

Think Quality - Think Future

Blount County Planning Department

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Blount County Planning Commission

FROM: John Lamb

DATE: December 11, 2007

SUBJECT: Long Range agenda items for the December 18, 2007 meeting.

1. Discussion on ridge line and hill side development.

The Planning Commission at the last regular meeting discussed ridge line and hillside development issues. Please refer to staff memo and attachments from the last meeting. The Planning Commission requested that staff prepare a summary of Sevier County's "Preferred Directions Report" (see <http://www.sevierlibrary.org/hillsides/Preferred%20Directions%20Report%208-14-07.pdf> for copy of report).

Staff will present a power point summary of the Sevier County report at the meeting, highlighting elements that may be applicable to Blount County. Please review the attachment from the last meeting in preparation for discussions. A review of the "Blount County Land Use Plan: A Plan for Mountain Areas" would be beneficial to note parallels to Sevier County (see <http://www.blounttn.org/planning/mountain%20area%20plan%201997%20with%20maps.pdf> for copy of plan, and <http://www.blounttn.org/planning/mountain%20area%20plan%20review%200powerpoint.pdf> for powerpoint presentation summary).

In brief, the Sevier County report recommends a two track regulation response, one to address aesthetic (view) issues and the other to address

physical constraints on steeply sloping land. For the aesthetic track, the report recommends that the jurisdiction first map scenic landscape resources of significance, and then formulate a hillside overlay district (zone) and regulations that would protect the landscapes. For the physical constraints track, the report recommends documenting environmental and public resources of concern, and adopting a critical slope floating zone along with standards for design and construction on steep slopes.

Related to the two regulation tracks is a recommendation to require project impact statement (“findings statement” in the report) and detailed site plan that would support reviewing the project in various permit processes. The report also recommends that a transfer of development rights (TDR) program be instituted.

The Sevier County report makes it clear that the purpose of the recommendations is not to stop development in hills and mountains, but to regulate development in such a way that it is not the predominant characteristic of the slopes and ridge lines (visually subordinate).

2. Discussion on sign lighting regulations.

The Planning Commission briefly discussed LED and other directly lighted signs at the last regular meeting, and asked staff to prepare alternatives for any regulation changes that may be needed to address this type of sign. Staff requests discussion of several issues of sign lighting in preparation for another attempt at proposed regulatory language.

Context from regulations. As context, the following are present regulations for sign illumination in Section 7.5 of the zoning regulations.

I. Unless otherwise regulated by this Resolution, signs shall be illuminated in accordance with the following provisions.

1. Signs within one hundred and fifty (150) feet of a residential use shall not be illuminated between the hours of midnight and 6 a.m., unless the impact of such lighting beyond the boundaries of the lot where it is located is entirely inconsequential. To be considered entirely inconsequential, such lighting shall not cast light at the joint property line of adjacent residential use of more than 0.5 footcandles,

certified as designed and installed by a licensed engineer or architect with documented experience in exterior lighting.

2. Signs with area greater than 10 square feet shall be lighted only with indirect lighting. Lighting directed toward a sign shall be shielded so that it illuminates only the face of the sign and does not shine directly into a public right-of-way or residential premises. Lighting shall be directed in a downward angle toward the sign.

3. Except for seasonal holiday lighting noted in subsection F above, illuminated tubings or strings of lights that outline property lines, sales areas, or similar areas are considered as signs under provisions of this Section and are prohibited.

4. No sign may contain or be illuminated by flashing or intermittent lights or lights of changing degrees of intensity.

Context from previous staff memo. From the previous staff memo, the following provides context for discussion.

The intent of the regulations is to limit sign illumination to indirect lighting, except for small signs of less than 10 square feet (e.g., a 2' by 5' sign). Given provisions in paragraph 4, the small signs could be lit by steady internal lighting.

