

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 17, 2009

TO: Parker-Gray Board of Architectural Review

FROM: BAR Staff

SUBJECT: Criteria for Administrative Approval of Signs in Historic Districts

Staff has attached for your review and consideration the proposed policy (Attachment 1) which outlines the Criteria for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts (“Criteria”) for staff-level administrative approval of certain commercial signs in the City’s two locally designated historic districts (Old and Historic Alexandria District and Parker-Gray District). The goals of this new program include: (1) Establishing a clear and understandable Criteria to be approved by the Board for signs to be administratively approved by Staff under the program; (2) Allowing for a reduction of application fees for signs meeting the administrative approval Criteria; and, (3) Providing an expedited and more user friendly process for sign approval.

Existing requirement of BAR approval for signs

Signs fall within the general rule that all exterior alterations to buildings and structures in the historic districts require a certificate of appropriateness. Thus, other than a few minor exemptions (Sec. 9-301(B)), signs in both the Old and Historic Alexandria and the Parker-Gray Districts require BAR approval before it may be installed on a building.

The Boards will typically hear 40 to 50 sign cases a year, with a vast majority of those applications approved, often with no changes whatsoever. In addition, those approvals result in an identifiable number of sign types with similar dimensions, characteristics, hardware, and sign locations on the building. The result on King Street demonstrates high quality materials, design and historical compatibility and appears to display a wide variety and range of signs, even though the signs themselves can actually be reduced to a short list of types that fall within a set list of design criteria.

Sign Criteria and Standards

Staff and the BAR have discussed over time the potential for articulating those signs which, if a business can meet certain criteria, may be approved without the necessity of a formal public hearing before the Board. Recently, staff formulated draft criteria and discussed its proposal with both the Old and Historic Alexandria and the Parker-Gray Boards, both of whom endorsed the concept and the criteria generally.

Over the last few months, Planning & Zoning Staff has worked with members of both Boards of Architectural Review to develop the language and Criteria in the proposed policy, using the existing *Design Guidelines* chapter on Signs and Board decisions as a starting point to frame the

policy. Staff thoroughly evaluated the signs that each Board reviewed in 2008 and thus far in 2009. A total of 61 sign cases were heard. Had the administrative approval process been in effect during that time period, over half of the signs (32 of the 61 cases) could have been approved by Staff, either as submitted or with a minor modification. Many of these cases were on the consent calendar when they went to the BAR hearing and were approved without discussion. Of those 61 cases, only three were heard by the Parker-Gray BAR.

Staff also conducted information sessions with both Boards in late spring and early summer of 2009, as well as conducting a meeting with the general public on September 14, 2009. The feedback Staff received has been integrated into the proposed final policy as described below.

Parker-Gray Board of Architectural Review meeting June 25, 2009

Staff received generally positive feedback from the Parker-Gray BAR at their June 25, 2009 meeting. However, two Board members voiced concern regarding Staff approval of a second sign administratively; suggesting that one sign was often adequate and that requests for additional signage should be considered by the Board. Staff feels strongly that allowing up to two signs on a commercial building, or three if the building is located on a corner, is not unreasonable. The Criteria set forth in the attached policy are relatively limiting, and are based on the types of signs typically approved by the Boards without comment. Therefore, Staff believes that if a second sign meets the Criteria that it should be eligible for Staff level administrative approval. In the Parker-Gray district in particular, there is limited commercial development and much of it is located on the Patrick Street and Henry Street, Route 1 vehicular corridors where signage is more essential to attract and guide customers.

Old and Historic Alexandria Board of Architectural Review meeting June 3, 2009

At their June 3, 2009 meeting, some members of the Old and Historic District Board asked Staff to explore the feasibility of expanding the sign color palette to allow for greater creativity in sign design, and to consider whether synthetic sign materials should be permitted under the policy. In regards to color, Staff is confident that the great majority of signs can be well designed within the five color limitation outlined in the Criteria. Staff also considered allowing additional sign materials, a suggestion also shared by two of the sign companies that typically work within the historic districts. The issue of sign materials was discussed in great detail at the public meeting on September 14, 2009 which was attended by two members of the Old and Historic District BAR. The group concluded that it was not appropriate to allow a significant number of new, in particular synthetic, materials as part of the initial Criteria for administrative approval of signs. However, over time as the Boards continue to evaluate and approve new materials, the policy can be updated.

