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**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Metropolitan Planning Commission

FROM: Mark Donaldson, Executive Director

DATE: October 11, 2012

SUBJECT: Request of MPC by Knox County Commission to study and make recommendations regarding amendments to the Knox County zoning ordinance regulating the conversion of billboards to electronic billboards.  
10-A-12-OA

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**REQUEST**

MPC has been requested by Knox County Commission to study and make recommendations regarding amendments to the Knox County zoning ordinance prohibiting the conversion of existing advertising signs (billboards) to electronic advertising signs (billboards) in areas of unincorporated Knox County.

**BACKGROUND**

This request comes to MPC following discussion by Knox County Commission regarding their continuing moratorium on new billboards. It expands upon a previous request to make recommendations regarding a prohibition on new billboards and the regulations of electronic message centers (EMC) in Knox County. The request asks to consider the additional action of prohibiting the conversion of existing billboards to billboards that utilize a digital sign face.

In December 2011, MPC provided recommendations on the expansion of Knox County's current prohibition on new billboards in several zone districts to include ALL zone districts and a recommendation to regulate EMCs in the same manner as the City of Knoxville.

Knox County Commission has recently conducted one public meeting on October 8<sup>th</sup> and has another scheduled for October 29<sup>th</sup>. Prior to considering any amendment to the zoning ordinance a recommendation from the planning commission is required.

**ANALYSIS**

At present the definition of advertising signs (billboards) in the Knox County zoning ordinance does not distinguish non-electronic and electronic signs; so that there is no definition of electronic billboards in the Knox County zoning ordinance, nor are there any regulations regarding the operating characteristics of electronic billboards. There are a number of electronic billboards

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currently operating in the County. These electronic billboards must meet state and federal guidelines with regard to operating and location standards.

From discussion at County Commission meetings it appears there is some sentiment to consider a package of ordinances which would:

- Prohibit new billboards in all zone districts throughout Knox County;
- Prohibit the conversion of existing billboards to electronic sign faces; and
- Regulate EMCs in a manner consistent with the regulations of the City of Knoxville.

A recommendation regarding conversions of billboards to electronic billboards, coupled with previous recommendations made by the planning commission, would support this package of ordinances amending the zoning ordinance.

### **STRATEGY**

To address the issue of prohibiting the conversion of existing billboards to digital billboards throughout all of unincorporated Knox County:

- A definition of electronic advertising signs or billboards is required; and
- Language that applies to all existing billboards must be added to prohibit their conversion to dynamic display, including the use of mechanical or electronic means to change the face of the sign.

### **INCENTIVES TO REDUCE NUMBER OF BILLBOARDS**

Many communities have established as a goal the reduction of the total number of billboards within their jurisdictions. The conversion of traditional billboards to electronic billboards is often used as an incentive to reduce the total number of billboards through a swap (reduction) of a number of traditional billboards for a single new regulated electronic billboard. Communities in the southeastern United States such as Gulfport, MS, Stuart, FL and Pinellas County, FL, has instituted this strategy, reducing the number of traditional billboards by, respectively, six, seven, and eight, for each new electronic billboard approved.

In addition, if new billboards become prohibited, the same strategy could be used with respect to the relocation of existing, legal nonconforming billboards. A swap (reduction) of a number of existing billboards could be part of an approval to relocate an existing billboard to a new location.

If the County Commission wishes to achieve a reduction in the total number of billboards, this type of incentive involving a swap of existing billboards for the approval of a new electronic billboard or a relocated billboard could help to reduce the total number of billboards in Knox County.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission recommend to Knox County Commission:

- A definition for electronic advertising signs as shown in Exhibit A be added to the zoning ordinance at Article 2, Section 2.20; and
- Language as shown in Exhibit A prohibiting the conversion of advertising signs to electronic advertising signs be added to the zoning ordinance at Article 3, Section 3.90.16.
- Consideration of an incentive program to encourage the reduction in the total number of billboards in the County.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

- Exhibit A, recommended additions to the zoning ordinance.