

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 3, 2004

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF A PILOT PROGRAM TO HANG BANNERS ON KING STREET FROM THE METRO STATION TO THE RIVER

ISSUE: Consideration of a pilot program to hang banners on King Street from the Metro Station to the River.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council authorize City staff to proceed to implement a pilot vertical banner program on King Street during 2004.

BACKGROUND: As discussed at the May 15 public hearing, and prior to that in a memorandum to Councilman Krupicka, the Department of Planning and Zoning, in coordination with other City departments, has been working over the last year with a design advisory service operated by the Society of Environmental Graphic Design on the first steps of a comprehensive City-wide sign program. This work stemmed from the findings of the Visitors Center Study, which identified better and coordinated signage as a major need for the City. Elements of a comprehensive sign program, when undertaken, would include wayfinding for tourists, coordinated signage throughout the City at all levels, enhanced opportunity to promote identity for commercial and residential areas, and understanding and enjoyment of historic sites, trails and districts. The overall signage program was proposed as an element in the FY 2005 budget, but the funds were reallocated to other budget priorities as part of the add/delete process. This budget reallocation will result in at least a one-year delay in the undertaking of a comprehensive City-wide sign program.

Prior to Council consideration of proceeding with a potential program for a City-wide sign program for FY 2006, which would include the hiring of design consultants and extensive public input, a few discreet, short-term signage enhancements have been identified which can proceed ahead of a City-wide sign program. For example, the City erected interim blue and white wayfinding signs along King Street prior to last year's Arts Festival. Reaction to those signs from tourists and businesses has been very positive. Also, Council has recently approved a program for replacement and enhanced landscaping at existing City gateways. This landscaping will take place this spring and summer. There was also the request from KSMET (endorsed by OTBA) for pilot vertical banners for King Street in Old Town.

As part of the King Street Retail Study now underway, a wide range of goals and objectives are being considered in order to support and enhance the King Street corridor as a successful retail area. Vertical banners were discussed at the King Street Study Advisory Group's May 26th meeting and received a generally positive response. Consultants working on the Retail Study and others have some concerns that vertical banners may not be a positive net addition to the King Street retail area, because they add clutter and detract from the restored environment in the more historic areas. However, the concern appears to be less of an issue on upper King Street where the buildings are newer, and where there is a mix of types, architecture, and ages of structures. On the other hand, there is a real concern along the entire street about the visibility of banners, especially in the summer, given the location of trees relative to the Gadsby light poles.

Vertical banners have also been discussed as part of the Mount Vernon Avenue area study by the Mount Vernon Avenue Work Group. It appears that there is consensus within the Work Group and the consultants assisting in the study that vertical banners would clearly be a positive addition to the Mt. Vernon Avenue area. Vertical banners were discussed as part of the Arlandria Implementation Strategic Plan, and the idea is consistent with the adopted Arlandria plans, goals and objectives.

PILOT PROGRAM OPTION: Attached is the outline of a potential pilot program for vertical banners on King Street (Metrorail Station to the waterfront). It proposes beginning with a program for only King Street, as the time and resources to get this program underway this summer are limited. KSMET has actively pursued this vertical banner program and OTBA has requested that it be extended down King Street to the waterfront.

The outline of a proposed pilot program anticipates a government/business partnership whereby the City will be responsible through a contractor for the installation and maintenance of banners and hardware, but only after the relevant business associations commit to contribute at least 45% of the direct cost of the program (banners, mounting hardware and the cost to install and maintain). The City would contribute 55% under this proposed plan. Having the business association contribute at least 45% makes this program a true partnership between public and private interests who could both benefit from such a program. KSMET and OTBA have agreed to contribute the 45% share.

The need for the City to pay for a majority of the vertical banner program rests with First Amendment issues regarding free speech. As long as the City pays a majority of costs and owns the signs, these signs remain "governmental" in nature so the City can determine their content. Without that governmental status, the City would be hard pressed to keep any interest group from having its banners, with that group's message, installed. Although there are no serious issues likely to arise regarding the design or content of any vertical banners which KSMET, OTBA, or PWBA may wish to have installed, the majority City government financial support of this program protects the City, and the business community, from the unintended consequences of a totally privately-funded program.

