



EDITORIALLY SPEAKING

By Wade Swormstedt

LA Show and Tell

The use of photographs unearthed the real sign-code problem.

“And if an unenforced sign code becomes more restrictive, wouldn’t it spawn more illegal signs, more blight and an even bigger problem?”

Two isolated instances triggered a proposed, drastic revamping of the Los Angeles sign code. An electronic billboard shone a bit too brightly into a resident’s home. And supergraphics were appearing sans permits. Certainly grounds for a complete moratorium on signage.

Opportunistic California Assemblyman Mike Feuer’s insipid AB 109 (*see ST, July 2009, page 136*), which failed miserably at the state level, sought a moratorium on all electronic message centers (EMCs) and supergraphics. But a similar proposal arose at the municipal level.

The *Los Angeles Times* published a telescopic photo of the 5300 block of Van Nuys Blvd. to illustrate sign proliferation in an, ahem, unbiased report. (I’m unsure if this tactic violates a Scenic America copyright.)

Kozell Boren, the founder of Signtronix (Torrance, CA), presumed the photo to be fraudulent. So he went to that exact street and took his own photo. Next, he dispatched an employee to the Los Angeles permit department to see how many of the offending signs had permits. Not surprisingly, 23 of the 27 signs were illegal.

Kozell then depicted the streetscape with the illegal signs removed. Next, he created a vision of the streetscape with coordinated EMCs.

These photographs were included in a 26-slide PowerPoint entitled “Los Angeles Sign Code Enforcement Program,” which was produced by Daktronics regional manager Ed Wasserman, who also serves as co-chair of government relations for the California Sign Assn. (CSA). Mitch Chemers, the proprietor of Permit Wiz (Van Nuys), which creates “master sign programs,” similarly took existing photos of “sign blight” produced by the city planning department, and marked them up with arrows and explanations to indicate the illegal signs. These were incorporated into the PowerPoint as well.

The Los Angeles Dept. of Building and Safety readily admitted its inability to enforce the sign code, due to inadequate resources. The PowerPoint estimates the city has 200,000 retail businesses, but CSA attorney Jeff Aran said there are only three to four sign inspectors.

The presentation outlines a proposal spearheaded by Roy Flahive (Pacific Sign Construction, Greater San Diego area). The Sign Code Administration Program (SCAP) seeks to raise the money necessary to enforce the sign code and streamline the process. Ideally, this would also help establish a “dedicated sign desk.” Currently, sign permits are just another license that can require up to six months to process. An amnesty component is suggested. It also explains the benefits of on-premise signs in general, and EMCs more specifically. Much of this is outlined in a CSA white paper called “Signing off on a Cleaner, Safer Los Angeles.”

(A second PowerPoint, entitled “Signs of a Successful Downtown,” compiled by Aran and Flahive, was presented to the California Downtown Assn.)

Perhaps most importantly, the presentation uses logic. If most existing signage is illegal, and if securing a permit requires several months, why bother? And if an unenforced sign code becomes more restrictive, wouldn’t it spawn more illegal signs, more blight and an even bigger problem?

The SCAP proposal suggests a nominal fee from every business that uses an external, on-premise sign. A \$25 annual fee could generate \$5 million.

Each of the 15 Los Angeles City Council members represents a district, and each district has its own planning department. Over the past year, each council member (or a member of the respective planning department) has individually viewed the PowerPoint presentation.

Sign-code issues require the blessing of the city’s Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) committee. PLUM has approved the SCAP concept.

The effort has greatly benefited from Veronica Perez, a partner with the Holland & Knight law firm (Los Angeles). CSA hired her as a lobbyist, largely because of her end-user connections. She had served as vice president of a business group called Central City Assn. (CCA) of Los Angeles.

Such connections embody the sign coalition’s true influence. Besides CCA, end-user allies include the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, the Valley Industry Commerce Assn., the Greater Los Angeles New Car Dealers Assn., the California Restaurant Assn., the Hotel Assn. of Los Angeles and a property-owners’ group called Building Owners and Managers Assn. All of these groups’ logos are presented on the second slide of the PowerPoint presentation. Daktronics belongs to the first three groups.

The group emphatically explained the difference between on- and off-premise signs. While scrutinizing the existing Los Angeles sign code, line by line, the coalition convinced the city council that none of the on-premise provisions required change, nor should EMCs be banned from on-premise signs.

This same exercise even convinced The Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight, a registered, nonprofit, 501(c)(4) organization, to exonerate on-premise signs and endorse, at least conceptually, SCAP. As of this writing, no implementation target date has been set for SCAP. Now if only our federal government could explore bipartisanship . . .

(*ST plans to show the photos and provide more details next month.*)

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