Community

The public has also been supportive of the proposed initiative for staff-level approval of certain commercial signs. The Historic Alexandria Foundation (HAF) has indicated support for the program but recommended that all requests for illumination be referred to the BAR rather than approved administratively. Staff feels that limited and targeted sign illumination is reasonable

and that the types of illumination that are controversial – illuminated box signs, back lit signs, neon and even gooseneck lighting – would continue go to the Boards for their review and approval. Another suggestion by HAF was to allow any Board member to request that a sign application be docketed on the BAR agenda. Staff believes that if a sign(s) meets the goals of the policy then the expedited approval under the administrative sign program is appropriate. The process and the Criteria have been extensively vetted and will be approved by both Historic District Boards prior to its enactment.

The Alexandria Chamber of Commerce also weighed in on the proposal, stating that the policy will benefit many new businesses in Alexandria. The Chamber suggested that the allowable square footage for signs be increased to be consistent with the zoning ordinance's allowance of one square foot of signage for every linear foot of building. Staff's review of previous sign cases revealed that the vast majority of the signs submitted to the BAR fall well within the limitations proposed in the proposed Criteria (1/2 a square foot of signage for one sign and 3/4 square foot of signage for two signs for every linear foot of building frontage). Very few applicants request the maximum square footage allowed under the zoning ordinance. In addition, the Chamber argued that the policy would not be useful if it did not benefit at least 50% of sign applicants. Staff can demonstrate that if the proposed policy was applied to the 2008 and 2009 sign cases, at least 50% of sign proposals would have received staff-level approval. It is feasible that this percentage will increase once business owners and sign companies become familiar with the Criteria and begin to design signs that meet the requirements that will allow administrative approval by Staff.

Staff Recommendation

At this time, Staff is seeking Parker-Gray Board approval of the proposed Criteria for the administrative approval of signs by Staff. Staff will present the same proposal to the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board on October 7th, 2009. Should both Boards recommend approval of the proposed Criteria, a text amendment will be taken to Planning Commission and City Council for their review and approval. The text amendment will modify the zoning ordinance in two places to allow the BAR to designate the Director of Planning & Zoning (Staff) to review and approve certain signs in the two historic districts if they comply with the BAR approved Criteria.

In the future, Staff will also undertake a revision to the Signs chapter of the *Design Guidelines* to reflect this new policy.

Attachment 2 includes images of signs for illustrative purposes only to show the types of signs that may be permitted under the proposed Criteria.

STAFF:

Stephanie Sample, Historic Preservation Planner, Planning & Zoning

Lee Webb, Historic Preservation Manager, Planning & Zoning

Stephen Milone, Division Chief, Planning & Zoning

ATTACHMENT 1:

Criteria for Administrative approval of signs within the Historic Districts

In order to support and facilitate the operation of small businesses in the Old and Historic and Parker-Gray Historic Districts, Staff proposes that certain commercial signs be reviewed and approved at an administrative level without the necessity of a Board of Architectural Review hearing.

The Criteria below was developed based on those typically required by the BAR for all signs (*Design Guidelines*, colors, telephone numbers, etc.), or, as to size, number and types of signs, limited to reflect those signs that have consistently been approved in the past by the BAR.

1. Administrative Approval of One Sign

One sign may be administratively approved for a commercial business, one per elevation if the building is located on a corner. The applicant may choose from one of the following three sign types listed below (see the attached images for an example of each sign type):

Wall sign

- A flat wall sign affixed to the building façade.
- An individual letter pin mounted wall sign installed on a wood frieze board or sign band, not a masonry façade, which may damage masonry.
- A painted wall sign, provided that it is painted on a frieze board or on an already painted building.

Hanging sign

- A one-piece double-sided hanging sign (with a maximum square footage of 7 square feet). All hanging signs must be hung from an approved sign bracket and placed so that the bottom of the sign is a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by vehicles. The hanging sign cannot project more than 4 feet from the building wall or within 1 foot of the curb line and cannot project from the corner of a building. The sign bracket must be constructed of metal with a black finish. Decorative scroll brackets are typical; however, other appropriate designs may be acceptable. If the bracket is being affixed to a brick building, the bracket must be installed into the mortar joints and not the masonry.

Window sign

- A window decal sign may also be permitted (the Zoning Ordinance states that the total signage may not exceed 20% of the window). The window sign may be located on a door or window and may not contain repetitive language (e.g. shoes, shoes, shoes) or special advertising (e.g. coffee, tea, latte).

