



Memorandum

To: Members of the Planning and Zoning Commission
From: Latika V. Bhide, Planner
CC: Michelle V. Rentzsch, Director of Planning and Economic Development
Date: June 22, 2011
Re: Electronic Message Center Signs

Background:

At the May 17th City Council meeting, the Council referred the proposed Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) Text Amendment regarding Electronic Message Center signs to the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) for a public hearing.

Prior to 2007, the Crystal Lake Sign Ordinance prohibited electronic message center signs (EMC) with the exception of time and temperature signs. Thereafter, from June 2007 to July 2009, until the adoption of the UDO, EMCs were permitted, subject to certain restrictions. Seven EMCs were requested during this 2-year period (including 2 gas station pricing signs; 1 free-standing EMC on Route 176 was denied). Following the adoption of the UDO, EMCs are a prohibited sign type. City Council has reviewed variation requests for 6 EMC signs (including 1 gas station pricing sign), all of which have been approved.

Given the pervasive nature of EMC signs, there was discussion at a recent City Council meeting directing staff to present a definitive, long-term plan for EMC signage. Accordingly, the text amendment has been referred to the PZC.

Discussion:

At this time, any request for an EMC requires the approval of a variation by the City Council. Unlike variations associated with a Planned Unit Development, stand-alone variations are appropriate to be granted only where difficulties or hardships caused by special or extraordinary circumstances occur on the property. These circumstances do not include economic hardship; rather, they refer to topographic or physical attributes of the site that do not allow for the development standards of the Zoning District to be applied. As such, it would be difficult to prove hardship necessitating the installation of an EMC when a free-standing sign meeting the Ordinance requirement is permitted by right.

It is therefore recommended that EMCs be permitted with a Special Use Permit (SUP) in certain districts, thereby requiring special review from the City. This will provide the City with the flexibility to determine if a specific use (electronic message center) at a certain location will be compatible with the neighborhood.

However, consideration should be given, that the cost of requesting a SUP is higher than requesting a sign variation (\$355 vs. \$100). Additionally, because SUPs require review and recommendation from the Planning and Zoning Commission, there is an added cost in time and money.

If the PZC and Council's direction is to allow EMCs as SUPs, the following changes to the UDO are recommended:

Article 2, Land Use

Electronic Message Center (EMC) Signs must comply with the following criteria:

a. Number Permitted: One EMC Sign may be incorporated into any freestanding business sign on a property, provided that such freestanding sign would otherwise be permitted within the underlying Zoning District and subject to the following restrictions:

- (i) Minimum Width: The zoning lot upon which an EMC may be permitted must have a minimum of two hundred (200) contiguous lineal feet of frontage that must be located on Northwest Highway (Virginia Street) or Route 31.
- (ii) Minimum Area: The zoning lot upon which an EMC may be permitted must have a minimum of two (2) acres of total lot area.

[An alternative to provisions (i) and (ii) above can be a requirement that a minimum distance of 500 feet must be maintained between EMC signs and the requirement that the EMC sign be located (approximately) in the center of the property.]

- (iii) Maximum Gross Surface Area: The maximum gross surface area of the EMC portion of any sign shall not exceed thirty two (32) square feet or 40% of the sign's total area; whichever is smaller. The EMC portion must occupy the bottom half of the sign. The maximum gross area of any sign within which an EMC sign is incorporated shall comply with the requirements for maximum gross surface area based on the underlying Zoning District and shall include the surface area of the EMC.
- (iv) Maximum Height: The EMC sign, including any sign in which the EMC is incorporated, shall comply with the maximum height permitted for any sign based on the underlying Zoning District to which the property is located.
- (v) Pre-existing nonconforming signs: An EMC sign cannot be incorporated into a pre-existing non-conforming sign.
- (vi) Minimum Design Standards: The EMC sign shall meet all the following design conditions:
 - A. The EMC unit must be equipped with both a programmed dimming sequence as well as an additional overriding mechanical photocell that adjusts the brightness of the display to the ambient light at all times of day. Such programming and mechanical equipment shall be set so that the EMC, at night or in overcast conditions, will be no more than 40% of the daytime brightness level;
 - B. All EMCs located on properties adjacent to residential uses must be extinguished from 11:00 p.m. to until 7:00 a.m... This restriction shall apply regardless of the location of the EMC on the Property;
 - C. The message area of an electronic message center may be illuminated by white or amber incandescent lamps, LED (light-emitting diode) or magnetic discs;
 - D. The EMC unit must have the "flash" feature disabled and messages shall have a 5-minute "hold" time except for time and temperature messaging which may have a shorter duration, but no less than 1 minute;
 - E. The messages displayed on the EMC may only transition from one message to another by either fading or dissolving to black with another message appearing immediately thereafter, without movement or other transition effects between messages;
 - F. Except as otherwise provided herein, all messages displayed on the EMC must be static and may not reflect movement, flashing, scrolling or changes in shape or size of images or portions of images. Streaming and/or live-time video may not be displayed and this function of the EMC must be disabled;

