The outdoor advertising company that wants to build three-dimensional digital billboards in a few corners of Center City presented its proposal to the City Planning Commission on Tuesday. Because the bill that would allow the structures is being amended—it was introduced by Councilman Mark Squilla in November—the presentation was for information only. The Commission will vote on whether to recommend the legislation at a future meeting.

The signs are being called “Urban Experiential Displays” (UEDs) by Catalyst Outdoor, the company that is hoping to build the first few of them. Catalyst has apparently been working behind the scenes on legislation that would permit the signs for more than two years, according to Thaddeus Bartkowski, one of the company’s founders. The proposal was first made public by the Philadelphia Business Journal last spring.

Bartkowski contends that the signs aren’t like traditional billboards because only 70 percent of the programming would be dedicated to advertising. The other 30 percent would promote local nonprofit organizations, share news and “infotainment,” and carry police and municipal alerts. Catalyst says the UEDs are intended to enhance a “sense of place” in the areas they’re built, and to “reinforce the identities of our commercial corridors.”

Squilla’s bill would create a special zoning overlay district in Center City, where UEDs would be allowed on properties zoned CMX-4 and CMX-5, the two highest-density commercial zoning categories. The first three signs proposed are outside the Philadelphia Convention Center, across from the Reading Terminal Market, and above the entrance to a parking garage on South Broad Street.

Under the terms of the bill, both the Planning Commission and the Art Commission would have to vote to approve each UED before it
constructed. The bill currently before Council simply adjusts the zoning code to make way for the signs’ future placement.

Bartkowski emphasized the financial component of the legislation: $5.2 million of the revenue from each sign would be given to a different nonprofit organization over the course of 25 years. The first three nonprofit organizations proposed to receive those funds are the Reading Terminal Market, the Avenue of the Arts, and the Center City District. The Planning Commission would also have some say in selecting the beneficiaries of the UED revenue, according to Bartkowski.

Earlier this month, the historic Lits Brothers building at 8th and Market streets illuminated a new wraparound digital billboard on its roof. In exchange for permission to place the sign, the owners will make improvements to the subway concourse below the building. At 11th and Market, crews are at work demolishing a block-length building to make way for a new apartment complex that will be wrapped in digital billboards as well. The Planning Commission approved a special advertising district on East Market street to incentivize new development on the corridor.

Commissioner Nancy Rogo-Trainer said on Tuesday that the UED proposal doesn’t seem to be driven by any similar planning goals. The proposal, it seemed to her, was being introduced “for its own sake.”

The bill was pulled from a Rules Committee hearing agenda in City Council late last year. Another hearing on the bill has not yet been scheduled.
About the author

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Jared Brey writes about development, zoning policy, and city government for PlanPhilly.com. He wasn't interested in being a reporter until halfway through a master's program in journalism at Temple University that he intended to parlay into an academic career. His work has appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Daily News, City Paper, Business Journal, and Metropolis.

Jared grew up in Montgomery County and moved to Philadelphia in 2005. He has since lived in Brewerytown, the Italian Market, North Central, Bella Vista, and East Passyunk. He believes he will stay in South Philadelphia. Follow him on Twitter @jaredbrey, or send him tips at jbrey@planphilly.com.