



# MENLO PARK PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES

Special Meeting  
September 29, 2003  
7:00 p.m.

City Council Chambers  
801 Laurel Street, Menlo Park, CA 94025

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## CALL TO ORDER – 7:00 p.m.

**ROLL CALL** – Bims, Fergusson, Fry (Chair), Halleck (Vice-chair) (Arrived at 7:05 p.m.), Pagee (Arrived at 7:15 p.m.), Sinnott, Soffer (Left at 7:36 p.m.)

**INTRODUCTION OF STAFF** – Murphy, Smith

## A. PUBLIC COMMENTS

There was none.

Commission Action: M/S Fry/Bims to close public comment.

Motion carried unanimously, 5-0, with Commissioners Halleck and Pagee not yet in attendance.

## B. REGULAR BUSINESS

1. **Design Guidelines for Signs:** Consideration of revisions to the existing Design Guidelines for Signs.

Staff Comment: Planner Smith said that the City Council had met and directed staff to work with the Chamber of Commerce and Planning Commission to analyze the Design Guidelines for Signs and make recommendations to the Council on changes to the review process regarding the use of bright red, orange and yellow colors. Specifically, the City Council directed that consideration be made of allowing Planning staff more flexibility and discretion in reviewing and approving some signs with those colors. He indicated that staff has provided recommendations developed through a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce for the Planning Commission to review. The recommendations developed through the Commission's review would be forwarded to the City Council for their October 28, 2003 meeting. He said that he passed out a list of colors that staff is suggesting as possible colors that are bright or strong enough to require Planning Commission review and approval if the colors comprise 25% or more of the sign area.

Questions of Staff: In response to a question from Chair Fry, Planner Smith indicated that staff had selected the colors. Chair Fry asked about the statement in the staff report that there are concerns with the length of time it takes for items to get to the Planning Commission for review and what caused the delay. Planner Smith noted that the placement of an item on the Commission's agenda is dependent on various factors such as the queue of items and a sign application might not be reviewed

by the Commission for two to three months. He said that although there are no notification requirements for the sign reviews, there is not always room on the agenda to hear them sooner.

Commissioner Soffer asked whether sign reviews might be considered on the consent agenda and whether that might accelerate the placement of the item on the agenda. Planner Murphy said that has occurred but it does not necessarily accelerate the item's placement on an agenda as a staff report would need to be written whether it was a consent or regular item. Commissioner Soffer asked about a sign committee. Planner Smith said that the committee might meet once a week; staff generally sees a sign application about once a month that currently requires Commission review. The committee's weekly meeting might be easily canceled until there was an application to consider. In response to a question from Commissioner Fergusson, Planner Smith noted that in general staff selected middle colors for administrative approval. Commissioner Sinnott asked about temporary signage and asked if there was some way to deal with banners used at car dealerships. Planner Smith said that enforcement of these temporary signs are complaint based. Commissioner Sinnott indicated that she was making a complaint. She also noted signs that had been posted on church property and questioned whether they had been in violation. Planner Smith indicated that he would need to check with City Attorney on that matter.

Chair Fry said that the staff report provided a history of the Design Guidelines for Signs but wondered what precipitated Commission review of signs. Planner Smith said that the revision to the guidelines specified that signs using bright colors were not encouraged. When Safeway wanted to do a sign that had a lot of red, it was staff's interpretation that the Planning Commission needed to review the application. With that application and the subsequent application by Vitamin Express reviewed by the Commission, the Planning Commission clearly stated that it believed brightly colored signs should be reviewed by the Planning Commission. Chair Fry noted for those Commissioners who were not on the Commission at the time of those applications, that through the review process for the Vitamin Express sign application a greater width of black trim was used on that sign which toned down the red.

Commissioner Fergusson recommended three changes to the Design Guidelines for signs as follows:

1) Expectation of Signage. She suggested adding a paragraph to the introduction of the guidelines that states "Every Menlo Park Business is expected to post an attractive sign stating the name of the business. The scale should be a scale appropriate to the pedestrian and vehicular streetscape and the nature of the business." She noted that a business can comply with the Zoning Ordinance by not having a sign; the lack of signage lends a rundown, neglected look to commercial areas; and the lack of retail signs means a less successful business and less revenue to the City. 2) Correct Spelling and Grammar. She suggested adding a paragraph under "General Criteria" in the guidelines that states "Signs shall use correct spelling and grammar, except when the name of the business uses colloquialism, a play on words, or when the name of a business is a newly-created word." She said that incorrect spelling and grammar sets a bad example for Menlo Park schoolchildren; it turns off potential clientele as there is an appearance of illiteracy; it lessens the aesthetic appeal of a commercial area, affecting commercial and residential property values as well as sales tax revenue to the City; and detracts from the charm of the City. 3) Delete Restriction. The guidelines state that "Signage should be used for the purpose of identifying the business and should not be used to list products or other information." Commissioner Fergusson suggested that simple descriptions are appropriate when the business name does not convey the type of business, products or services and descriptive signage may attract new clientele that otherwise would remain unaware of the business.

Commissioner Soffer said that he agreed with Commissioner Fergusson's first point regarding the expectation of signage and he would also like the name of the business to be the official name or the same as that listed on the business license. He agreed that misspellings and grammar errors have an intangible effect on the City's image and how it is viewed. Chair Fry suggested that the recommendation for correct spelling and grammar should contain softer words than "shall" and "not acceptable" such as "should" or "is encouraged."

