

DATE: NOVEMBER 20, 2008

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMAN, CITY MANAGER

SUBJECT: ORDINANCE TO ESTABLISH A PILOT PROGRAM FOR TEMPORARY
PORTABLE SIGNS FOR RETAIL BUSINESSES IN THE CENTRAL
BUSINESS DISTRICT

ISSUE: Ordinance to establish a pilot program for temporary portable signs for retail businesses in the Central Business District.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council adopt the ordinance as emergency legislation at its November 25, 2008 meeting.

DISCUSSION: City staff is proposing a pilot program of expedited administrative approvals for coordinated temporary portable signs to improve the visibility of restaurants and retail-oriented businesses in the Central Business District. The proposal is designed to provide one tool that small businesses can immediately use to stimulate business in the current economic downturn and during the upcoming holiday shopping season, and enhance the economic vitality of the business district as a whole. The recommendation builds on a series of other economic development efforts over the last several years, including the King Street Retail Strategy plan, the outdoor dining program, and the King Street trolley, all designed to bolster the pedestrian activity, economic stability, historic ambiance and tourist attraction of this important district. This pilot program recognizes that:

- The temporary portable signs to be allowed under the proposal would otherwise not be allowed because, as a zoning matter, they are remote from the location they advertise; in addition, an encroachment ordinance would normally be required to allow their location on the public right of way;

- Many vital businesses that are a part of the Old Town experience are located one or two blocks from the King Street corridor, but are not visible to pedestrians and others along King Street. Given the current economic and retail downturn, steps should be taken to assist the interesting, unique and attractive restaurants and retail businesses located in these areas and allow them to participate in the tourism and economic activity of King Street;
- Today, there are many businesses that erect signs on corners directing shoppers to their stores on side streets, but they are designed and placed on the sidewalk without coordination or oversight. The proposed program will provide expedited review of the location and design of all such signs, while maintaining a safe pedestrian thoroughfare and accessibility.
- The ongoing citywide Wayfinding planning process has recognized the dilemma posed by the recent proliferation of remote temporary portable signs, but will not have a solution for businesses not located on King Street in time to assist those enterprises for the upcoming holiday season.

The pilot program is a coordinated effort among several departments and agencies, including Planning and Zoning, Transportation and Environmental Services, Code Administration, the Disabilities Resources Coordinator and the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP). The program includes the following proposed components:

Duration of the Program

The pilot program is temporary. It will begin upon adoption of the ordinance and will end on March 15, 2009.

Eligibility

Restaurants and retail oriented businesses located within the Central Business District (CBD) not on King Street are eligible to participate in the program. This includes businesses within the CBD on the 100 and 200 blocks of streets intersecting King Street and on streets parallel to King Street. The map attached to the proposed ordinance identifies the overall zone within which the temporary portable sign program applies. Eligible businesses include restaurants, retail uses and retail oriented businesses, which include personal services uses, as those terms are defined by the zoning ordinance. Eligible business shall not include banks, savings and loans, credit unions, real estate, contractor or other offices.

Coordination and Cooperation among Businesses

Eligible businesses will coordinate their efforts for King Street visibility by creating a single sign that refers to each of them and is placed at the corner of King Street closest to their location. If some businesses within a block face choose not to participate, then the remaining businesses may apply for a permit for a temporary portable sign. The permit application will require an affidavit

attesting to the fact that all eligible businesses on the blockface were offered the opportunity to participate. A map and/or list will be made available to assist eligible businesses in determining which other eligible businesses must be contacted.

Eligible businesses within the Central Business District located on the east-west streets of Cameron, Queen, Prince and Duke will coordinate with other eligible businesses in the 100 and 200 blocks of the north-south streets in order to participate and have their business name included in a temporary portable sign located on the corner of King closest to their business. Maps showing the sign location plan will be available from P&Z.

Temporary Sign Permit

All participating businesses will submit a coordinated application for a temporary portable sign that will be reviewed and approved by the Directors of P&Z and T&ES. The application will include a photo of the proposed King Street corner, the specific location and method of sign placement, and a mock up of the proposed sign size and design. The application will also include an affidavit indicating that all eligible businesses were invited to participate. Temporary portable signs without a permit will not be allowed. City staff is committed to reviewing and responding to complete sign permit applications as quickly as possible in order to facilitate this process for businesses. In some cases, complete applications may take up to 2 business days to review in order to ensure safe and unobstructed pedestrian clearance.

Sign Locations

Typically, the businesses on a street intersecting or parallel to King Street will erect their coordinated sign on the corner of King Street closest to their business locations. Some situations with unique circumstances will require a separate review and determination by staff to find the most appropriate location. However, only one temporary portable sign will be permitted on any one King Street corner, and each eligible business may be featured on only one sign. In addition, acceptable sign locations will:

- Maintain at least a five foot minimum pedestrian path along the sidewalk;
- Be placed so as not to obstruct pedestrian movement and safety. People should be able to safely cross the street, and safely enter and alight from cars and buses without obstruction;
- Allow clear access to curb ramps;
- Not be within five feet of a curb or curb ramp next to an accessible-only parking space;
- Be stabilized or weighted to remain safely in place, preferably with a sandbag within the base of the frame; and
- Not damage the public right of way or any other property.

Temporary Portable Sign Design

Signs will be relatively consistent in size; they may be up to 42” tall and up to 30” wide. Sign colors and design are at the discretion of the business owners, but should look professional and be in keeping with the character of the Old and Historic Alexandria District. No illumination, neon letters or neon background are permitted. A drawing or sample of the proposed sign, including its size, text, materials, colors, and method of installation will be part of the temporary sign permit application.

Potential Future Sign Changes: Signs that advertise businesses off King Street will ultimately be addressed through the Wayfinding process. Issues will include whether or not to have such signs; ensuring that if the decision is made to allow such signs that they are designed in such a way to reduce visual clutter and be compatible with the Old and Historic District; whether they should include general retail opportunities or name specific stores; whether they should be part of a kiosk or mounted on a pole; funding mechanisms and maintenance costs and responsibilities. There is a public advisory group that meets regularly to discuss the Wayfinding plan as well as periodic community meetings. There will be work sessions for the Planning Commission and City Council in January, and ample opportunities for public comment. The staff will incorporate the results of this process into our final recommendations.

Public Outreach

Because of the rapid nature of the economic downturn, staff worked very quickly at Council’s direction to have the parameters of the pilot program finalized so that businesses could take advantage of the signs in time for the post Thanksgiving holiday shopping weekend and the remaining holiday shopping season. Regrettably, this accelerated timeframe did not allow for the public outreach that staff would conduct under normal circumstances. If Council determines that the pilot program should be extended, a full public outreach process and public hearing would be conducted. Outreach to businesses was conducted by AEDP after Council’s November 19 legislative meeting. Information about the proposed pilot program was posted on the P&Z website on Monday, November 24.

STAFF :

Faroll Hamer, Director, Planning and Zoning

Richard Josephson, Deputy Director, Planning and Zoning

Peter Leiberg, Principal Planner, Zoning Compliance, Planning and Zoning

Carrie Beach, Urban Planner, Planning and Zoning

Richard Baier, Director, Transportation and Environmental Services

Sandra Marks, Principal Transportation Planner, Transportation and Environmental Services

John Catlett, Director, Office of Building and Fire Code Administration

Michael Hatfield, Disabilities Resources Coordinator, Office on Human Rights