It is proposed that the program would have one banner design displayed repeatedly along the King Street corridor in Old Town from July to late fall. The pilot program described includes design work by an outside design professional, as well as installation by a private firm, after input and sign-off from the business community associations who would be contributing the 45% private funding share.

As this is a pilot, detailed plans are being discussed and developed. The successful 250th City Anniversary banners that the City had in place during 1999 provides some very helpful guidance on the details of the pilot program. However, while in concept the idea of vertical banners is fairly straightforward, there are many logistical details which will need to be worked out. For example, Dominion Virginia Power just issued state-wide guidelines on what could be attached to their light poles, and where items such as banners could be attached. These standards may not allow banners of an adequate size (to provide a meaningful display visible from some distance) to be attached to the City's Gadsby lights because the ground to bottom of the banner clearance standard of 9½ feet does not leave room for an adequately sized banner to be attached to the Gadsby light poles. This issue will need to be resolved with Dominion Virginia Power before the banners can be installed.

An issue with this initiative, as well as other initiatives, is the staff capacity to plan and implement the program. While outside assistance (such as from design and installation firms, as well as citizen volunteer efforts) can be a major help, City staff time will be necessary to plan the program in detail, to procure the design and installation services, and to monitor the banners after installation to deal with issues such as weather damage, vandalism, etc. At this time, due to its very heavy workload, the Department of Planning and Zoning has limited internal resources to take on the added duty of planning for new vertical banners. As a result, only the King Street area of the City can be implemented on a pilot basis at this time. Once the banners are planned and installed, ongoing maintenance oversight would shift to the Department of Transportation and Environmental Services, whose "downtown managers" staff can monitor the banners and handle any requests for repairs or replacement, which would then be done by a private contractor.

FISCAL IMPACT: The estimated fiscal impact of a short-term, pilot vertical banner program on King Street in Old Town is \$18,000 for banner design, production, installation and ongoing maintenance. Funds for this program will originate from the City-wide signage account.

ATTACHMENT: Pilot Program for Vertical Banners on Commercial Corridors

STAFF:

Barbara Ross, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Zoning

Mark Jinks, Assistant City Manager

Tom Fairchild, Business Facilitator

PROPOSED PILOT VERTICAL BANNER PROGRAM FOR KING STREET

ELEMENTS OF PILOT VERTICAL BANNER PROGRAM

Purpose:	To provide identity and enthusiasm for King Street in Old Town without interfering with important streetscape elements.
Initial potential pilot location:	King Street between the waterfront and King St. Metrorail Station
Business participation:	Requirement of 45% contribution to entire cost of banner program for street location by business associations.
Design work:	Design professional work under City supervision, with input from a work group for each location composed of City staff, outside consultant, and representative businesses, and a BAR representative for King Street signs. Design should highlight City identity with minimal text.
Banner material:	High quality material, such as Sunbrella
Banner size:	Size: 1.5' x 3' to 4' x 9' (250 th Anniversary program used 1.5' x 3' for the Gadsby lamps and 2.5' x 5' on the taller poles.)
Density:	Two banners for each block face (i.e., on each side of street, but at opposite ends of the block). This would be ideal, but pole opportunities will not allow this density or placement plan at all locations. Detailed locations to be worked out. On King Street, with an insufficient number of tall poles, may duplicate the 250 th Anniversary banner program and use both Gadsby and tall poles.
Orientation:	Banners should be cantilevered over the street if possible, not over the sidewalk, with sufficient clearance for trucks and buses.
Duration:	Banners would be erected in the early summer (July 1 is the goal) and be removed in the late fall (probably late October or mid-November); banners to be coordinated with the City's flag policy.
Hardware:	City responsibility for installation and maintenance. Hardware would remain on light poles or traffic standards when banners are not on display.
Design, installation and maintenance:	To be performed by outside vendors under an ongoing contract.
Estimated cost:	Total program cost is estimated to be between \$12,000 and \$18,000.