Commissioner Halleck confirmed that staff reviews applications for sign color and would continue to do so. He said that he is comfortable with the recommended changes. He questioned whether it was feasible to expect to monitor sign text. He asked whether staff has a problem with businesses that have no signage. Planner Smith said that there are multi-tenanted buildings that have no individual signs, but could not name any retail business that does not have a sign. He said that he would have to ask the City Attorney if there is any legal ability to regulate text. Commissioner Halleck asked if Commissioner Fergusson had an issue with a business that has no signage. Commissioner Fergusson said that was correct. Commissioner Halleck asked if the City has any description or ordinance regarding "blight." Planner Murphy said that blight is a consideration with redevelopment, but there is nothing in the code or ordinance regarding it. Commissioner Halleck indicated that he supported staff's recommendations.

Chair Fry referred to Commission Fergusson's first point regarding the expectation of signage and noted that some businesses do not have signs for reasons such as security as would be in the case with a data center. She referred to page five of the staff report and suggested that "square footage" be added to "...the new signs would need to maintain a similar "square footage", percent and shade of bright colors." Thus, if a larger area of bright color was wanted than the existing signage, Planning Commission would review. Noting the improvement of the Vitamin Express signage by adding a larger black border, she wondered whether borders might be required with bright colors. She suggested that it would be helpful for the Commission to receive a sample of the color if that is an issue for the Commission to review.

Commissioner Pagee said that the size, color and style of lettering are important to signs and none of the Commissioners are qualified to judge the quality of signs. She suggested that perhaps someone in the Chamber of Commerce might be tapped to provide professional review of signage.

Commissioner Sinnott said that she supports staff's recommendations.

Chair Fry suggested that the language regarding percent and square footage of color from page five of the staff report be carried over to the recommended "Section B. 13" on page six of the staff report.

Chair Fry asked the Commissioners for their comments on Commissioner Fergusson's recommendations. Commissioner Bims said that item one might be toned down as some businesses have a legitimate reason for not having a sign; he thought it would be difficult to monitor errors in text and language as that would include the use of foreign languages and would be difficult to monitor; and he agreed with item three. Chair Fry also suggested toning down the language of item two.

Commissioner Halleck asked what prompted the restriction of B.9 of the General Criteria. Planner Smith said that he did not know, noting that he has reviewed and approved signs that specify more information than that indicated in B.9 but that were very tastefully done.

Commissioners Halleck and Sinnott agreed with the deletion of B.9. Commissioner Pagee suggested that the guidelines might encourage the use of borders to tone down bright colors. Staff was comfortable with Commissioner Pagee's suggestion.

Chair Fry asked Mr. John Conway, representing the Chamber of Commerce, if the recommendations were agreeable to the Chamber. Mr. Conway said that the proposed changes were very satisfactory and would speed up the process.

Planner Murphy said in follow up to Chair Fry's comments about percentage and exact color that staff would flag issues for the Planning Commission and indicate somehow that color is an issue. Chair Fry

confirmed that staff would bring sign applications to the Planning Commission that staff is uncomfortable approving.

Commission Action: M/S Fergusson/Halleck to recommend to the City Council the following revisions to the Design Guidelines for Signs:

Reword Section B.7 of the Design Guidelines for Signs to read as follows:

Colors, materials, and design of the sign should be compatible and harmonious with the colors, materials, and design of the building and surrounding area. Signs using the bright colors listed below shall require Planning Commission review and approval, unless such colors comprise 25 percent or less of the sign area, in which case the signs can be approved at an administrative level. The use of techniques such as creating borders around signs containing bright colors can be useful in making the color more compatible and harmonious with the surrounding neighborhood. The following colors are considered bright colors for purposes of determining the level of review required (using the Pantone Matching System [PMS]):

- Yellow: Process Yellow, 102, 108, 109, 116, 123, 395, 396, 3955, 3965, 803
- Orange: Process Orange, 136, 137, 1375, 151, 1575, 1585, 165, 1655, 804
- Red: Process Red, 171, 172, 178, Warm Red, 179, 1788, 1795, 185, 186, 192, 199, 200, 206, 213, Rubine Red, 226, 485, 805, 806

Add a new Section B.13 to the Design Guidelines for Signs to read as follows:

Existing businesses with corporate logos containing bright red, orange, or yellow colors exceeding the intensities and percentages outlined in B.7, above, may be replaced and upgraded subject to an administrative review, provided that the total square footage of such signs does not increase, and provided the signs maintain approximately the same percentage and shade of bright colors.

Delete the existing following guideline B.9 regarding sign text:

Signage should be used for the purpose of identifying the business and should not be used to list products or other information. Logos or graphics consistent with the nature of the business, such as a clock for a clock store, may be considered.

Add the following new guideline as B.9:

Signs should use correct spelling and grammar, except when the name of the business uses colloquialisms, a play on words, or when the name of the business is a newly-created word. As examples, "Anything Fur You" for a pet store or "Xyla Enterprises" are acceptable, whereas "Blended Berrys" for a smoothie store is not encouraged.

Add the following paragraph to A. Introduction:

Every Menlo Park business is encouraged to post an attractive sign stating the name of the business. The sign should be at a scale appropriate to the pedestrian and vehicular streetscape and the nature of the business.

Motion carried 6-0, with Commissioner Soffer absent for the vote.

### **C. COMMISSION BUSINESS, REPORTS, AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Commissioner Fergusson reported on an armed robbery at the Hacienda Market on Menalto Avenue.

Chair Fry reported on the upcoming Joint Study Session with the City Council on Residential Review.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting adjourned at 8:12 p.m.

Staff Liaison: Justin Murphy, Principal Planner

Prepared by: Brenda Bennett, Recording Secretary

Approved by Planning Commission on October 27, 2001.