted onto glass storefront windows not cover more than 10 percent of the total window surface and that signs hung inside display windows not cover more than 15 percent of the window. ANC 2E recommends that for the Georgetown

Historic District, the D.C. government incorporate these provisions into the regulations proposed here rather than increasing the allowed window area to 20 percent as stated in the proposed regulations.

Support of this provision recognizes concern over the proliferation of large signs (including enlarged photographs and colored light panels) covering all or nearly all of a window area of commercial establishments in the Georgetown Historic District, again creating undesirable visual clutter on the commercial streets. In fact, this provision should be expanded to apply to all signs visible from the street, including those signs set back from the window face, providing transparency between the street and the commercial establishment and promoting greater interaction between the interior and exterior spaces.

Sec.404.1 MASTER PLANS FOR SIGNS: ANC 2E recommends that the D.C. government stipulate clearly in the regulations the permissive and not mandatory nature of a requirement for the development of a coordinated master plan for signs where a complex houses multiple tenants requiring several signs. A goal of the signage program in the Georgetown historic district should not necessarily be to promote a single “look” which might be appropriate to a suburban shopping district but inappropriate to a historic district. We believe the overall policy driving these regulations should promote the individuality and even the eccentricities that identify the character and spirit of the historic district, encouraging diverse yet compatible signage in the commercial districts. Such decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis through the review process, including those concerning signs to be installed on multiple properties that are historically or architecturally related.

Sec.606 FREESTANDING SIGNS ON PUBLIC SPACE: ANC 2E urges that freestanding sidewalk signs be prohibited in the Georgetown Historic District with the three limited exceptions described below. Our opposition to freestanding sidewalk signs is based on our interest in ensuring pedestrian safety and encouraging the free flow of foot traffic and commerce on the principal commercial streets in the historic district. Georgetown’s narrow, brick sidewalks are challenging enough for pedestrians to navigate without the addition of freestanding signs. With some 10 million visitors a year, the sidewalks in Georgetown, especially on the principal commercial streets, are often filled to capacity for all pedestrians and even more challenging for people with strollers, in wheelchairs, or walking bicycles. The extensive streetscape design implemented by the District of Columbia on M Street and Wisconsin Avenue several years ago included the goal of reducing street furniture and visual clutter on those streets. The imposition of freestanding signs on the sidewalks of those streets is oppositional to that approach and defeats one of the principal goals of the streetscape project.

We support exceptions only for (1) valet parking signs within the Georgetown BID boundaries, (2) the provision Sec.606.7 in the proposed regulations permitting freestanding sidewalk signs indicating the location of a public market during the market’s house of operation, and (3) signs pertaining to a business located on a side street within one block of any of the principal commercial streets, or located on a corner away from

the principal commercial streets, with a daily changing message related to the commercial nature of the business and determined to contribute to the individual character and spirit of Georgetown. Signs meeting these exceptions must also comply with all other provisions of these regulations, including available sidewalk width.

CHAPTER 3: SIGNS SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY THE COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS/ CHAPTER 4: SIGNS SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION BOARD: We urge that the regulations clarify the roles of the Commission of Fine Arts and the Historic Preservation Review Board with regard to signage in the Georgetown Historic District. Specifically, we recommend:

A. Primary review by the CFA. As written, the provisions of Chapter 3 (CFA) and Chapter 4 (HPRB) seem to overlap, possibly suggesting that both CFA and HPRB will review each permit application for the Georgetown Historic District. This would be inefficient for all concerned, and we believe it is not necessary. Instead, the regulations should be clarified to provide that CFA has primary jurisdiction and applications will not also be reviewed by HPRB (except, perhaps, in rare cases of unusual importance).

B. Clarification of CFA's role. The regulations should make clear that CFA, in reviewing individual cases, may be more restrictive than the signage regulations might otherwise allow. That is how CFA needs to operate and it generally works well. For example, zoning regulations may permit a certain height limit or lot-coverage limit, but CFA considers the particular context of the applicant property and frequently applies a more restrictive standard than the more general regulations establish. CFA focuses on specific properties and specific visual context, and that role needs to be preserved clearly in these regulations.

C. Timetable for CFA action. Sections 303.3 and 303.4 of the proposed regulations require that CFA act within 45 days of receiving an application. In practice, that deadline would not give CFA time to review cases it should be reviewing. Because of the two-stage review process (OGB and CFA) that applies to Georgetown, combined with CFA's cut-off time for putting applications on an upcoming agenda, review within a 45-day timetable could often be impossible. The CFA process requires applicants to submit a week to 10 days before an OGB meeting; then the OGB meets; then around two weeks later the CFA meets; then the CFA report is prepared and distributed. An application received after the submission cut-off for a meeting in month one would be heard in month two, and the process would take more than 45 days to complete. Also, neither OGB nor CFA meets in August, and a 45-day limit could have the perverse effect of encouraging some applicants to game the system. We suggest that Section 303.3 refer to the Commission's normal schedule and provide that review be conducted within the time frame of the next available meetings, including post-meeting reports, following receipt of an application, taking into account cut-off periods for hearing applications at a particular meeting.

TEMPORARY SIGNS: We have some concerns about the proposed duration, size and review process for temporary signs in the Georgetown Historic District. We would appreciate the opportunity to work with the D.C. government on refining these aspects of the proposed regulations as they apply to the Georgetown Historic District.

We appreciate the opportunity to bring this resolution to the attention of D.C. government. If there are any questions or concerns, please let me know so that we can discuss the issues together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron".

Ron Lewis
Chair, ANC 2E
Serving Georgetown and Burleith
202-253-5969