

CITY OF WASHINGTON

PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairman Burdette and Planning and Zoning Commission
FROM: Jon R. Oliphant, AICP, Planning & Development Director
SUBJECT: Public Hearing – Potential Billboards Zoning Code Text Amendment
DATE: February 25, 2026

Summary: The City's zoning code grants a narrow allowance for small and large billboards within the city limits. Two recent variance cases prompted consideration of an amendment to those regulations to potentially expand the allowable locations. Attached is a draft amendment that would slightly increase the possible locations. Staff requests feedback on the draft amendment. Following its review, a first reading ordinance may be scheduled for a future City Council meeting.

Background: Small billboards are classified as signs that advertise goods, products or services not sold on the premises on which the sign is located and can be a maximum of 64 square feet. A large billboard is the same type of sign up to a maximum of 672 square feet. A billboard cannot be located any closer than 500 feet from the nearest lot line of any residential zoned lot or parcel used for residential purposes unless a small billboard is separated by a highway where the maximum permissible speed limit is not less than 55 miles per hour. In such locations, which is limited to the US 24 corridor, the minimum setback is 300 feet. Both types of billboards are permitted only along corridors where the maximum speed limit is not less than 55 miles per hour. The existing regulations are attached.

Two variance applications were submitted and considered over the past two years during public hearings by the Planning and Zoning Commission to potentially allow an electronic digital billboard at 1230 Peoria Street. Todd's Servicecenter was located on the property for decades prior to its demolition in 2021. The sign was proposed to be 16' from the intersecting front property lines abutting Eagle and Peoria and approximately 394' from the nearest residential zoned lot at 1103 Eagle. There were three components to the variance request:

1. The allowance for a large billboard adjacent to a road with a maximum permissible speed limit of less than 55 miles per hour;
2. The allowance for a large billboard to be located less than 20 feet from the property line; and
3. The allowance for a large billboard to be located within less than 500 feet from the nearest lot line of any residential zoned lot.

Staff had some concerns regarding the proposed location as well as the placement of any billboards near corridors that do not allow for such off-premise signs, as it could create precedent. Both the PZC and City Council did not favor that location. However, some of the Council expressed interest in exploring a zoning code amendment that could modestly expand the allowable locations for billboards.

Billboards are intended to draw the attention of eyes to the displayed message. As such, they should only be considered where they will not substantially impact pedestrian and vehicular safety. Preserving the community's visual character is also an important consideration. Among the placemaking strategies within the 2023 Comprehensive Plan is to initiate a façade improvement program along Business Route 24, which is intended to make the corridor more inviting to residents and visitors to the city. The second year of the Washington Commercial Building and Property Improvement Grant Program was implemented in 2025 and staff is hopeful that a third version of the program will be offered this year. Should there be interest in a future zoning code text amendment, the attached draft incorporates three primary elements:

1. Consider any such requests through a special use process. That would allow for a specific site to be analyzed and if it may be deemed suitable, conditions could be attached that addresses its eventual operation, height, size, and placement.
2. Maintain an underlying set of regulations applicable to any billboards. There could be changes to the existing regulations but there should still be a framework from which any such billboards must abide. Staff would recommend that such signs only be considered on or adjacent to non-residential properties and those zoned C-2, C-3, or I-1, which are typically where more intensive non-residential uses are located. The current regulations require that billboards be on properties zoned for commercial or industrial uses. The draft amendment would eliminate C-1 properties from consideration, given the relatively lack of such properties and their location in close proximity to residential uses.
3. Require that any billboard that incorporates automatic changeable technology to contain a light detector or photocell that allows for the brightness to be dimmed when ambient light conditions darken as well as to prohibit any video or graphic animation or chasing, scintillating, or high intensity lighting. These standards reflect the existing zoning code requirements for electronic message board signage.

Some municipal zoning codes designate particular locations where billboards are permitted or prohibited. Washington's zoning code already outlines these allowable and restricted locations. While not included in this draft amendment, further refinement could provide for a range of sizes depending on the whereabouts—for example, differentiating between the US 24 (Boyd Parkway) corridor versus McClugage Road. Another option could be to allow slightly broader placement of small billboards (up to 64 square feet in size) while maintaining strict limitations on large billboards (up to 672 square feet in size), given the significantly greater visual impact of larger signs that are customarily only adjacent to divided highways or major arterials. A related approach could be to allow taller monopole signs adjacent to US 24 but to require ground signs with a shorter height maximum near other commercial or industrial corridors.

Staff requests input on the draft code amendment as part of a public hearing during the March 4 PZC meeting. Unless there is clear consensus on any changes, staff recommends continuing the discussion at a future meeting to allow additional time for refining the language.

Attachments

ORDINANCE NO. _____

(Approval of this ordinance would amend regulations pertaining to the allowance of billboards within the Washington city limits)

AN ORDINANCE AMENDING THE CODE OF ORDINANCES OF THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, ILLINOIS, BY AMENDING SECTION 56-271 ENTITLED "BILLBOARDS"

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, TAZEWELL COUNTY, ILLINOIS AS FOLLOWS:

Section 1. The foregoing recitals shall be and are hereby incorporated as findings of fact as if said recitals were fully set forth herein.

