

CITY PLANNING DEPARTMENT



Memorandum – FINAL

To: City Plan Commission
From: Jonas U. Bruggemann, MSCRP | Senior Planner
Date: June 24, 2024
RE: 1 Wholesale Way – Assessors Plat 10, Lot 698
Application for Dimensional Variance

Owner: Tri State Displays, Inc.
Applicant: Lamar Advertising Company
Location: 1 Wholesale Way
Zoning: M2 – General Industry
FLUM Designation: Industrial

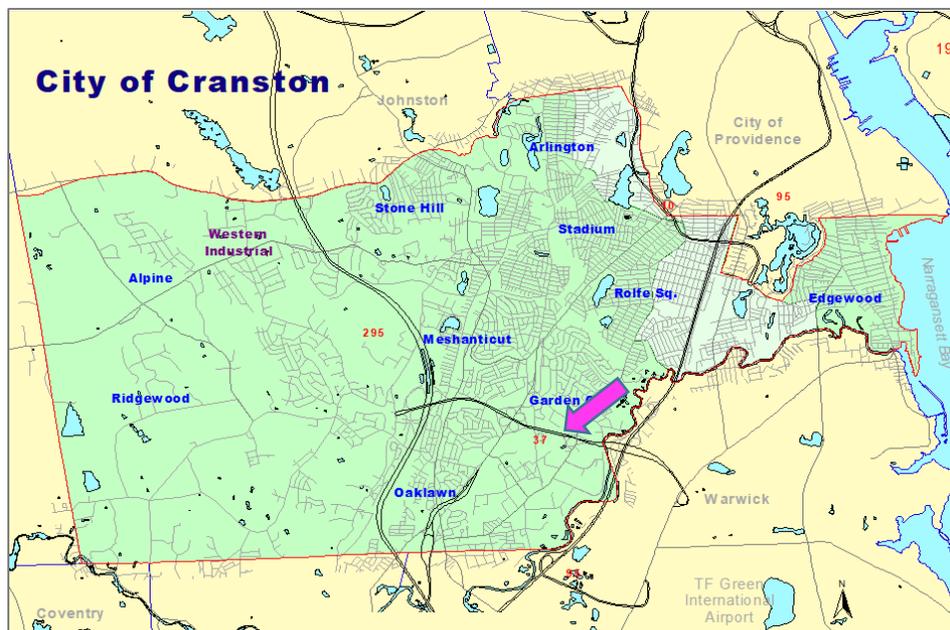
Subject Property:

The subject property is located at 1 Wholesale Way, identified as Plat 10, Lot 698, and has a land area of 5.49± acres, (239,144± sq. ft.,) with frontage on Wholesale Way.

Request:

To allow relief from schedule of uses, billboard requirements, and prohibited signage regulations to replace an existing billboard facing Route 37 with a 14' x 48' digital advertising panel of the same height in a M2 zone (17.92.010 – Variances and 17.92.010.G – Signs Prohibited Under This Section)

