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NEWS - LOCAL

Friday, Mar. 05, 2010

Myrtle Beach debates digital dazzle

Myrtle Beach considers flashy overhaul

By Lorena Anderson - landerson@thesunnews.com

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There's one word some people would like Myrtle Beach to keep in mind as it works on its new electronic sign ordinance: restraint.

"Myrtle Beach is notorious for taking a good idea and beating it into the ground, until you're left with the worst common denominator," said downtown merchant Chris Walker.

The city is wrestling with a proposal to allow digital billboards and electronic message signs throughout the city's commercial areas. The electronic messages could replace the signs that now have changeable messages that have to be switched out manually - signs that often have missing letters or misspelled words.

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A digital sign (right) stands among nonmoving signs along the Frontage Road in Myrtle Beach.

"This is a huge change for this city," City Manager Tom Leath said. It has been 25 to 30 years, he said, since the last overhaul of the city's sign ordinances, and then it was to enact a "very restrictive" set of rules meant to deal with visual clutter.

"In the 1970s, this town was wide open, and had all manner of signs and visual displays," Leath said.

Some worry that the new ordinance will leave Myrtle Beach looking more like Las Vegas.

That's not a concern for some council members.

Councilman Mike Lowder said at the last City Council meeting the idea of the city looking like Vegas didn't bother him at all - he's more concerned that the city allow businesses every advantage when it comes to advertising.

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Councilman Wayne Gray said the new-generation electronic signs and billboards are so much improved, they are attractive now.

Ebbie Phillips, president of Tyson Sign Co., said the signs have been refined and now use LED lighting, which is a low-energy light source, and have much better resolution than the older lighted signs.

But Walker said he has heard from some hoteliers, especially on the north side of Ocean Boulevard, that they have worked with builders to cultivate a look for their district and they don't want it disrupted by such signs.

He said if the city were to take the ordinance district by district, that might help.

"There are some places where they would fit in really well," he said, such as the downtown entertainment

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district and along Kings Highway in the highly commercial areas. They would not work, he said, on the north end where there are more residences than businesses.

The city has already proposed a restriction on digital billboards that for every one that someone wants to put up, they must take down two other, older-style billboards.

"Visual clutter has always been an issue in Myrtle Beach," said City Councilwoman Susan Grissom Means.

Leath said this ordinance is just one of the visual-display-oriented regulations the council is looking to update, and it has been in the works for more than a year. The council referred the issue of

signs - not billboards - to the planning commission for research and a recommendation, and the panel worked hard to complete that assignment, said Commissioner Sally Howard.

"These electronic signs would be a good, clean look," she said. "The old changeable signs are an eyesore."

But, she said, the planning commission's recommendation is much different than what the city is considering adopting now.

For example, the commission recommended restricting the change of electronic messages to once every 24 hours - a limit Howard said was too strict.

"My suggestion was three times a day, so restaurants could change their signs for breakfast, lunch and dinner," she said.

Phillips said businesses have been asking for the signs, and they like that they can change the messages from a computer in the office, rather than sending someone out with a ladder to do it by hand.

The first draft of the ordinance, which passed at the City Council's last meeting, would allow each sign to change as often as the owner wants it to.

The commission also recommended no animation, but the council wants to allow it - a decision North Myrtle Beach made when it chose to allow electronic signs but later rescinded. North Myrtle Beach leaders are in a budget retreat and could not be reached for comment.

"[Animation is] a constant change," Howard said. "It's always moving. We just threw that out to start with - the commission just wasn't interested in animation."

Howard said the commission was worried about signs grouping together in the heavily populated areas and causing a flashing effect that could affect drivers.

Phillips said the signs would be especially advantageous in Myrtle Beach, where "you have so many people from out of town who are looking for information. The signs will help them locate attractions and services."

All those out-of-towners being unfamiliar with the city and then distracted by the signs is what worries others, though.

