



Design Review Board (DRB) Staff Report

Tenant Wall Signs

Case # 15-68: Tenant Wall Signs
The Tower at Peabody Place
100 Peabody Pl
Memphis, TN 38103

Applicant/Owner: Belz Enterprises
100 Peabody Pl
Memphis, TN 38103

Project Description: The subject property is a 15-story tower located at the northeast corner of the Main Street Mall and Peabody Place. The mixed-use building includes ground-floor commercial and office space above. For purposes of the Central Business Improvement District (CBID) Sign Code, the subject property is located within the Downtown Core and Main Street Mall sub-districts. The property is not located within a locally-zoned historic (Landmarks) district.

As a potential strategy for retaining and attracting office tenants, the building owner is requesting DRB approval to allow new signage on the exterior of the tower. Generally, the proposed signage would be located along the horizontal bands that exist between rows of windows. The applicant would install up to three (3) wall signs on each elevation of the tower to identify upper-floor tenants. The signage would be relegated to the upper half of each building elevation.

As an example of what a typical sign might look like under this proposal, the applicant included a request to install a set of internally-illuminated channel letters to read "Bass Berry Sims," identifying a local law firm that currently has office space in the building. Each letter will measure 3 ft. 6 in. (h) and the overall width of the display will be 66 ft. Each letter will have a translucent face that glows at night.

Sign Code Review: Per the CBID Sign Code, wall signs are generally allowed in all sub-districts, provided that certain requirements are met with respect to sign location, size, and number of signs.

The Code limits wall signs to locations within the “signable area” of a building’s elevation. The signable area is defined as “*an area of the façade of the building below the roof line which is free of windows, doors, or major architectural details and not higher than the lowest of the following: 25 feet above the adjoining sidewalk, the bottom of the window sills of the second story, or the highest part of the building under the roof as illustrated in Exhibit 1 (pg. 4).*” In this case, the applicant is requesting to install wall signs well outside the confines of the signable area.

The Code also limits the number of wall signs that can face the public right-of-way. Ground floor businesses are allowed up to two (2) primary signs facing a public right-of-way. Based on staff’s interpretation of the Code, upper-floor tenants are not specifically allowed any wall signs on upper floors of the building. Wall signs on upper floors would almost always be located outside the signable area. It should be noted that the Code does allow for the “majority tenant” of a multi-tenant building to display a sign on the upper portion of the building, near the roof line.

Upper-floor tenants are allowed window or door graphics on the ground level and window graphics at the floor level on which they are located. In lieu of every tenant in a multi-tenant building having a separate exterior sign, the Code provides for multi-tenant buildings to incorporate a Designation Sign at the ground level to identify all tenants.

Another Code issue for the proposed signage involves the illumination type. The subject property is located within the Main Street Mall sub-district, which specifically prohibits internally-illuminated signs. Given the contemporary character of the circa 1997 building, staff does not believe that allowing individual channel letters with internal illumination on upper floors of the building will negatively impact the district or be out of character with the building. It is also relevant that the site is not within a local Landmarks District.

Staff Evaluation:

This application highlights an important question about how best to balance the business needs of a building owner with the restrictions set by the CBID Sign Code. The purpose of the Code is to protect the public interest through reasonable limitations on exterior signage. On one hand, the building owner is competing for office tenants against properties located outside Downtown that may have lenient signage restrictions. If it is a goal of the DMC to attract new office workers to Downtown Memphis, it seems reasonable to consider exceptions to the Code that are consistent with that goal.

However, the CBID Sign Code is necessary because it is in the public interest to place reasonable limitations on exterior signage. Confusion, visual clutter, public safety, aesthetic degradation and

other associated negative impacts are all legitimate reasons to limit signage located in public view. While staff recognizes that the authors of the CBID Sign Code could not be omniscient and predict changes in technology or anticipate atypical properties, a clear intention of the Code is to limit the proliferation of exterior signs on multi-tenant buildings. It can reasonably be argued that allowing each and every tenant in all Downtown office towers to display an exterior sign would be untenable, unsightly, cluttered, confusing, and could negatively impact both the appearance of Downtown property and commercial property values.

Recommendation:

An exception to the Code would be required to approve the signage application as submitted. A strict reading of the Code allows for only one (1) upper wall sign on each building elevation. Each upper wall sign should be placed on a wall area free of architectural features and should not exceed 40% of that area. It is the prerogative of the building owner to determine which on-premise activity or tenant to identify on each building elevation.

Staff asks the Board to give consideration to the applicant's request as it strives to balance competing interests and allow property owners as much flexibility as possible within the structure of the CBID Sign Code. If the DRB determines that the applicant's request to install up to three (3) upper wall signs on each elevation is appropriate, staff recommends adding the following approval conditions:

1. Each upper wall sign should be placed on a wall area free of architectural features and should not exceed 40% of that area.
2. Each sign shall consist of an individual set of fabricated metal channel letters with opaque cabinets and translucent faces.
3. The maximum letter height is 4 ft.
4. Each sign must be submitted to the DRB for review and approval.