

# Opposing Views

Retailers and city planners are often engaged in a tug of war over signage

BY MICHAEL K. BJORKLUND

**T**he sign industry is in a pitched battle with the APA (American Planning Association) for reasonable regulation of signs. It is a battle that has gone on for 40 plus years.

The APA is a nonprofit public interest and research organization representing 37,000 practicing planners, officials and citizens involved in urban and rural planning issues. Sixty-five percent of its members work for state and local government agencies. They are involved on a day-to-day basis in formulating planning policies and preparing land-use regulations. APA's objective is to encourage planning that will meet the needs of people and society more effectively.

APA resulted from a consolidation of the American Institute of Planners and the American Society of Planning Officials. The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) is APA's professional institute, certifying planners who have met specific educational and work criteria and passed the certification exam.

As you probably know, the city planners you deal with are part of the APA. That group embraced a book published in 1972 called "Street Graphics," which called for very small non-illuminated signs. Think Cape Cod or any Old Main Street program. The members were to go back to their communities and rewrite sign ordinances to conform to the ideas in the book. They succeeded in many areas where the local sign companies were not vigilant. Some city planners were politically wily and embedded the new rules in their comprehensive plans.

While those small non-lit signs actually work in a pedestrian area of small shops, they were useless in the modern world of multi-lane roads, large-scale retail developments and the general traffic-driven world. Planners wanted signs for people on foot. Businesses wanted signs for people in cars.

The broad disparity between what the rules allow and what will actually work has led to variance hearings being routine. In the areas where the variance boards are reasonable and intel-

ligent, the system works. Where they are ultra-conservative, old-fashioned or unreasonable, it has led to a lot of lawsuits.

The sign industry took two approaches. One was to go to the APA and offer to work together to write a sign code that would work in the real world. This offer was accepted but after the research was completed, the APA did not like the outcome and refused to publish the code as it had committed to by contract. The two parties are now in court.

The second approach was to go to the SBA (Small Business Administration) and show how important signs were to the survival of new businesses. This has worked well. The SBA has embraced the information and done an outstanding job of getting it to entrepreneurs. With their boundless energy and vast numbers, these busi-



The best time to win the signage battle is at the point of maximum leverage, when making a proposal to bring new business to the community.

ness people have made a profound cumulative effect on how sign codes are actually enforced in this country.

Meanwhile, smart developers and retail executives are beginning to include detailed signage information in their original proposals to a community. The granting of permits for these signs necessary to make the project a success is a condition of moving forward. This is the point of maximum leverage, when the community wants the additional tax dollars. Beyond that, they are placing more emphasis on variance and sign permit skills when selecting a sign company. This skill set is now just as important as manufacturing capacity as criteria for picking a sign vendor and/or a sign company that knows how to maximize all aspects of a businesses signage needs.

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