Council OKs bill for UEDs; Nutter concerned

Music notes festoon a proposed high-def, full-motion billboard on the Bellevue parking garage in an artist’s rendering. A bill to allow such signs in a second Center City area comes up for a City Council vote this month. Catalyst Outdoor

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DAILY NEWS

JUST BEFORE City Council approved a zoning-bill change that would allow 3-D digital billboards in Center City, architect Kiki Bolender spoke out.

The bill, which passed by a vote of 13-3, permits “Urban Experiential Displays,” with full-motion video, that range from 1,500 square feet to 3,500 square feet in size, and up to 48 feet tall.

“We’re not talking kiosks,” Bolender said. “We’re talking about the house next door lit up like a billboard on I-95.” Bolender, chairwoman of the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia, is also a board member of the Philadelphia Chapter, American Institute of Architects.

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But officials from the Reading Terminal Market, the Pennsylvania Convention Center and Avenue of the Arts, whose groups stand to receive $125,000 a year from Catalyst Outdoor Advertising, the company that promoted the bill, spoke of the need for financial support.

Only Council members Kenyatta Johnson, Blondell Reynolds Brown and Wilson Goode Jr., voted against the bill introduced by Councilman Mark Squilla. Johnson was expected to vote no because the Center City Residents’ Association asked him to remove his district from the bill.

The current plan is for a UED at Broad and Race streets and another at 12th and Arch streets.

Goode and Brown said they voted no because Squilla took out sections of the bill requiring City Planning Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s approvals before a UED is built.

“Clearly the role of the Planning Commission has been diminished,” Brown said. “As we, as a city, move into unchartered waters that are going to yield new dollars, we want to be very thoughtful and intentional about how we proceed.”

After the vote, Squilla said, “When folks see these things, they’re going to say, ‘They don’t look so bad.’ ”

Mayor Nutter’s spokesman Mark McDonald said the mayor has “serious concerns.”

“The administration fears the impact of these full-motion videos on drivers [who may be distracted by them],” he said, adding that in 2013, 1,761 people were struck and injured by vehicles and another 37 people died.

Jerry Wachtel, a California-based highway billboard safety expert, said in an interview, that he was shocked by the size of the UEDs.

Most highway billboards are 672 square feet in size and some states allow them up to 1,200 square feet, said Wachtel, president of the Veridian Group, a consulting company on billboard safety.

But the smallest UED would be 1,500 square feet and the largest at 3,500 square feet — nearly three times larger than the largest billboards.

Highway signs are big so people can see them from a mile away. “But to have it on a city street, it’s just crazy,” Wachtel said.