

**Camden County Planning Board
Minutes
June 16, 2010, 7:00pm
Historic Courtroom
Camden County Courthouse Complex**

Members Present:	Absent:
Chairman Rodney Needham	Michael Etheridge
Vice Chairman Calvin Leary	David Bundy
Fletcher Harris	John Aydlett
Ray Albertson	

Call to Order & Welcome

Chairman Rodney Needham called to order the June 16, 2010 meeting at 7:00 PM.

Others Present at Meeting

STAFF PRESENT

Name:	Title:
Dan Porter	Director of Planning
Dave Parks	Permit Officer/Flood Administrator
Amy Barnett	Planning Clerk/Clerk to the Board
Aaron Maupin	Code Enforcement Officer

OTHERS PRESENT

Name/Residence:	Title:	Purpose / Representing:	Meeting Section:
Scott Givens	Business Owner	R.O. Givens Signs	Old Business
Melissa Brown	Business Owner	R.O. Givens Signs	Old Business
Gary Ambrose	Business Owner	Ambrose Signs	Old Business

Consideration of Agenda

Chairman Rodney Needham called for consideration of the agenda.

Motion to approve the agenda as presented made by: Ray Albertson.

Motion Seconded by: Fletcher Harris.

The motion was approved with Chairman Rodney Needham, Vice-Chairman Calvin Leary, Members Fletcher Harris and Ray Albertson voting aye; none voting no; 3 absent; none not voting.

Consideration of the Minutes - May 19, 2010

Chairman Rodney Needham called for consideration of the minutes from the May 19, 2010 meeting.

Motion to Approve As Written made by: Calvin Leary.

Motion Seconded by: Fletcher Harris.

The motion was approved with Chairman Rodney Needham, Vice-Chairman Calvin Leary, Members Fletcher Harris and Ray Albertson voting aye; none voting no; 3 absent; none not voting.

Comments from the Public

None

Old Business

Further Discussion - Sign Ordinance

Dan Porter, Director of Planning, made a brief introduction to this agenda item:

- Planning Department invited a couple of businesses that make and sell signs to come to tonight's Planning Board meeting and provide the Board with some input regarding sign regulations and ordinances
- Code Enforcement Officer Aaron Maupin is present to provide input relevant to his position as CE Officer.
- Code Enforcement does not do a lot of sign enforcement
- Camden County Code of Ordinances are not too strong on signs
- Main point of discussion is concerned with the Hwy 17 and Hwy 158 corridors as far as how to regulate signs for businesses and for the county as a whole

At this time, Mr. Porter introduced Mr. Gary Ambrose, of Ambrose Signs. Mr. Ambrose described what makes a good sign:

- Well Constructed
- Properly Maintained
- Looks Good & Pleasing to the Community

Mr. Ambrose commented on the current sign ordinance:

- Doesn't see a need for complicated regulations
- Billboards in disrepair should be reported to the sign company that owns them so they can be repaired
- Feels that a good sign is a reflection on the sign company

Mr. Ambrose commented on speculation that the future might bring more signage to Camden County.

- Doesn't think the demand is there
- Zoning may preclude a lot of signs
 - Dave Parks, Zoning Officer, added that the regulation for billboard signs is 500 feet between each billboard sign, on either side of the road

Questions and Comments From Board and Staff To Sign Company Owners Present

Dave Parks asked Mr. Ambrose how the widening of Hwy 158 is affecting his business and his companies' signs.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - conforming signs are allowed to be moved back off the right of way
 - non-conforming signs can either be replaced at some other conforming location or be purchased by the state.

Code Enforcement Officer Aaron Maupin asked Mr. Ambrose if he had any suggestions as to whether to allow more signs, restrict more signs, size limits that would impact driver safety, etc.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - Thinks the space required between signs may need to be addressed.
 - Language in Camden County's current sign ordinance is what Mr. Ambrose termed 'a blanket 500 feet distance' between signs.

Dan Porter asked Mr. Ambrose if his business worked with other types of signs, other than billboards (on-premise signs, etc.).

- Mr. Ambrose indicated:
 - His business could produce all kinds of signs with the exception of electric signs which he purchases wholesale, then installs for his customers who order such.
 - Does not manufacture electric signs, due to the cost limitation involved it is better for his company to handle electric signs this way as they can get very expensive.

