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TOP STORY

Mesa poised to allow billboards at 2 sites

By Scott Shumaker, Tribune Staff Writer

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Drivers on the westbound Loop 202 at the Country Club Dr. exit encounter three digital billboards which sit on state land and overlook the freeway. Soon, billboards could appear not far away at the old Fiesta Mall site. (File photo)

After a push from the mayor last year, city staff have crafted a change in city code that would allow owners of large parcels next to freeways in Mesa to erect billboards on their property.

The proposed update is aimed at granting the right to install billboards to just two landowners next to U.S. 60 Superstition Freeway: Mesa Community College and Verde Investments, the owner of the Fiesta Mall site.

Defined as an off-site sign more than 32 square feet, billboards are currently prohibited in Mesa, though numerous landowners have put them on county island land next to freeways running through Mesa.

On Feb. 14, the Planning and Zoning Board unanimously approved the planning department's proposed city code update for billboards.

City Council is slated to introduce the measure tomorrow, at the Feb. 26 council meeting, and it will hold a hearing and vote at its following meeting.

Former Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh, who represented the area surrounding Fiesta Mall and the community college, has come out against the change allowing billboards.

"There were valid reasons why past elected leaders banned billboards in our city and they were consistent with national efforts led by Lady Bird Johnson to ban billboards on federal highways and to beautify roadways," Kavanaugh wrote in an email to council members.

"In my opinion, they diminish the quality of life in our city and continue to be a distraction to motorists," he wrote.

According to a staff report, Apache Junction, Chandler, Gilbert, Scottsdale and Queen Creek currently ban billboards; Phoenix, Tempe, Maricopa County and Pinal County allow them.

City planners said the municipalities that currently ban this form of advertising typically cite negative visual impacts.

The language approved by Mesa's P&Z board would restrict the signs to parcels of 50 acres or more with at least 1,500 feet of freeway frontage, a requirement that currently only Mesa Community College and the adjacent Fiesta Mall property meet.

City staff, however, said last year that a dozen additional parcels throughout Mesa could potentially qualify following annexation or rezoning.

The mayor and Vice Mayor Francisco Heredia said last year that Fiesta Mall-owner Verde Investments has lobbied city officials for the change, arguing that billboards would help it to redevelop the 80-acre site.

The company has finished leveling the 1-million-acre Fiesta Mall building, which was once a regional shopping hub but fell into decline in recent decades.

Verde has floated a plan to turn the site into a mixed-use district with retail, offices and up to 4,000 apartments.

One of the company's principals, Ernie Garcia II, is also an investor in the billboard industry, among other ventures. Last summer, he purchased millions of shares in Clear Channel, a national billboard firm.

Heredia told the Tribune that he thinks billboards are appropriate for the kind of urban, mixed-use district Verde Investments intends to put on the site.

The mayor also argued last year that the change could give a new revenue stream to Mesa Community College, which might be able to put the money toward a good cause like scholarships.

Kavanaugh pushed back on this argument.

"I understand the lure of funding streams to a worthy project," he wrote, "but is it worth it to change decades of public policy for an outdated advertising platform?"

In recommending the change, planning staff also stated that billboards could be used for disseminating public service messages.

Some key rules for billboards in Mesa include no animation, flashing or moving lights on the signs.

Illumination on both electronic and static billboards would have to be shut off at 11 p.m. until sunrise. Electronic billboards would need to be dimmed from sunset to 11 p.m.

The signs could be no more than 48 feet above the level of the adjacent freeway, and max height would be 70 feet from their base.

The P&Z board was generally receptive to the proposed billboard code update. One question from the discussions was whether the public could provide comments before billboards were approved.

Planning staff said that each new billboard would require an overlay zone on the property, so the billboards would go through the rezoning process with city council and board hearings.

The rezoning hearings would allow for public comments on individual billboards before they are approved.

The proposed language also stipulates that each billboard requires a development agreement between the city and the landowner.

In a study session last week, council members had several questions about the change, but there did not appear to be any major opposition.

Councilwoman Julie Spilsbury observed that there were homes on the opposite side of the U.S. 60 from where the billboards might go in.

“Is there some way someone can guarantee me it’s not going to affect those neighbors right there?” she asked.

City Manager Chris Brady responded that the city code change would only allow the possibility of billboards to go in, but there would be a long process in which light studies and other information about the specific impact of a billboard would be brought to the council.

The mayor issued a strong endorsement of moving forward.

He said the billboard revenue could be a “game-changer” for Mesa Community College, and the possibility of billboards was leverage the city could use to help guide the redevelopment of Fiesta Mall.

“I think the potential for downside is certainly there,” Giles said. “We need to be sensitive to those few homes that are in the neighborhood. But I think the plus side in some very strategic areas is huge.”