New technology for outdoor signs now includes Light Emitting Diode (LED) illumination options. An LED sign may fall within the classification of internally lit sign, and be limited to area no greater than 10 square feet. However, the light itself is generated at the surface of the sign, possibly clouding the interpretation of the regulations. In addition, an array of clustered LED lights can be programmed to change message periodically, possibly clouding the interpretation of “flashing or intermittent”.

The Planning Commission recently recommended regulations for outdoor lighting. In reviewing present sign regulations, staff noted that paragraph 1 set a spill light limit of 0.5 footcandles for sign illumination. This is inconsistent with recently recommended regulations that set a total spill light limit of 0.4 footcandles in the rural areas of the county.

That light is a concern in rural areas especially is evident in the newly recommended lighting regulations. Any new light in rural or relatively unlit

areas of the County would change the character of that area. Regulating lighting, including lighting of signs, would be consistent with goals of preserving the rural and small town character of the County found in our Policies Plan.

Context from previous discussions. The Planning Commission discussion from the last meeting on this subject indicated that small monochromatic signs or components of signs with changeable messages may be appropriate for inclusion in our regulations. Some members noted instances where LED signs were present in the County and were not necessarily considered objectionable or out of character, most notably gasoline price signs. The general consensus was that such signs should not be completely excluded but should be appropriately regulated.

Further staff research and comments. Changeable message signs have been around for a long time. Such signs range from manually changeable characters, to mechanized changeable characters and facings, to more modern digital changeable message surfaces that can rival television animation. Examples of manually changeable character signs found around Blount County (including the cities) are price and message boards for churches, filling stations, grocery stores and many other businesses. An example of a mechanically changeable sign is the billboard across from Home Depot that changes message by rotation of strips to form multiple messages in sequence.

Directly lit sign surfaces range from neon designs, arrays of incandescent bulbs, to arrays of light emitting diodes (LED). The more modern alternative LED arrays provide advantages and disadvantages for changeable message signs.

LED signs are much more durable and energy efficient. They also provide flexibility in forming and changing the sign message. Being brightly lit and colorful, the signs are also eye catching. LED technology has advanced recently to the point that a wide range of colors can be produced on a large scale, allowing signs that can approach picture quality if seen from a distance, with animation capabilities.

Some of the disadvantages of LED and other directly lit and changeable signs are distraction to traffic if the message changes too often or quickly, and the obtrusiveness of directly lit signs especially in rural settings.

Any sign along a road will demand some redirection of attention from driving to reading the message of the sign. The more information provided on a sign, the more potential for lengthy redirection of attention. For signs of set message, there is a determinable limit to the redirection of attention. For changeable message signs, the redirection of attention can be extended in the period of message change and focus on new message. If the message changes quickly in succession, the redirection can extend for a long period. This can pose a traffic hazard. Some jurisdictions severely limit the period of message change and succession.

Some jurisdictions, such as Blount County, do not allow directly lit signs. A directly lit sign is one where the light source directly forms the message. This is characteristic of LED signs, where the LED pixels in pattern form the message, and the viewer is seeing the light source directly. Blount County allows only indirectly lit signs (light source shining on a sign surface) or small internally lit signs (light source shining through an opaque surface in such a manner that the light source is not viewed directly and is not directly part of the message). The purpose of such lighting restrictions is to limit the intrusiveness of the sign, and this is especially important in rural areas where there is less ambient light from other sources. A bright and directly lit sign may stand out unduly (be intrusive) in a rural context, and could be viewed as not consistent with preserving rural character. A changeable message surface may be seen as compounding the intrusive nature of a directly lit sign.

In preparation for any changes that may be needed in our sign regulations, staff request further discussions on how and where LED and other directly lit signs fit in our overall thinking on community character. Staff will defer any recommendations on regulation amendments pending further guidance.

3. Setting policies plan revision meeting in January

The Planning Commission has committed to meeting in special session to progress through the revision of the Policies Plan. Staff requests that a date and time be set for the extra meeting in January to allow for proper notice. Staff suggests Tuesday January 29 or Thursday January 31, these being the fifth Tuesday and Thursday in that month which usually limits conflicts with regularly scheduled meetings.