Mr. Porter commented on the current ordinance:

- Appears to be directed toward off-premise signs
- Expectation is that there will be more commercial businesses in the county in the future due to the improvements to infrastructure (widening of 158, sewer extensions, etc.)
 - Sign ordinances should reflect these expectations

Mr. Porter then spoke about temporary signs such as mobile portable trailer signs with plastic lettering.

- Does not take a very strong wind to blow the lettering off
- Appears to have been an increased number of these signs seen throughout the county

Dave Parks then asked Mr. Ambrose his opinion of the portable signs near Sissy's Subs.

- Example there is that there is a 'pole' sign which lists the businesses in that strip / shopping center
- There are portable signs out in the right of way on which businesses like Sissy's list things like daily specials and so forth
- Mr. Park's opinion is that the portable signs are eyesores.
 - Ms. Melissa Brown, of RO Givens Signs, commented that the Board needed to have business owners present for the discussion regarding portable signs.
 - Such signs were sold to, and put in place for the business owners at their request.
 - If the county wants to call them eyesores, then dialog is needed between the county and those business owners who requested such signs.

Vice Chairman Calvin Leary asked Ms. Brown "once a portable sign is put out, it is the business owners, and you have nothing more to do with it?"

- Ms. Brown responded:
 - That was correct, it belongs to the business owner at that point.
 - Business owner usually specifies what they want
 - Sign company creates a sketch of the project
 - Once that sketch is approved by the business purchasing the sign, the sign company then produces or arranges for it to be produced (as in the case of an electric sign) and then installs it.
 - Sign companies try not to produce or install anything that would be considered ugly or unattractive.

Dave Parks asked for an example of an innovative idea / something different than what they normally see, how the signs were built and constructed, materials involved, etc.

- Ms. Brown responded that it depended on how much a customer wanted to spend on a sign.

Dan Porter asked if businesses know about sign design and size and so forth when they come in to order a sign, or do the sign companies find themselves having to help the business purchasing signs with this aspect.

- Mr. Ambrose responded that many customers have a general idea of the size sign they want when they come in.

Dan Porter commented that there is a science to how high a sign needs to be in order to be seen by a car traveling at a certain speed, also how large the sign needs to be and the size of the lettering of the content so it can be read from a certain distance. Mr. Porter asked Mr. Ambrose if he gives his customers recommendations in terms of these considerations.

- Mr. Ambrose responded that he will prepare a design sketch and the customer usually adds some more elements to the sketch.

Aaron Maupin, Code Enforcement Officer, asked in the sign companies professional opinion, was there an ideal height and size for on-premise signs that a business located between 50-100 feet off the road would need.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - A lot of sign ordinances try to address this by applying standards across the board regarding the size of a sign
 - Those standards do not always work in every situation
 - A business that is off the road might need a larger sign where one that is closer to the road would not need so large a sign.

Dave Parks asked about advertising signs on the side of trucks / vans: where businesses own trucks and vans and put signs on the side of the vehicle and park the vehicle somewhere where it will be seen or even right outside of their store.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - It is a common practice
 - A lot of the time, a truck / van with advertising on it will be such that the ad is on a “scroll” and the vehicle is simply driven through traffic so the advertising will be seen by commuters.

Dan Porter asked about high definition electronic billboard signs and asked Mr. Ambrose if he had ever considered or looked at such signs.

- Mr. Ambrose responded that those types of signs were cost prohibitive for his company to own and operate.
- Ms. Brown (RO Givens Signs) commented:
 - With the exception of perhaps a few businesses at the beach, companies in this region who advertise using billboards can not afford the high tech billboards.
 - Does not foresee that type of billboard ever being used in Camden County.
 - Design of billboards owned and maintained by RO Givens Signs has not changed much over the last 40 years.

Dan Porter asked about billboards and whether NCDOT was allowing them on the NC Hwy 17 corridor.

- Mr. Scott Givens responded:
 - Billboards are not allowed in the NCDOT right of way of the new NC 17 bypass
 - Billboards are allowed to be placed on private property by the property owner
 - At present there are no billboard signs on the new Hwy 17 bypass.

Chairman Rodney Needham commented that the Planning Board wants to create an ordinance that would help keep Camden County looking as nice as possible. Chairman Needham asked if an ordinance which placed the following pre-requisites on permits would help the sign companies in that a person would have to have their permit prior to hiring a contracting company/sign builder to provide the sign:

1. Design specifications & plans (size, dimensions, materials)
2. A detailed site plan on the permit process for getting a sign permit

Regarding Chairman Needham's above question:

- Ms. Brown responded that she thinks that would be a good way to show that the county wants to keep the areas whereupon signs would be placed looking nice.
- Mr. Scott Givens commented on the Elizabeth City ordinance regarding size of a sign not taking into consideration the buried portion of a sign.

