

STAFF REPORT
City of Lancaster, California

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Date: May 13, 2008

To: Mayor Parris and Council Members

From: Brian S. Ludicke, Planning Director

Subject: **Appeal of Staff Decision Denying Electronic Message Center Sign
Lancaster Marketplace**

Recommendation:

Deny appeal and uphold staff decision denying installation of an electronic message sign in the Lancaster Marketplace in accordance with Section 17.12.1000.B.1.c. of the Lancaster Municipal Code.

Background:

The Regional Commercial (RC) zone of the Lancaster Municipal Code was established in the early 1990's. The intent of the zone classification was to promote the development of a major commercial center with the ability to act as a regional draw. The only viable site identified for this land use designation was the area bounded by Avenue I, SR-14, Lancaster Boulevard, and 27th Street West, which was vacant at the time.

The RC zone envisioned, and was intended to facilitate, the development of a regional mall with surrounding ancillary uses. This intent is clearly stated in the "Purpose and Intent" section of the zone classification, which reads: "Normally, the mall would consist of several anchor department stores or other major tenants with individual retail, service, and dining uses arranged between them. . . .The peripheral freestanding uses may include, but are not limited to, discount and warehouse-style large volume retailers ..." In recognition of the large-scale, regional draw that such a center was intended to create, the RC contains an exemption for "mall identification signs" to include "programmable electronic messages." This is significant because the City's other commercial zones do not contain such an allowance, meaning that commercial development within the RC zone was intended to be unique. Only one other commercial center in the City, the regional draw Lancaster Auto Mall, contains this electronic signage.

The Lancaster Marketplace was constructed in 1994 as a "factory outlet center." Its design reflects that intent, since it contains no identifiable anchor tenant spaces, which is a characteristic of such centers (*Shopping Center Development Handbook*, Second Edition, Urban Land Institute). The total gross leasable area (GLA) of the center is approximately 250,000 square feet, as opposed to the typical regional center of 400,000 square feet (*Shopping Center Development Handbook*, Second Edition, Urban Land Institute).

Discussion:

The retail center contains a roof-mounted sign, oriented towards SR-14, which was damaged by wind. The appellant requested a replacement of the sign that included an electronic message board, an element that is prohibited in the RC zone except for a specific exemption for mall identification signs. Staff, acting in accordance with the code, denied the sign application (see attached letter). On January 31, 2008, the appellant filed an appeal of the staff decision. Discussions between City staff and the appellant have not resulted in a resolution of the matter.

The appellant states in the appeal form that the City's municipal sign code definition of a mall is "ambiguous and vague". The appellant further indicates the Lancaster Marketplace contains unique retail shopping, and, therefore, functions as a regional center, meeting the intent of a "mall" as contained within the code.

Staff asserts that the restrictions placed on electronic message signs by the code clearly indicate that they are to be allowed only in limited instances where the regional nature of the commercial center justifies the potential negative aesthetic effects of an electronic sign. In this case, staff does not believe that the Lancaster Marketplace functions as a regional draw. It is true that the Lancaster Marketplace contains some very viable and, in certain instances, unique tenants. However, it has not been demonstrated that this center, on its own, contains the size, type, or mix of tenants necessary to create the critical retail mass that functions as a regional draw, especially when contrasted with the Antelope Valley Mall, the Lancaster Auto Mall, or even Valley Central Shopping Center located on the south side of Lancaster Boulevard. In fact, it is interesting to note that the Antelope Valley Mall and Valley Central Shopping Center generate considerable consumer traffic because of their significant retail mass, despite the lack of extremely large or electronic freeway-oriented signs.

Based on this information, and the concern for the reasonable control of electronic signage as contained within the existing municipal code, staff recommends that the Council deny the appeal and uphold the denial of the electronic message sign request.