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# City of Detroit

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October 14, 2022

## HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

**RE:** Request of Conwash, LLC for PCA (Public Center Adjacent) Special District Review of a proposed local advertising sign at 601 Washington Blvd. (**RECOMMEND DENIAL**)

## REQUEST

The City Planning Commission (CPC) has received a request from Conwash, LLC for PCA (Public Center Adjacent) Special District Review of a proposed local advertising sign to be located at 601 Washington Blvd. This request is being made consistent with the provisions of Section 50-3-222 of the Detroit Zoning Ordinance.



*Subject premises – 601 Washington Blvd.*

## PROPOSED PROJECT

The updated sign ordinance that was enacted in 2020 allows for new advertising signs in the Central Business District (CBD). The specific regulations governing these signs are located in Chapter 4, Article IV, Division 5 of the 2019 Detroit City Code. Because this site is zoned PCA, all exterior changes require review by Your Honorable Body.

The petitioner originally proposed to erect a 20' wide by 20' high (400 square feet) sign on the south side of the building facing Congress Street. CPC staff suggested that the proposed sign would dominate the front of the building and detract from its appearance. A smaller sign, sized and positioned to fit within the window grid, was suggested as more appropriate. The petitioner responded by proposing a 15' wide by 15' high (225 square feet) sign.



*Rendering of Proposed 15' x15' Sign*



*Smaller sign as proposed by CPC/HDAB staff*

The proposed sign meets the regulations in the sign ordinance including:

- Must be constructed as a wall sign
- No more than one advertising sign per premises
- Area must be smaller than 700 square feet and not exceed 80% of the area of the façade
- Height cannot exceed 60 feet
- May be externally illuminated but not internally illuminated
- May not be dynamic (electronic)
- May not be located within 200 feet of the Detroit River

As part of the review process for advertising signs in the CBD, findings by several City departments are required including:

- Department of Public Works – placement of the advertising sign on the premises will not impair the traffic safety of motorists and pedestrians
- Chief Financial Officer – neither the applicant nor the owner of the premises to which the sign is sought to be placed is in arrears to the City for any unpaid, outstanding, or delinquent property tax, income tax, personal tax, or special assessments
- Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department – neither the applicant nor the owner of the premises to which the sign is sought to be placed is the subject of any outstanding violations of the Detroit City Code
- Fire Marshall – the premises are not in violation of Chapter 18, *Detroit Fire Prevention and Protection Code* and that the placement of the advertising sign on the premises will not cause any such violation
- Any other federal, state, or local governmental agency that may be necessary for construction, erection, or operation of the sign, including, but not limited to, approval by the Michigan Department of Transportation or the Detroit Historic District Commission

All findings are required before a permit can be issued.

### **REVIEW & ANALYSIS – PCA District Review Criteria**

The purpose of PCA District review is to ensure that proposed changes are consistent with the spirit, purpose, and intent of the district. To guide the review, eighteen PCA District Review Criteria are listed in Section 50-11-97 of the Zoning Ordinance. The relevant criteria follows with staff analysis in italics:

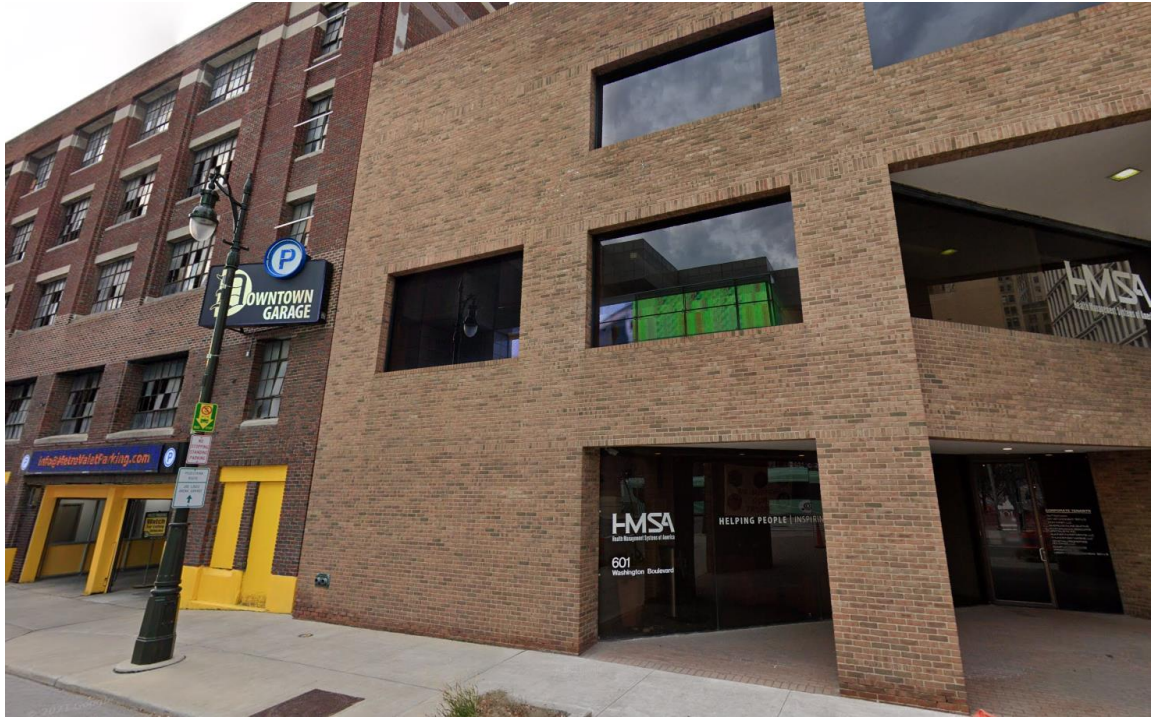
(2) Scale, form, massing and density should be appropriate to the nature of the project and relate well to surrounding development.

*The proposed sign would be located on a primary façade of the building. The previous advertising signs that were recommended for approval were proposed on blank side walls of buildings—elevations that were often originally covered by another building but were subsequently revealed when the neighboring building was demolished. This sign would be located on the front of the building facing the street and sidewalk which is more prominent than a side wall and detracts from the appearance of the building.*

(3) The proposed development should be compatible with surrounding development in terms of land use, general appearance and function and should not adversely affect the value of adjacent properties;



*The proposed advertising sign would be several times larger than the business signage on both the subject building and its immediate neighbor, thus overshadowing the communication potential of identification signs that assist the public with wayfinding.*



***Existing business signage on the subject property and its neighbor***

(11) Signage and graphics should be tastefully designed to be visually appealing and in character with surrounding development; they should provide needed information, direction and orientation in a clear and concise manner.

*One of the character-defining features of the building is the deeply-set horizontal windows in a symmetrical pattern with equal margins along the sides. The proposed square sign would be in contrast to the windows in both shape and placement, thereby detracting from the balance of the façade. The proposed placement of the advertising sign would crowd the corner and does not respect the architecture of the building. A sign of a similar size and shape as the windows and set in the same grid would be less objectionable.*

(15) Urban design elements of form and character should be carefully considered; such elements include, but are not limited to: richness/interest of public areas through the provision of storefronts, window displays, landscaping, and artwork; color, texture and quality of structural materials; enclosure of public spaces; variations in scale; squares, plazas and/or "vest pocket parks" where appropriate; continuity of experience, visual activity and interest; articulation and highlighting of important visual features; preservation/enhancement of important views and vistas.

*This proposed advertising sign would not add to the richness or interest of public areas. It would detract from important visual features.*

***Design***

The Planning & Development Department has reviewed the proposed signage and supports approval. The full recommendation is attached.

**CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION**

Consistent with the above, the City Planning Commission staff recommends denial of the proposed sign.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Marcell R. Todd, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Marcell R. Todd, Jr., Director  
Jamie J. Murphy, Staff

Attachments: PDD Recommendation  
Resolution

cc: Antoine Bryant, Director, PDD  
Katy Trudeau, Deputy Director, PDD  
Greg Moots, PDD  
David Bell, Director, BSEED  
Eric Johnson, BSEED  
Daniel Arking, Law Department

**A RESOLUTION REGARDING ALTERATIONS IN A PCA ZONING DISTRICT  
AT 601 WASHINGTON BLVD.**

**BY COUNCIL MEMBER \_\_\_\_\_:**

**WHEREAS**, Conwash, LLC proposes a new local advertising sign at 601 Washington Blvd.;  
and

**WHEREAS**, 601 Washington Blvd. is located within an established PCA (Public Center  
Adjacent) zoning district; and

**WHEREAS**, work to be performed within a PCA zoning district requires Special District  
Review and the purpose of the PCA zoning district classification is provided for in Section 50-  
11-81 of the Zoning Ordinance as follows:

*This district includes property in close proximity to the Public Center (PC) District,  
and the controls specified in this division are designed to prevent any uses or structures  
within the district from having a deleterious effect upon the public center. Uses in this  
district shall include, to the maximum extent possible, ground-floor commercial space  
or other space oriented to pedestrian traffic, to enhance the public streetscape and  
street-level activity; and*

**WHEREAS**, the Planning and Development Department has provided review; and

**WHEREAS**, the City Planning Commission staff has, on behalf of the City Planning  
Commission, reviewed the proposed alterations in accordance with Section 7.5 of the City  
Planning Commission bylaws; and

**WHEREAS**, the City Planning Commission staff has submitted its report and recommendation  
to City Council, noting that the proposed signage fails to satisfy the special district review  
criteria of Sec. 50-11-97 of the Detroit Zoning Ordinance;

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Detroit City Council hereby accepts the  
recommendation of the City Planning Commission and denies the request of Conwash, LLC to  
affix a 15' x 15' (225 square foot) off-premises advertising sign on the southern façade of 601  
Washington Blvd. on land zoned PCA in the City of Detroit.



**PLANNING AND  
DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT**

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Marcell R. Todd Jr., Director  
Detroit City Planning Commission  
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February 16, 2022

**REVISED**

Dear Director Todd:

Following is the revised review by the Planning and Development Department (PDD) of an externally illuminated 225 square foot wall-mounted advertising sign proposed for the southern wall of 601 Washington Blvd. (BSEED Permit numbers SGN2021-00067). As the property is zoned PCA (Public Center Adjacent), this review is required under Sec. 50-11-96.

The relevant PCA criteria from Sec. 50-11-97 of the Zoning Ordinance are followed by our analysis in italics:

*Criterion 2:* Scale, form, massing and density should be appropriate to the nature of the project and relate well to surrounding development; *The proposed sign is located on a portion of the wall that is blank and appears appropriate.*

*Criterion 11:* Signage and Graphics should be tastefully designed to be visually appealing and in character with surrounding development, they should provide needed information, direction and orientation in a clear and concise manner; *The advertising sign location is in character with the building and does not cover any architectural features.*

While the PDD supports the requested installation of an advertising sign on the building 601 Washington Blvd., we are very concerned about the long-term use of the current LED sign as an unpermitted animated sign. The Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department has issued a notice regarding the violation. Our support is therefore *contingent* on the existing sign not being used again as an animated sign, as well as on the sign meeting all Federal, State, and City regulations. We conclude that the proposed reduced-size advertising sign will not significantly negatively impact the character of the surrounding downtown area adjacent to the Public Center.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory Moots  
Lead Planner-Design and Developer Innovation  
Planning and Development Department

CC: Karen Gage

Russell Baltimore