Dave Parks asked what considerations are looked at for a billboard, and does it include traffic count.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - Items of consideration include:
 - Location
 - Visibility
 - Traffic Count
 - Property Zoning
 - Most professionally drawn site plans show where on-premise signs will be placed, and place them to make best use of location on that property.

Chairman Rodney Needham commented that he thinks there should be 3 categories of signs:

- On-Premise Business Signs
- Billboard Signs
- All Other Signs
- In his opinion the ordinance should specify standards of design stating what materials can and can not be used.
 - Mr. Ambrose responded to this stating that when you get into telling people what they can and can not do, “you tend to ruffle feathers”.

Dave Parks stated:

- Per the current ordinance for billboards, they are currently zoned for specific areas.
- The Hwy 158 corridor is about the only area where they were allowed
- Hwy 343 is mostly residential and so the potential for billboards along 343 is not as great as 158

Mr. Parks asked if the sign companies had looked at placing any billboards on North or South 343 in the areas wherein they are allowed.

- Mr. Ambrose stated that he already has vacant billboards along that roadway.
- Mr. Parks stated that if the market for billboards were on the rise, perhaps additional signs could be placed along 343 by obtaining a re-zoning or special use permit.
- Mr. Ambrose commented that according to the current ordinance, the NCDOT [State DOT Outdoor Advertising Manual] regulates the size and placement of signs placed on property in the NC DOT right of way.

Chairman Rodney Needham asked if there were items or considerations that the sign companies would not want to see in a sign ordinance.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - Yes there are a few things, but that every project is different
 - Not every kind of sign will work in all locations
 - Monument signs have the potential to block view of traffic and are not good in all places
 - Pole signs are sometimes better suited due to the height, view of traffic is not blocked
 - Mr. Ambrose commented on the signs on the connector road (Elizabeth City) and the fact that all the utilities are run underground. He thinks that looks nice.

Regarding temporary signs, Mr. Ambrose indicated that he is not speaking against temporary signs if they are used and maintained properly.

- Dan Porter responded regarding temporary signs
 - these signs is that they are called temporary, but in many cases they are not temporary
 - The messages may change but the sign itself sits in the same location

Mr. Porter stated that most sign ordinances specify maximum sign heights, some specify minimum heights, based on distance from the roadway. Mr. Porter further commented regarding monument and pole signs and their relevant heights. He then asked if each type, respectively, were the same height, would they block each other's view.

- Mr. Ambrose responded saying that same height signs would and do block view of other signs, among other things.

Mr. Porter then asked if it would be better to have an ordinance that allowed varying height in each type of sign, such that any 3 on-premise signs could not be the same height so as to prevent blocking views.

- Ms. Brown responded:
 - In a situation where there are multiple businesses in the same strip / shopping center, this is a good reason for having a monument type sign that lists the names of the businesses that reside in that strip.
 - Each business can have their own sign over their door or their portion of the shopping center.

Mr. Ambrose re-visited the earlier comments regarding building permit pre-requisite possibility of providing a design specification. He said he likes this idea because Planning staff can, at building permit stage, inform an applicant of what will or will not work at a given location and why.

Ms. Brown asked, hypothetically, if Camden County were to get a mall, would the Planning Board allow a digital sign similar to that currently located at the entrance to South Gate Mall in Elizabeth City. This type of sign tells passers by what is inside / going on inside the mall.

- The Board and staff indicated that they would not be against it.
- Mr. Porter stated that he thinks signs at main gates should only indicate where to turn in, not to list every business inside the shopping center
 - Mr. Porter's opinion is that type of sign would likely cause traffic incidents at some point
 - Ms. Brown responded saying that there is a need for signage showing what is inside shopping centers

Chairman Rodney Needham asked if money was not a factor, what kind of sign other than pole signs would be feasible for an attractive modern sign, even if such were not feasible at present but could be in the future.

- Mr. Ambrose and Dave Parks spoke briefly regarding requirements that exist in the current ordinance for pole signs.
- Mr. Ambrose commented that the ground must be able to support the weight of such a sign, or even a billboard.
- Camden County has a lot of swampland.

Dave Parks asked if the sign company business owners present (Ambrose Signs and RO Givens Signs) had read the current ordinance for off-premise signs and did they have any suggestions for changes.

