City Council OKs two huge, 3D billboards for Center city

City Council on Thursday approved a controversial bill that would allow two huge, animated, three-dimensional billboards in Center City.

Councilman Mark Squilla's ordinance permitting the hybrid-movie screen/digital sculptures, dubbed "urban experiential displays," passed, 15-1. A companion bill authorizing location of the boards and specifying the approval process passed 13-3.

If approved by the Art Commission, one display, a hand holding up a globe, would sit outside of Reading Terminal Market. A second, more traditional square display would be placed in front of the Convention Center.

The proposed law outraged some residents and the anti-billboard group Scenic Philadelphia, who called the displays
eyesores that would reap huge profits for Catalyst Outdoors, the Malvern-based firm slated to erect them.

But proponents point to some of the benefits the effort would provide. As part of the arrangement, Catalyst has to pay $5.2 million per display to be distributed to local nonprofits, including Reading Terminal Market. Furthermore, Catalyst would dedicate only 70 percent of content to commercial uses.

"Everyone has an opinion of what's right or wrong, but when you live here, work here, play here, you have more influence on the decision than someone who lives a mile away or further," Squilla said.

He noted there was once pushback in the city for outdoor dining and building above William Penn's hat.

"Did we ruin the fabric of Center City? No, we now have a beautiful skyline. . . . We have to find ways to combine the old and the new."

Opponents also argued that the bill was politically motivated and that support for it was exaggerated. They called on Council to look at the two locations, not as belonging to Squilla's district, but commonly used public spaces.

Kenyatta Johnson was the only council member to vote against the proposal. Johnson said he heard too many complaints from Center City residents in his district, which was originally included in the legislation but later removed.

"The UEDs [urban experiential displays] and the impact it'll have on that particular area will mean an impact on my constituents along the border," Johnson said. "I wanted to listen to their voices."

While Council was considering the matter, supporters outweighed opponents, stomping their feet and raising neon signs that read: "Feed nonprofits with UEDs."

John McNichol, president of the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority, said the signs would help with conventions, currently short on outdoor advertising options.

"We're not competitive in digital signing opportunities," he said. "We simply don't have the infrastructure and these are customers who bring in $20-, $40-, $60 million in economic impact."

Russell Meddin, a member of the Reading Terminal Market board of directors, said the market would benefit greatly from the money. He described the signs as less garish than portrayed:

"We are in the electronic age. Our neighborhood is proof that when you blend the old and the new, you come up with something that is much, much better."

Kiki Bolender, an architect who works in Center City,
lambasted the size of the displays - a minimum 1,500 square feet.

"We're not talking about kiosks, we're talking about the house next door, lit up," Bolender said. "No matter what kind of dressing you try to put on them, they will degrade our public space."

Mark McDonald, spokesman for Mayor Nutter, said the administration was "deeply concerned" with how the displays would be regulated. An initial traffic safety review was pulled from the ordinance, as was the requirement that the Planning Commission approve designs. As it is written, only the Art Commission needs to approve plans for the signs.

Nutter has until April 9 to veto or sign the bill.

In other action, Council advanced a resolution calling on the Nutter administration to pursue Payments In Lieu Of Taxes (PILOT) for large nonprofit institutions in the city.

The University of Pennsylvania, which like other nonprofits would be asked to pay money to the city if the program was approved, has been vocal in its opposition to the proposal. It has said it already contributes a lot of money to the city and the local economy.

Councilman Bobby Henon introduced a resolution to hold hearings for people to comment on issues with Comcast. The city's 15-year cable-television agreement with the company expires in 2015.

Council voted in favor of a bill introduced by Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown to double the green roof tax credit, available to businesses that invest in the environmentally friendly roofs.

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