

City for Sale again? Or an Opportunity for Real Discussion?

by Robert Kettell



Betsy Ross updated.

City Council President Darrell Clarke has proposed selling space on digital billboards mounted on city property to raise revenue for the city. While the details

of the advertising signs has yet to be determined, his bill currently before City Council specifies that these new signs will **not** be subject to the newly adopted regulations imposed upon signs on private property. He envisions an “integrated network of digital signs on municipal property” under a contract approved by City Council that includes advertising signs city controlled “land, building or structure” “including but not limited to bus shelters, information kiosks, trash receptacles and public restrooms.”

The issue of signs on public property was not satisfactorily addressed during the recent hearings on the new sign ordinance so this is a good time to discuss all the issues involved with public signs. Maybe we should broaden the topic to include signs on property owned by other public groups: the school district, the parking authority, the housing agency, local transportation authorities, and quasi-public redevelopment and economic development corporations. Maybe new signage regulations are also needed for public parks, bridges, schools and vehicles.

In addition to possible new revenue, such a discussion should include the impact of public advertising signs on the city’s image and appearance, its historic character, property values, the safety of motorists and pedestrians and the city’s residents’ quality of life. Should consideration be given to compliance with previously adopted, community-approved plans and zoning ordinances? What role will neighborhoods play in reviewing the placement and design of new public digital billboards? Who will benefit from public advertising signs and who will be adversely affected them?

Is it best to issue a single advertising contract that city council approves, or would it be better to set Design Standards that apply to all public agencies? One place to start a discussion on Design Standards for public signs might be the proposals that were presented by the Old City Civic Association during the public hearings on the new zoning code last year (even though they were not adopted).

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For example, it was suggested that in **public parks** there be one pedestrian-oriented sign at each entrance, a maximum of three auto-oriented signs, and no billboards (non-accessory) signs. At **public schools** there should be one lit identification sign at the public entrance to the building, one sign at each entrance to the playground that states school regulations, and billboards (if any) should not advertise activities that are illegal or harmful to students. Any signs on **public bridges** should be limited to traffic information; no billboards.

Parking structures that are operated by public or quasi-public entities should have rate signs at each entrance and a maximum of two signs identifying their location to auto traffic, but they could have an unlimited number of advertising signs inside that are not visible to the public. **Vacant public land or buildings** should have two small signs: one advertising the site's availability and another for the regulations governing those who enter the property – no advertising billboards. Signs in **transit stations** should show a map of the local area, information on routes, fares, schedules and station regulations, and advertising signs should not be distracting to vehicular traffic, nor promote illegal activities or activities that may be harmful to the public; advertising signs would only be permitted if allowed by local zoning.

It would be a shame to let Councilman Clarke's Bill #130109 pass without using this opportunity to enlarge the conversation about advertising signs public property.

Robert Kettell is a retired architect and community planner who has lived in Old City in Philadelphia since 1975.

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