Section 2. That Section 56-271 (entitled "Billboards") of the Code of Ordinances of the City of Washington is hereby amended as follows (additions are indicated by **bold underline**; deletions by ~~strikeout~~):

Sec. 56-271 – Billboards

(a) Billboards of the following three types shall be allowed:

- (1) Poster panels or bulletins normally mounted on a building wall, roof, or freestanding structure with advertising copy in the form of pasted paper;
- (2) Multi-prism signs alternating advertising messages on one displayed area; and
- (3) Painted bulletins, where the advertiser's message is painted directly on a wall-mounted, roof, or freestanding display area.

(b) Billboards are prohibited in the city, except under the following conditions:

- (1) No large billboard will be permitted which advertises a business which is not located and presently being conducted on the premises on which the billboard is located, except as follows:
 - a. As may be permitted by applicable state and federal law, rules, and regulations along state and federal highways, or roads under the jurisdiction of the state or federal departments of transportation, and where the maximum permissible speed for vehicles traveling upon such highway or road is not less than ~~55~~ **50** miles per hour;
 - b. The maximum height above grade of such large billboard shall not exceed 30 feet;
 - c. The maximum surface area of such large billboard shall not exceed 672 square feet;
 - d. The lot, block, or parcel of real estate upon which the large billboard is located must have an area of no less than 20,000 square feet, and must be zoned ~~for commercial or industrial use~~ **C-2, C-3, or I-1**;

- e. The location of the large billboard shall be no less than 20 feet from the property line of the lot upon which the large billboard is located;
 - f. The large billboard may not be located or placed within 500 feet from the nearest lot line of any residential zoned lot, block or parcel, or any lot, block or parcel use for residential purposes;
 - g. The large billboard may not be located any closer than 1,500 feet from another such large billboard whether on the same side of the highway or road; ~~and~~
 - h. The large billboard may not be located in such a place or in such a manner so as to block the view of drivers of vehicles approaching an intersection;
 - i. **No large billboard shall be erected in the city without a prior public hearing for a special use and recommendation from the Planning and Zoning Commission followed by approval of the City Council;**
 - j. **If the large billboard incorporates automatic changeable technology, the large billboard must contain a light detector or photocell by which the sign's brightness can be dimmed when ambient light conditions darken; and**
 - k. **The large billboard shall not incorporate video or graphic animation and shall not utilize chasing, scintillating, or high intensity lighting.**
- (2) No small billboard will be permitted which advertises a business which is not located and presently being conducted on the premises on which the billboard is located, except as follows:
- a. As may be permitted by applicable state and federal law, rules, and regulations along state and federal highways, or roads under the jurisdiction of the state or federal departments of transportation, and where the maximum permissible speed for vehicles traveling upon such highway or road is not less than ~~55~~ **50** miles per hour;
 - b. The maximum height above grade of such small billboard shall not exceed 15 feet;
 - c. The maximum surface area of such small billboard shall not exceed 64 square feet;
 - d. The lot, block, or parcel of real estate upon which the small billboard is located must have an area of no less than 20,000 square feet, and must be zoned ~~for commercial or industrial use~~ **C-2, C-3, or I-1;**
 - e. The location of the small billboard shall be no less than 20 feet from the property line of the lot upon which the small billboard is located;
 - f. The small billboard may not be located within 500 feet from the nearest lot line of any residential zoned lot, block, or parcel, or any lot, block, or parcel used for residential purposes if the small billboard is lighted using internal or external means unless the small billboard is separated by a highway or road

where the maximum permissible speed for vehicles is not less than 55 miles per hour. If separated by such a highway or road, the small billboard may not be located within 300 feet from the nearest lot line of any residential zoned lot, block, or parcel, or any lot, block, or parcel used for residential purposes;

- g. The small billboard may not be located any closer than 500 feet from any other billboard with the exception of small billboards that are located on opposite sides of a public street; ~~and~~
- h. The small billboard may not be located in such a place or in such a manner so as to block the view of drivers of vehicles approaching an intersection;
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- k. **The small billboard shall not incorporate video or graphic animation and shall not utilize chasing, scintillating, or high intensity lighting.**

Section 3. All ordinances or parts of ordinances in conflict with this ordinance are hereby repealed insofar as they are in conflict with this ordinance.

Section 4. If any provision of this ordinance is adjudged invalid, such adjudication shall not affect the validity of the ordinance as a whole or of any portion not adjudged invalid.

Section 5. This ordinance shall be in full force and effect from and after its passage, approval and publication as required by law.

PASSED AND APPROVED this _____ day of _____ 2026.

AYES: _____

NAYS: _____

ATTEST:

MAYOR

CITY CLERK

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(Code 2000, § 154.154; Ord. No. 2033, 9-3-1996; Ord. No. 2941, 6-20-2011; Ord. No. 3169, 3-7-2016)