

ITEM #: 27  
DATE: 04-22-25  
DEPT: P&H

### COUNCIL ACTION FORM

**SUBJECT:           AMENDMENT TO ZONING ORDINANCE MODIFYING BILLBOARD STANDARDS AND CREATING NEW DIGITAL DISPLAY STANDARDS**

**BACKGROUND:**

City Council first considered the concept of leasing land for a digital billboard along Highway 30 as part of the update on the Linc project located along Lincoln Way in October 2022. At that time, the developer noted that for the Linc to proceed, the two billboards located on the site would need to be removed and that the billboard owner, Lamar Advertising, would consider ending their leases early if a suitable alternative could be found.

Lamar representatives indicated that a digital billboard--which does not currently exist within Ames--with a potential location along Highway 30 would be a desirable alternative. City Council determined that a site on City controlled land could be beneficial in relation to the request. Specially, land owned by the City along Highway 30 and Billy Sunday Road could be suitable. Council reviewed a draft lease for the site at their February 11, 2025 meeting. In order to consider leasing the proposed location, the digital billboard zoning standards would need to be modified. **On February 11, the City Council initiated a zoning text amendment to modify the billboard standards and create standards for digital billboards.**

Currently the City regulates Billboards through zoning standards of Section 29.409. A billboard is distinguished from a regular sign allowance as a specific use for advertising offsite products or services. On-site signage is considered accessory to the use on-site.

The current standards include placement of billboards, message area, heights, setbacks, lighting, support structure, and landscaping standards. Billboards are only permitted in HOC, GI, PI and Agricultural zones. Billboards are prohibited in all other zones and within 600 feet of the boundary of a zone in which billboards are prohibited. Additional placement restrictions include a 250-foot restriction from any part of interchanges with Interstate 35 and Highway 30 and 600 feet from another billboard. Illumination of a billboard after 10 p.m. is prohibited, unless by downward directed lights. See attached map for current allowed areas.

**ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT:**

**Two primary features of the billboard regulations need to be modified to allow for proposed size and illumination.** The current 300 square foot allowance is below common industry standards of billboards. Lamar Advertising's interest in a digital billboard relates to the 672 square foot "Bulletin" size. Allowing LEDs as the lighting source, which are not directed downwards, and allows for the billboard to be lit continually and not be shut off after 10 p.m.

The LED display has a proposed illumination control that requires ambient sensors to reduce light levels during nighttime hours compared to daytime hours. Staff also proposes a standard for measuring the intensity of lighting which is measured in "nits," which is a standard measurement of luminous intensity equal to one candela per square meter of surface area. This the most direct way to measure

intensity, but does require special equipment. Alternative options are to use a more common area measurement that is usually used for something like a street light, which is easier to measure, but has lower correlation to intensity of lighting.

The following is summary of proposed standards:

1. Location of Digital Billboard limited to Hwy 30 frontage for commercial property
2. Increased size allowance for digital billboards up to 672 square feet
3. Prohibition when abutting property with residential zoning
4. Light controls for automatic dimming based upon ambient conditions
5. Maximum brightness levels of the digital display at 250 nits in the evening
6. Maximum height of 50 feet
7. Separation distance of 1000 feet from another billboard for a digital display
8. A minimum of two nonconforming billboards with a message area totaling at least 400 square feet must be removed to permit approval of a digital display.

#### **PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION:**

The Commission reviewed a preliminary draft of the ordinance on April 2. Staff provided an overview of size, location, and lighting issues related to the digital billboards. The Commission questions focused on the areas that they would be permitted, clarification of the lighting standards, removal of nonconforming billboards, and the size. Concerns were expressed about how many could be permitted and how bright the lighting may appear. The Commission voted 5-1 to recommend approval of the changes. Since the meeting with the Commission, staff has refined the ordinance.

One notable issue that has been updated in response to the Commission discuss was the reference to removing nonconforming billboards and the amount of sign area required to have a new approval. Originally it was required to remove two billboards with a sign area at a one to one ratio, meaning 672 square feet. Staff researched this requirement further and because current limitations are 200 square feet, the requirement would likely require four billboards to be removed rather than two. Staff modified the attached draft ordinance to require 400 square feet rather than 672 square feet of sign area be removed to receive approval for a new digital display.

#### **ALTERNATIVES:**

1. Approve the attached ordinance on first reading.
2. Modify the proposed ordinance and approve on first reading.
3. Refer this item back to staff for more information and take no action to approve the ordinance.
4. Deny the text amendment.

#### **CITY MANAGER'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**CITY MANAGER'S RECOMMENDED ACTION.**

**The proposed change will allow for a new type of billboard within Ames in limited locations along Highway 30. The proposed standards will allow for billboards very similar to the two high profile billboards in Des Moines near the northeast mixmaster of the I-80/I-235/I-35 interchange (one is on the east side of 235 and the other is on the south side of I-35). The proposed standards address concerns about nuisance factors of lighting with automatic lighting controls and potential proliferation of billboard with the removal requirements and spacing standards. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager to approve Alternative #1, as described above.**

**ATTACHMENT(S):**

[Billboard Zoning Map.pdf](#)

[DRAFT Ordinance for Billboards and Digital Displays.pdf](#)