- G. The EMC unit must be equipped to override commercial messages for emergency situations such as an “Amber Alert” or other such acute public emergencies, but such “override” authority for public emergencies shall not exceed 48 total hours within any two week period. The owner of the EMC unit is requested to cooperate with the City of Crystal Lake in order to allow the City to exercise its override authority; and
 - H. The EMC sign must be set in a manner that the display will turn dark in case of a malfunction.
- (vi) No sign shall have more than one (1) sign face except only a free-standing sign or a marquee sign, which may have not more than two (2) sign faces. Freestanding signs with more than one sign face must be designed to have the sign faces attached back to back to the support structure. No V-shape freestanding EMC signs shall be permitted within the City of Crystal Lake.
 - (vii) The EMC unit shall otherwise comply with all other provisions of Article 4-1000 of the Crystal Lake Unified Development Ordinance (“Signs’), including, but not limited to, the prohibition against Off-Premise Signs.

Article 10 Definitions

Electronic Message Center Sign - A sign with a fixed or changing display/message composed of a series of lights that may be changed through electronic means. Signs whose alphabetic, pictographic, or symbolic informational content can be changed or altered on a fixed display screen composed of electrically illuminated segments.

Action Steps:

Make a recommendation on the text amendment regarding Electronic Message Center signs to the City Council.



3. Shell



4. Cassidy



5. M'Lady



6. Colonial



7. HSB



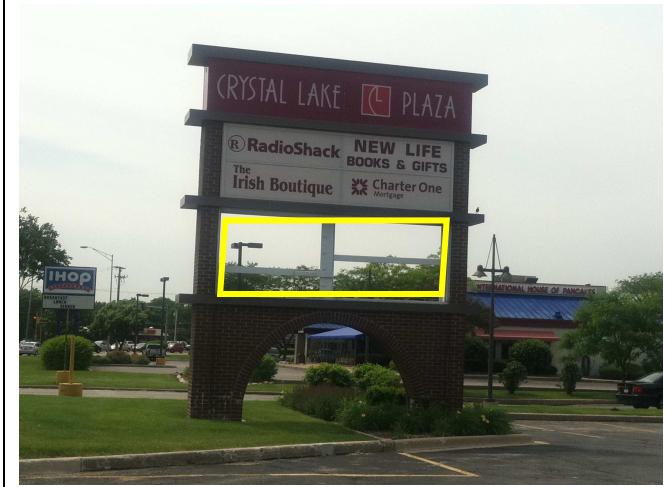
10. Lions Club



12. Walgreens



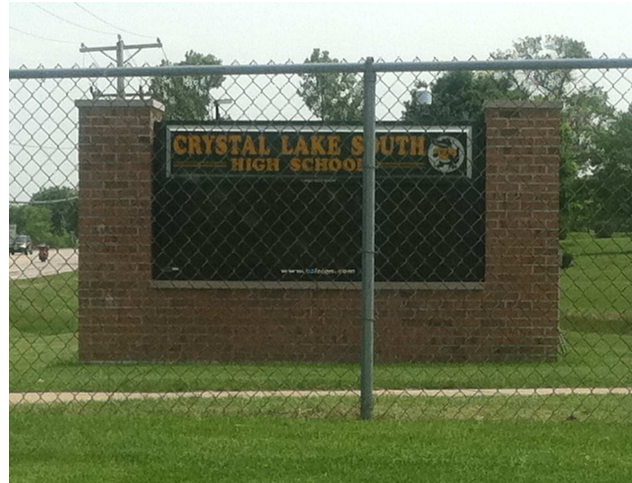
14. Davenport



16. Plaza



17. Park District



18. CL South



19. US Bank

