



MAYOR & COUNCIL MEMORANDUM

Subject: **STUDY SESSION - INFORMATION for proposed
Historic Landmark Sign Preservation Program –
City of Tucson Sign Code (Chapter 3)**

Page 1 of 5

Issue – This is a study session for a Sign Code (Tucson Code, Chapter 3) text amendment to provide options for restoration, adaptive reuse, and relocation of historic signs. The text amendment would include a definition of Historic Landmark Signs; an official City Register of Historic Landmark Signs, a series of Historic Sign Districts; a menu of options available for owners of registered Historic Landmark Signs; and, provide the process and procedures used to implement and regulate the program.

The purpose for this Study Session presentation is to request authorization to proceed with the formation of a subcommittee as part of the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and return to the Mayor and Council in approximately six (6) months for review of a proposed Sign Code amendment for Historic Landmark Signs.

Background – On September 17, 2008, the Rio Nuevo/Downtown, Culture, Arts and History Focus Area Subcommittee directed the Historic Preservation Officer to research programs used in other jurisdictions to preserve historic signs. The Historic Preservation Officer, together with staff from the Urban Planning and Design Department, the Development Services Department, and the City Attorney’s Office, has investigated options and considered current challenges experienced by historic sign owners using the current regulations in the Sign Code. A proposed program based on the findings of this investigation is described below.

Project Description – Tucson has a unique character, history, and identity reflected in its historic and iconic signs. Under the current Sign Code, owners of historic signs have difficulty restoring, reusing or relocating historic signs. As a result, owners opt to remove or demolish historically significant signs because such actions seem to be the only viable, legal options. To encourage maintenance, restoration and reuse of historic signs, staff has identified the issues encountered most often by historic sign owners. The framework of this proposed program includes the following elements further described below:

- A definition of Historic Landmark Signs;
- Sign Inventory and Register of Historic Landmark Signs;
- Designation of Historic Sign Districts;
- Options and Incentives for Owners of Historic Landmark Signs;
- Processes and Procedures; and
- Amendment to the Sign Code.

Project Elements – The Historic Landmark Sign Preservation Program has been developed by identifying models used by other jurisdictions around the country, comparing the components of these models for their ease of use by sign owners and implementation by program administrators. A description of the elements is as follows:

Definition of Historic Landmark Signs – The definition of an Historic Landmark Sign will include specific criteria to assess the eligibility of each sign including the age, materials, cultural and historical significance, and structure of signs. The availability of inexpensive plastics, beginning around 1960, marked a significant shift in the design and fabrication of advertising signs. Staff proposes that designation as an Historic Landmark Sign be limited to signs that were constructed prior to 1960, using materials other than plastic, and that the owner of the sign demonstrate the sign exemplifies the cultural, economic or historic heritage of the City of Tucson. In addition, staff proposes that Historic and Landmark Signs meets the following criteria:

- The sign is of exemplary technology, craftsmanship, or design for the period in which it was constructed; uses historic sign materials or means of illumination; and/or is unique in that it demonstrates extraordinary aesthetic quality, creativity or innovation;
- The sign has not been significantly altered from its historic appearance, or, if it has been altered, it is potentially restorable to its historic function and appearance;
- The sign is structurally safe or can be made safe without substantially altering its historical appearance;
- The sign is operable or can be made operable without substantially altering its historical appearance;
- The sign complies with movement, bracing, and illumination requirements contained in the City of Tucson Sign Code;
- The sign is not an off-site sign.

Sign Inventory and the Register of Historic Landmark Signs – An inventory of potential Historic Landmark Signs will be developed by identifying properties that are eligible for inclusion on the City’s official Register of Historic Landmark Signs. The Register would be voluntary and property owners would be able to “opt-in” to the process if they so chose. Properties with eligible or registered signs will be noted in a City database used by staff in the permitting process. Those property owners that “opt in” to the program will be eligible for specific options that apply only to Historic Landmark Signs. Those that “opt out” will be encouraged to help preserve the signs by conveying an easement to the City of Tucson, which is tax deductible as a charitable donation.

Property owners that have signs not listed on the initial inventory of eligible signs can apply to have these signs included on the official Register. The Sign Code Administrator will review the application through a site assessment using predefined criteria. Property owners with eligible signs will be prompted when applying for permits to indicate whether they want to designate the sign as an Historic Landmark Sign and responses will be entered into the database.

Designation of Historic Sign Districts – Based on the initial inventory of eligible Historic Landmark Signs, Historic Sign Districts will be mapped for the areas with the highest concentrations of these signs. Within Historic Sign Districts, property owners may apply for relocation of registered signs, or placement of donated historic signs. Maps of the Historic Sign Districts will be included in the Sign Code. To the extent possible, existing districts that are delineated in the Land Use Code or Sign Code will be used.

Options and Incentives for Owners of Historic Landmark Signs – The options available to property owners choosing to register signs using this program include the following:

- Restoration: The current Sign Code allows the Sign Code Administrator to approve permits for restoration of Historic Landmark Signs, provided the sign is replaced in the same spot from which it was removed for restoration. The proposed program would ensure that property owners can restore and repair their registered Historic Landmark Signs.
- Relocation: Currently, the Sign Code requires that a sign conform to the existing Sign Code requirements if it is relocated on-site or to another location, including reducing the height and area by 10 to 20 percent. The proposed program would allow registered signs to be relocated to another location on-site, or to other properties with appropriate zoning and land use within designated Historic Sign Districts, without necessarily requiring reduction in height or area.
- Relief from Maximum Sign Allowance: Owners of historic signs that have been “grandfathered” under the existing Sign Code have limited ability to change the copy or use these signs if any change is made to the sign. To encourage the preservation of Historic Landmark Signs, owners would be able to exempt registered Historic Landmark Signs from the total sign allowance allowed for the property. New signs would be allowed for the property, provided they are compatible with the Historic Landmark Sign.
- Removal: Owners that decide to “opt-out” of the process to keep and maintain eligible signs will be encouraged to convey easements on the signs to the City of Tucson that are tax deductible as charitable donations.

Process and Procedures – The proposed program will include methods of review for applications submitted by Historic Landmark Sign owners. Staff recommends that the program build on the existing processes and procedures for design review currently utilized by the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission Plans Review Committee. Criteria and procedures for major and minor reviews will be developed and included in the proposed text amendment to the Sign Code.

Amendment to the Sign Code – Staff recommends that an Ad Hoc Committee be formed to assist with developing the proposed program, assist staff in drafting the amendment and provide feedback on the proposal. The Ad Hoc Committee will be formed as a subcommittee of the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission with a total of seven (7) representatives. Two (2) representatives will be requested from the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission, two (2)

MAYOR AND COUNCIL MEMORANDUM
Historic Landmark Sign Preservation Program
Sign Code (Chapter 3) Text Amendment

Page 4 of 5

from the Tucson Citizen Sign Code Committee, and three (3) representatives from stakeholder interest groups such as the Tucson Downtown Partnership, local sign companies, and citizen's advocates. The Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and the Citizen Sign Code Committee will provide assistance to staff in forming a recommendation to the Mayor and Council to amend the Sign Code.

Recommendation – The Historic Preservation Office and the Development Services Department are working together to begin the process of amending the Sign Code. The primary focus of this collaboration is to preserve and protect Tucson's Historic Landmark Signs by providing options for their relocation, restoration and rehabilitation. Staff recommends that the Mayor and Council authorize the work program outlined above and direct staff to return in approximately six (6) months with a Sign Code amendment for Historic Landmark Signs.

Respectfully submitted,

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Urban Planning and Design Department