Many cities and states are wrestling with the same issue, and the Federal Highway Administration said it has been working on a cutting-edge study, in which a high-tech car monitors drivers' eye movements in different situations, to determine what distracts drivers. The results should be available this year, the administration said.

There are some large, changeable message signs in the city now - most notably the ones at The Palace Theatre and BB&T Coastal Field. Those are allowed because of the zoning of the baseball field and Broadway at the Beach.

If the new ordinance passes as proposed now, the signs would be allowed in all the city's commercial districts except The Market Common, including Robert M. Grissom Parkway - an allowance one council member isn't pleased about.

Means, after whose father the road is named, said because the road is designated as a parkway, it shouldn't have the big electronic signs. Gray tried to talk her into changing her stance at the last meeting, but Means said she "feels a little protective" of the road because she lives along it and because of the family connection.

There are already three there, two of which were allowed by mistake, Leath said, and the other because the board of zoning appeals granted a variance. Means said the council will find a way to get the signs on Grissom Parkway anyway.

"I'm so outnumbered on this, I don't have a prayer," she said.

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But Leath said it could be that the final ordinance will require any electronic signs allowed on Grissom to be monument-style, which are lower and usually smaller, or maybe it won't allow animation on those signs. No one is sure about the end result yet. The second and final vote could be scheduled for Tuesday's meeting.

No matter what happens, the community appearance board will have to approve signs as they are proposed, and city spokesman Mark Kruea said he doesn't think there's going to be a sudden rush of new electronic signs.

"Over time, as people update their signage, they could consider these, but not everyone will want one or be able to afford one," he said.

Howard said whatever the council chooses to do, she hopes the public will turn out to have its say.

"I also hope Myrtle Beach will get it right the first time," she said, "and not do anything it will regret."

Contact LORENA ANDERSON at 444-1722.

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tarheelbunny wrote on 03/05/2010 05:55:00 PM:

Can't you residents feel the pressure.....from the Leaders..they are running scared....The money the Myrtle Beach Chamber is spending on marketing not to mention the numerous people that are traveling aboard to promote MB.....Time will tell but it's not looking Good. Sun News.....daily articles are promoting one new adventure after another. Good Luck

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KingofPop wrote on 03/05/2010 05:45:30 PM:

It's my understanding that the Brittins and the folks at B&C and many of the longtime hotliers ALSO built this city, not JUST the working-class folks. Don't they have a say, too?

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RantmanSC wrote on 03/05/2010 02:43:04 PM:

Leath and the council might also consider this. The American publics' anger at Government isn't limited to the federal level. Americans across the nation are waking up and becoming more politically aware on every level. All politics is local. The leaders of MB are driving this area into the ground, regardless of the rhetoric they spew to the contrary. REPLACE THEM AT THE EARLIEST OPPORTUNITY!!!

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sandflea wrote on 03/05/2010 10:31:37 AM:

Myrtle Beach is notorious for taking a good idea and beating it into the ground, until you're left with the worst common denominator," AMEN TO THAT!!!

he has heard from some hoteliers, especially on the north side of Ocean Boulevard, that they have worked with builders to cultivate a look for their district and they don't want it disrupted by such signs. Does BRITTIAN ring a bell!!!!

Means said she "feels a little protective" of the road because she lives along it and because of the family connection.

WHO CARES HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH WHAT IS BEST FOR THE CITY!!!!!!

I also hope Myrtle Beach will get it right the first time," she said, "and not do anything it will regret."

THERE IS A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING I GUESS!!!!

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noname wrote on 03/05/2010 08:41:39 AM:

Stay up to date,times change we have to stay with them.If some are to old to understand replace them.

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train wrote on 03/05/2010 08:30:09 AM:

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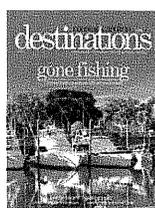
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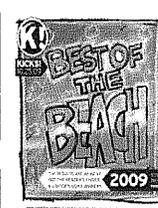
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