2. Second Sign Option

An applicant may select a second sign with the following limitations:

- Wall signs can be paired with a hanging sign or a window decal sign only.
- Hanging signs can be paired with a wall sign or window decal sign only.
- Window signs can be paired with a wall sign or hanging sign.

Corner businesses may elect to add a second sign on only one of the building's two elevations.

3. Size

The overall signage square footage may not exceed 1/2 (.5) of the linear footage of the building frontage. For example, the maximum amount of signage permitted for a 20 foot wide building is 10 square feet. If a second sign is proposed, the aggregate signage square footage may not exceed 3/4 (.75) of the linear footage of the building frontage (15 square feet for a 20 foot wide building).

4. Material

The sign material must be compatible with the building (wood or wood composite signs are generally acceptable for flat wall signs and hanging signs, aluminum is generally acceptable for pin mounted signs and vinyl lettering is appropriate for window decal signs).

5. Content

Only the business name or identity, and logo or design flourish, is permitted on the sign (no special advertising, phone numbers, addresses or web sites).

6. Color

Signs should have no more than three colors, excluding black or white.

7. Lighting

Staff may approve the installation of targeted illumination (e.g. mini-spot lights) which are small in size, illuminate only the proposed sign(s), and do not damage the building in installation. Gooseneck lighting must be reviewed and approved by the BAR, as well as all signs which are internally illuminated, halo lit or neon.

8. General Requirements

- Signs must be professionally made.
- A sign which meets the requirements of a coordinated sign plan previously approved by the Board can be administratively approved by Staff, regardless of whether the sign meets the requirement for administrative approval.

- All administratively approved sign(s) must be consistent with the *Design Guidelines* recommendation that “Signs should be designed in styles, materials, type faces, colors and lettering that are appropriate and sympathetic to the historic style of the building.”
- Prior to receiving an administrative approval for signage, BAR Staff will conduct research and visit the site to evaluate the subject property, as well as its context, to determine if the proposed signage is appropriate. Signs which are out of proportion or scale with contiguous signs on the block will be referred to the BAR for their review and approval.
- Directory signs, freestanding signs, after-the-fact signs, and sign applications submitted by the City of Alexandria must be reviewed and approved by the BAR.
- Applicant must obtain a sign permit (and/or building permit) through Code Administration.
- Regardless of whether the sign meets the above Criteria, Staff may determine that the sign(s) must be approved by the BAR.

ATTACHMENT 2:

Examples of Flat Wall Signs



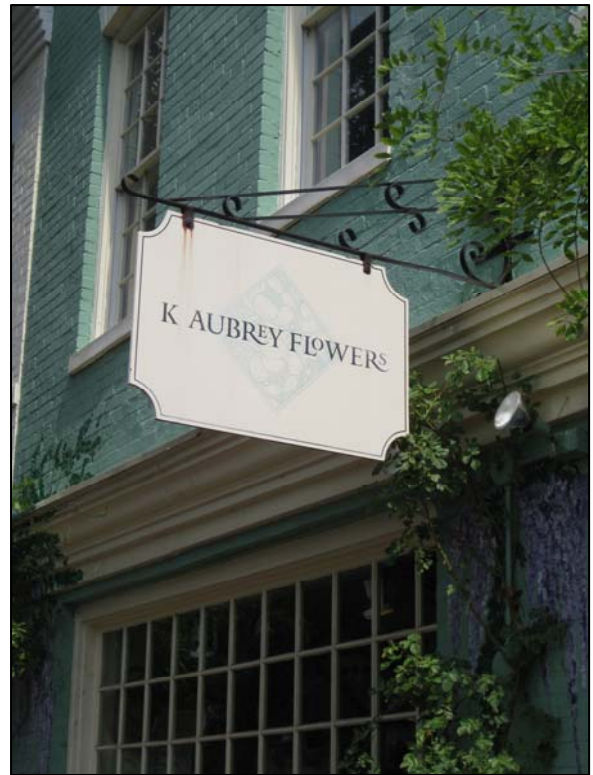
Examples of Wall Individual Letter/Pin Mounted Signs



Examples of Painted Wall Signs



Examples of Hanging Signs



Examples of Hanging Sign Brackets



Common Scroll Brackets



Unique Hanging Brackets

Examples of Window Signs



Examples of Second Sign Option



Examples of Targeted Illumination



Signs Still Requiring BAR Review



Illuminated Signs



Awnings with Signage



Multiple Signs