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Downtown business signs come under study

By Sue Buck

Staff Writer

Farmington merchants rely on outside signs to draw attention to their businesses and snag a second look from motorists and passersby.

For some time, the Design Committee of the Main Street program in Farmington, has worked to update the downtown sign ordinance.

Merchants, who seek as much visibility as they can, have routinely come before Farmington City Council to seek variances, or exemptions from the rules. The ordinance update is expected to reduce visual pollution and motorist distraction as well as improve aesthetics and public safety.

The public has a chance to offer input at a public

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hearing of the Farmington Planning Commission scheduled for 7 p.m. Monday, Feb. 14. It goes before Farmington City Council at 8 p.m. Monday, March 21.

A draft copy is available from the Farmington City Manager's office.

Signs were discussed at the Jan. 4 Farmington Downtown Development Authority meeting.

All legal non-conforming signs would be required to be removed and replaced by signs that conform to the new regulations no later than 12 years after this ordinance takes effect.

"You can't change those signs today but you can keep them from coming in today," said Brent Morgan, DDA director.

There may be financial incentives for those businesses which want to change their signs earlier.

Monument signs, rather than pylon or freestanding signs, are preferred today. Pylon signs are erected upon or are supported by the ground on one or more poles, uprights or braces.

"The standards are established by the courts," said Farmington City Manager Vince Pastue.

He added that the courts consider 12 years to be a reasonable time frame.

Broadening of permitted signs is expected.

"Certainly, it does allow for A-frame signs," Pastue said. "We have had variances in the past."

Projecting signs, as seen on the Greg Cowley & Sons

building on Grand River, will also be allowed with the stipulation that they be eight feet above ground level with certain dimensional requirements.

Projecting signs are signs that have a leading edge extending more than 12 inches beyond a building or wall.

Restricting window signs to cover only about 25 percent of the window is also proposed.

A sign committee may be formed which will review all kinds of signs. Now, the person requesting the sign contacts John Koncsol, the city's building inspector, who handles the review and issues permits. Appeals would be reviewed by the downtown sign committee. The Farmington City Council would make appointments based on recommendations from the DDA board.

"From my end of it, I am comfortable with the existing administrative process," Pastue said. "It certainly is more efficient than to get a committee involved. You are obviously looking at delays for businesses."

Craig Grace, a DDA board member, suggested that an "old versus new chart" be provided for better understanding.

"As a layman, this whole thing could be the same as the old one," Grace said.

"Throughout most of it, it is," Pastue said. "It's just tweaking. There isn't substantial differences."

Greg Cowley, a DDA board member, who chairs the Economic Restructuring Committee, asked if it was a "competitive" document with other cities. Pastue believed it was and said the committee made comparisons.

Businesses plan to locate in cities which make doing business easy, Cowley said.

"Could I make a statement that we are sign-friendlier than other communities?" he asked. "Have we talked to any traditional retailers to see if our ordinance is onerous on their improvement?"

"It is not cumbersome and is as an efficient a process as you will find," Pastue said.

Leonard Gyselink, a local developer who travels across the country and asks for different variances, was an outspoken resource who was consulted, Pastue said. Gyselink talked to the committee about competing potential businesses which might want to locate in Farmington.

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