

PRESERVATION ACTION COUNCIL OF SAN JOSE

Dedicated to Preserving San Jose's Architectural Heritage

October 2, 2020

Transmitted via e-mail: toni.taber@sanjoseca.gov

San Jose City Council
c/o Toni Taber, City Clerk
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San Jose, CA 95113

PAC*SJ Opposes Digital Billboard Amendments (PP20-004 and ER20-054)

Dear Mayor Liccardo and Members of City Council,

As you are likely aware, the City of San José is considering amendments to its sign code to allow animated digital billboards along freeways, building-mounted digital signs downtown and in North San Jose, and digital advertising on bus shelters and other street furniture citywide. These amendments would reverse a 35-year ban on new billboards in the city, with potentially disastrous impacts to the public realm, historic structures, residential neighborhoods, and public safety.

PAC*SJ supports the current billboard ban and fears that a proliferation of new digital signage would create dangerous driving conditions, serious disruptions to wildlife, increased light pollution and decreased property values for adjacent residents. We are also concerned that a proposed "Downtown Sign Intensification District" lacks necessary protections for historic buildings, which could be physically damaged or visually overwhelmed by the installation of building-mounted digital signs.

We recognize that these proposed amendments are intended in part to reduce the number of existing static billboards currently disfiguring neighborhoods across the City, and we are supportive of efforts to reduce this blight. However, the proposed 4-to-1 replacement policy supported by the billboard industry and included in the proposed amendments is simply a bad deal for the people of San José. New digital

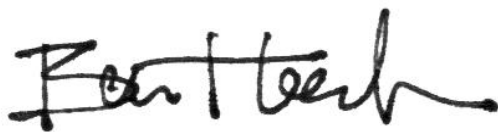
billboards are likely to be far larger in size, taller in height, brighter, more energy-consuming, more conspicuous, and ultimately more blighting an element of the visual environment than the static billboards proposed for replacement.

We also note with grave concern the potential unintended impacts of concentrating digital signage along freeways that already burden adjacent neighborhoods with air and noise pollution, physical barriers, and other adverse affects. We strongly encourage meaningful residential buffer zones—not just exemptions based solely on parcel-specific land-use designations—in any potential amendments to the current Sign Code.

Finally, we take strong exception to the claims included in City presentations that digital signage “creates a more vibrant and interesting setting” and supports “art and place making opportunities.” This is absurd billboard industry propaganda that has no place in a reasoned discussion of these issues. San José is already home to a wonderful collection of historic neon signs, painted wall murals, and contemporary small business signage that represent true artistry, craftsmanship, and heritage. We cannot and should not trade this authentic, unique sense of place for a cheap imitation of Times Square.

PAC*SJ and its members have voiced these concerns at numerous public meetings and have provided formal comments to the Department of Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement. We are hopeful that the City’s forthcoming Environmental Impact Report will address these concerns and we look forward to reviewing its findings. In advance of any scheduled City Council hearings on the issue, I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you or your staffs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Leech". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ben Leech
Executive Director
Preservation Action Council of San José
ben@preservation.org