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Planners: No 3-D digital billboards in Center City, please

- Tuesday, February 17, 2015
- By [Jared Brey](#)
- [5 Comments](#)



The Planning Commission voted on Tuesday to oppose a plan to build three-dimensional digital advertising displays at three locations in Center City.

A bill to allow the signs, which backers are calling Urban Experiential Displays (UEDs), was [introduced last year](#) by Councilman Mark Squilla. A committee hearing is scheduled in City Council next week. The Planning Commission's recommendations are advisory only, and Council can choose to ignore them.

Asked whether the Commission's vote changed his thinking about the proposal, Squilla said he'd want to hear more of its reasoning before making up his mind. The Commission's vote was split 6-2.

In its original form, the proposal would have diverted \$5.2 million in revenue from each of the three signs—to be located at the Convention Center, across from the Reading Terminal Market, and at the Bellevue Garage on South Broad Street—to a different nonprofit organization in the city. Since the bill's introduction, Planning Commission staff apparently worked with representatives of Catalyst Outdoor, which hopes to build the signs, to revise its terms. An amended version of the bill presented to the Commission on Tuesday would divert that same amount of revenue to a public authority, such as the Redevelopment Authority, to spend on as-yet-unspecified public improvements.

Other changes to the bill would:

- prevent the signs from encroaching on public sidewalks

- require each sign to get approval from the Art Commission and Planning Commission
- require each sign to go through Civic Design Review
- prohibit the signs on vacant lots or parking lots
- prevent the signs from broadcasting audio messages except to people who intentionally tune in through a mobile app
- manage the brightness of each sign “so it doesn’t hurt anybody’s eyes to look at it.”

Carl Primavera, a lawyer representing Catalyst Outdoor, said the proposal responds to a need for private commercial messaging near the Convention Center. He also said the Convention Center sign would act as a landmark and meeting place, like the Wanamaker Eagle at Macy’s.

“There’s no place to say, ‘Comcast welcomes the American Society of Engineering [sic] to Philadelphia,’” Primavera said. “... Where do you meet somebody? How do you say ‘Flower Show’ in bold, dramatic, and creative ways?”

Some Commissioners questioned the proponents’ process of reaching out to community groups, saying that most of the “stakeholders” they’d identified were nonprofit groups that initially stood to benefit from the sign revenue, rather than traditional civic organizations. Primavera said the outreach didn’t include all of the typical Registered Community Organizations because the signs are buffered from residential areas. He said the proposal was the result of almost two years of conversations with community members and City Council.

Mary Tracy, a longtime advocate for stricter billboard regulations and director of Scenic Philadelphia, was the only witness from the public to comment on the proposal.

“Why are we doing this?” Tracy asked. “Why are we spending [the Commission’s] time, my time, City Council’s time ...?”

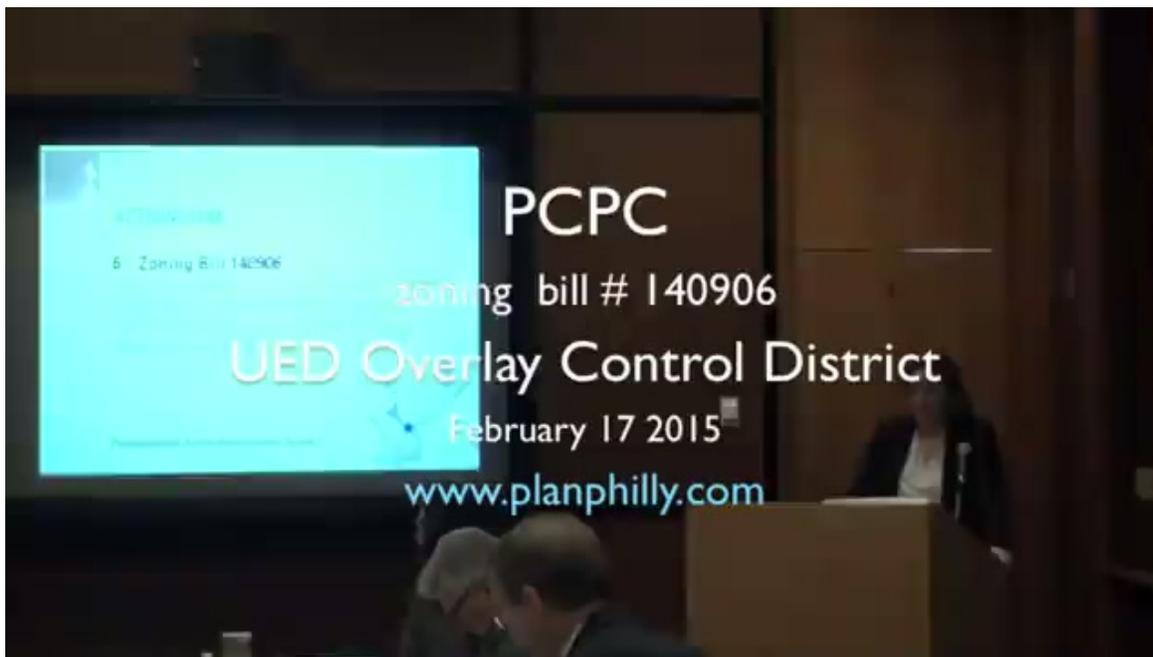
Tracy pointed out that, under the terms of the bill, the signs wouldn’t have to comply with [hard-fought local regulations](#) on outdoor advertising, in terms of size or height brightness or display. She also raised a question about whether the signs would violate the federal Highway Beautification Act.

In the end, most of the Planning Commissioners weren’t convinced the proposal is in the city’s best interests.

“I can’t in good conscience approve this in any case,” said Nancy Rogo-Trainer at the end of the discussion. “Vote me down if you want, but I’ll make a motion to disapprove.”

Only Commissioners Bernard Lee and Nilda Ruiz voted against the motion. The bill will go before Council’s Committee on Rules next Tuesday, February 24th.

Watch full video of the hearing below.



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