

Tucson Business Concerns Need To Be Heard in City Sign Code Revisions

☒ TUCSON, ARIZONA – The Tucson Sign Code has been under revision since August 9, 2016 and Wednesday night, a joint meeting of the Citizens Sign Code Committee and the Planning & Zoning Commission took place at a public joint study session and hearing on the final recommendations to be submitted to Mayor and Council by September.

A Sign Code revision is made necessary to:

- 1) comply with the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision on Reed v. Town of Gilbert;
- 2) simplify the Sign Code by integrating it into the Unified Development Code; and
- 3) make practical changes that modernize the Code, improve the quality of design and flexibility of the overall code, and ground it in technical standards.

The Citizens Sign Code Committee and the Planning & Zoning Commission were formed to hear from the community and businesses have taken time and effort to provide “real world” commentary to help re-draft the Sign Code over the past year. On Wednesday, 22 business people showed up to speak at the meeting. All of these participants voiced disapproval of the current draft and recommended it not be accepted in its current form, with further changes needed per the business community’s requests. There was no one from the public who spoke in favor of the current draft.

Amber Smith CEO of the Metropolitan Pima Alliance said, “Mayor Rothschild and City Manager Mike Ortega have committed through Project Prosperity, a collaborative effort between MPA, the Metro Chamber, and SAHBA, to work on 8 initiatives to improve

the business climate in the City of Tucson. The Sign Code was identified as one of those priorities more than 18-months ago. I am certain that the City Council will consider the business community's concerns regarding this extremely important economic development issue. It is imperative that the business community continue to be engaged in this issue in spite of the recent events and process."



Amber Smith,
CEO Metro
Pima Alliance

After Wednesday's meeting, Smith had some strong opinions regarding the process that she voiced in an open letter to Tucson Mayor and Council members:

Mr. Mayor and Council members, I wanted to bring to your attention an extremely negative experience MPA and its members had due to comments made by your appointees who represent your voice. MPA and our colleagues at the Metro Chamber and SAHBA have been actively reviewing and commenting on the existing and draft Sign Code since August of last year. The process has only offered us to participate during Call to the Audience in 3 minute increments. We have attended every public meeting on this issue, we have met with staff, we have testified and we have invested in hundreds of hours working on this issue. While I may be a paid advocate, my members are volunteers and citizens that have dedicated hours to this process because they are the most impacted by this code. In a show of good faith, we continue to work on this issue that impacts the business community larger than any other issue.

We submitted letters in January and February and we received a response to the February letter a week before the commission hearing in June- 5 months later. On that same day, we submitted another letter reiterating the concerns testified to

and submitted in writing between February and June. Because we submitted additional comments for the public hearing, a week before the public hearing, we were called, "unprofessional", "suspect", "suspicious" and on the take (summarizing the comments made). We were repeatedly chastised for submitting "last minute comments" when we have actively been working through the process and had received little to no response or concessions over the entire period of the public process.

22 land and property owners and property representatives testified about their experience with the current code and issues with the current draft. Each one stated they were unsupportive of the current draft and they offered reasons as to why signage is important. These business people and private citizens represent businesses of all sizes and were completely disrespected. At times, we may disagree on issues. However, for a commissioner to disrespect another citizen in that fashion during a public hearing in which the public was trying to be heard is a travesty to an alleged public process. MPA itself has been around for 20-years and during my 8.5 years with the organization, we have never been publicly treated this way. Our entire goal and intention is to form public/private partnerships and try to work through issues for the benefit of all parties. To have our organization slandered alongside the other business representatives and constituents that have taken time to participate in the public process, is extremely unfortunate. When Council becomes frustrated because people do not come forward to participate in public processes, know that situations like this only propagate that issue.

The lack of decorum and confusion last night in how and when the joint committee can vote, meet and make motions was embarrassing to watch. Despite this situation and confusion, we will continue to participate in the process laid before us and we will fight to have a good Sign Code supportive of

businesses. We look forward to meeting with each of you to discuss those specifics and have this very important dialogue. In the meantime, I hope that your representatives will at least show the business community respect and not create such a hostile, negative environment towards your constituents.

Planning & Zoning have postponed action until its regularly scheduled meeting July 12th and the Citizen's Sign Code Committee will be meeting on this topic in the meantime. It is uncertain whether or not there will be any further public hearings. Additional information on the Sign Code Revision Project can be found here: <https://www.tucsonaz.gov/pdsd/projects/sign-code-revision-project>

Those impacted by the sign code should contact their city council member and ask that the business community be involved in the process. The Citizens Sign Code Committee and the Planning Commission staff are to return final recommendations to Mayor and Council for September 2017, which will be the final opportunity for the business community to be heard at that time.