Who's got Council's ear in vote on bill for new digital ads?

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POSTED: Thursday, March 26, 2015, 12:16 AM

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A big turnout is expected for the Council discussion and vote on the UEDs today.

"The thing that matters the most are the people in the community," Squilla said yesterday.

He said it doesn't matter how many petitions from outside his district come in - on either side.

"The residents, the community organizations and the people who see it every day, who live and work and play in that area: That's what matters to me the most."

Yet the organizations who testified for the bill - the Pennsylvania Convention Center, the Reading Terminal Market and Avenue of the Arts Inc. - each would receive up to $125,000 a year from Catalyst under an earlier version. For the public good, Bartkowski said.

Squilla's bill has earned the ire of Mary C. Tracy, of Scenic Philadelphia, and the Center City Residents' Association.

But now Mayor Nutter is raising questions:

Squilla removed language that would have required Catalyst to get "approval" from both the Planning Commission and the Art Commission before getting a zoning permit for a UED advertising display.

At a public hearing, Squilla told fellow Council members not to worry about the UEDs and the level of brightness.

Yesterday, Squilla said he took the planning "approval" out of the bill because the planners didn't want to take part in a "plan of development."

"That's not true," said Gary Jastrzab, the Planning Commission's executive director.

"They [the UEDs] are little buildings - little billboards, some would say - and we wanted to be involved in assessing their impact on the surrounding public space," Jastrzab said.

The bill says a UED is a "digital display" of "full-motion video or animation." Over the Planning Commission's objections, the Council Rules Committee voted last month to move the bill to the full Council - with amendments added by the planning staff.

Now, Jastrzab said, "All those amendments they [Squilla and Catalyst] agreed to include in the bill, they've been stripped."

Squilla said the bill still must be approved by the Art Commission. "The hammer here is still the Art Commission," he said. "It's stricter."

Although he removed language for "approving" the UED, the bill would still require the planning staff to "review" and "provide technical assistance" to "promote the UED's purpose and goals."
Mark McDonald, the mayor's spokesman, said: "We have real concerns with the direction that this legislation has taken, but we are having discussions with the bill's sponsor to address them."

Recent complaints from residents blocks away from the digital billboards on the Lits Building, at 7th and Market streets, should make the city take its time, said Mark Alan Hughes, planning professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Let's pause for a minute and have a more comprehensive conversation about all the benefits and the costs," he said.

"If we start trading away a public resource like light levels and space in the public square, we really have to ask, what is the value of what we are giving up, what are the costs, and who is bearing those costs?"

Frank DiCicco, the former councilman who pushed the Market Street digital-ad bill, represents Catalyst as a lobbyist.

"I'm tired of people accusing [Council] of doing things for people only because we get a contribution."

Councilman Kenyatta Johnson, was among several who got Catalyst donations, but he still took his district out of the bill.