- Mr. Ambrose pointed out an error in the current ordinance:
 - In 151.418(B)(3), the State DOT Manual [State DOT Outdoor Advertising Manual] refers to one off-premise sign being no less than 500 feet from another off-premise sign.
 - In the Camden County ordinance referenced above, the wording “or on-premise sign” was erroneously added to the end of the regulation.
- Mr. Ambrose stated that monument signs are nice, and they have their place, but not every sign should be a monument sign.
 - Doesn't like the idea of dictating that signs have to be certain heights and widths in an ordinance.

Aaron Maupin asked if the sign company business owners had any suggestions as to what would be aesthetically pleasing in an on-premise sign.

- Mr. Ambrose responded:
 - Professionally designed,
 - Engineered,
 - Look good, and
 - Be presentable.

Mr. Ambrose asked if sign proposals had ever been flatly denied, or if staff suggests modifications to what will work for a given location.

- Dave Parks responded that the Planning Department tries to offer alternatives and changes that may fit the particular project.
- Mr. Parks stated that the Planning Department and Planning Board want to get ideas for ordinance language that will be aesthetically pleasing along the roadways whereupon signs would be placed.

Mr. Ambrose stated that there needs to be a balance between nice looking signs (for people who can afford them), and signs that are not quite so elaborate or expensive so that small businesses or struggling businesses can also afford signage.

- Ms. Brown commented that businesses have to be able to make a living while at the same time the need for signage and advertising is key to that living.

Mr. Ambrose commented regarding setbacks for signs:

- Setbacks from existing power lines are 7-1/2 feet horizontal, and 8 feet vertical according to the NCDOT manual
- These are probably for aesthetics and for safety
- Mr. Ambrose then read 151.416(D) which states that “No sign may be erected so that by its location, color, size, shape, illumination, nature, or message would be confused with official traffic signs or signals or other signs erected by governmental agencies, or would tend to be confused with a flashing light of an emergency vehicle.”
- Signs do not have to be in a “sight triangle” such that it blocks the view of traffic (this goes for anything that might block view - bushes at intersections, high grass, people standing at crosswalks, etc.)
 - Mr. Porter replied regarding “sight triangles”:
 - When a commercial site plan is brought in for review, the applicant must show their sight triangles, and Planning tries to make sure that this is followed
 - Regarding temporary signs - some are on DOT right of way, some on private property. Some are in the sight triangles.

A somewhat lengthy discussion was held regarding temporary signs and how long they should be allowed and how to regulate them.

- Dan Porter stated that he has seen some ordinances of other municipalities that restrict usage to 3 or 4 uses per year for temporary signs.
- Aaron Maupin commented that businesses (restaurants in particular) need to be able to advertise daily specials and a temporary / letter-board style sign works for this purpose.
- Mr. Ambrose stated that he did not have an answer to the question of temporary signs.

Mr. Givens and Mr. Ambrose both commented on landscaping in Elizabeth City blocking store fronts.

- Aaron Maupin stated that Camden County may want to add language to their landscaping ordinances to keep from blocking store fronts and thereby increase visibility.
- Ms. Brown made a request that any change to the landscaping ordinance not dictate specifically the type and number of foliage per lot / business establishment.

Chairman Rodney Needham suggested that once a business goes out of business, and the sign is removed, that the sign has to be removed until the new business comes in and puts up a new sign. Chairman Needham commented that this might be an idea for a change to on-premise ordinances.

- Mr. Ambrose stated that a lot of times what happens is the out-of-business business simply takes the sign face plate out and any new business going in only has to put a new sign face plate up.

Mr. Ambrose extended an invitation to the Planning Department and Planning Board members to view his facilities.

Dave Parks stated that at a future Planning Board meeting, the Planning Department would be trying to get additional business owners to come and provide input, at which point Ambrose Signs and RO Givens Signs are welcome to attend and provide additional input.

Consider Date of Next Meeting – July 21, 2010

[There was no meeting held on July 21, 2010 nor on August 18, 2010. The next Planning Board meeting wherein the Board will meet is on September 15, 2010.]

Adjournment

At 8:02 PM, Ray Albertson made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Fletcher Harris seconded the motion. The motion was approved with Chairman Rodney Needham, Vice-Chairman Calvin Leary, Members Fletcher Harris and Ray Albertson voting aye; none voting no; 3 absent; none not voting.

Date: _____

Approved: _____
Chairman Rodney Needham

Attested: _____
Amy Barnett, Planning Clerk