LOCATION MAP



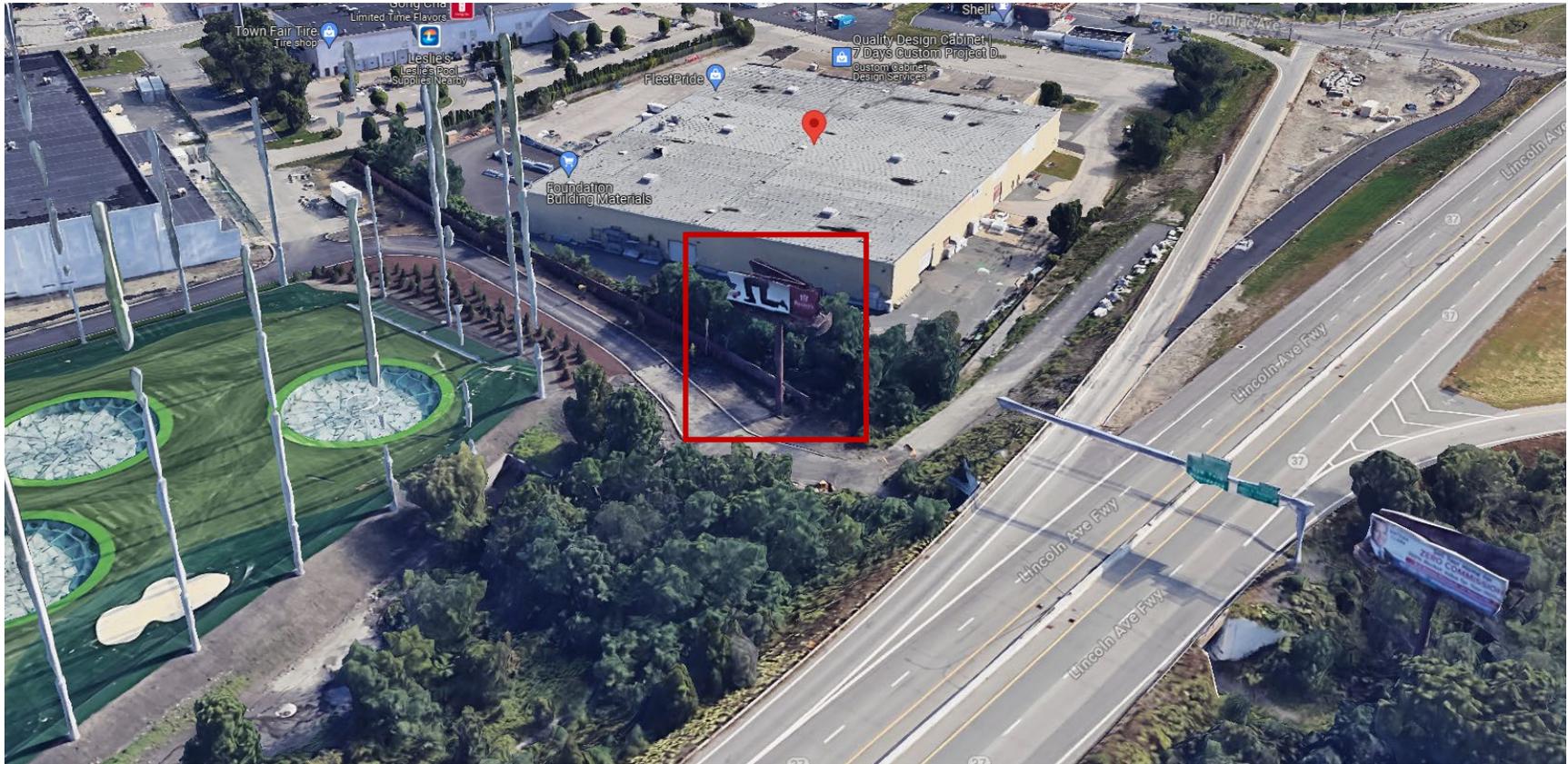
AERIAL PHOTO



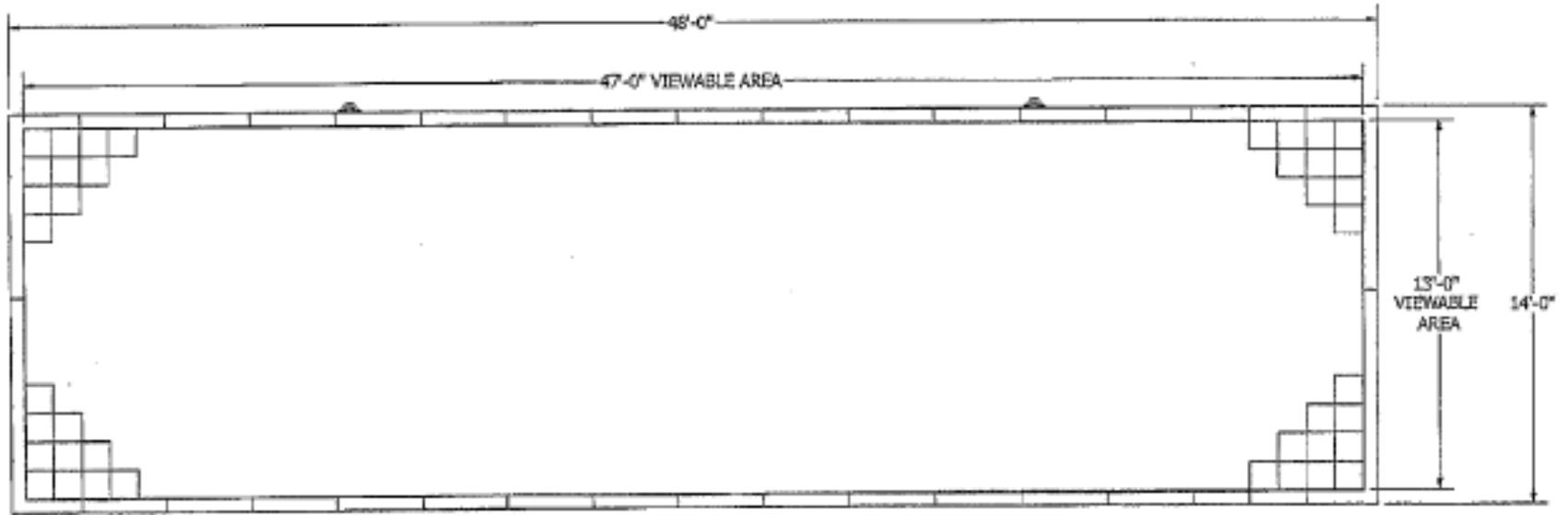
STREET VIEW



3D AERIAL



SIGN PLAN



Findings of Fact:

- The applicant proposes to convert an existing static billboard into a digital, LED billboard while retaining existing dimensions (14' x 48') of the billboard itself.
- The Applicant has requested specific relief in their Application, namely:
 - 17.72.010.G. Signs Prohibited Under This Section
 - *“All signs not expressly permitted under this section or exempt from regulation hereunder in accordance with the previous section are prohibited in the city.”*
- Electronic LED message signs of any type are not permitted in the zoning code in any zone as per Section 17.72.010.G. [Signs Prohibited Under This Section] of the Zoning Ordinance.
 - Other LED billboards have been approved by the Zoning Board of Review through Use Variances and installed throughout the City of Cranston, but none are found near the proposed site.
 - There are other known “animated signs” in the nearby area, including two wall signs facing Sockanosset Cross Road and Pontiac Avenue on 1191 Pontiac Avenue. a property abutting 1 Wholesale Way.
- The Future Land Use Map (FLUM) designates the subject property as *“Industrial.”*
 - The Comprehensive Plan is silent on LED billboards specifically as an appropriate use.

Analysis:

It has been consistently the stance of the City Planning Department that digital LED billboards are not an appropriate use in the City. The following will restate several issues that have been brought up in past analyses of digital LED billboards.

- Digital LED billboards can be visually overwhelming and may create a sense of clutter or sensory overload for passerby drivers. This can detract from the overall visual aesthetic of an area, even if it is an industrial zone located near a highway. It is the planning staff’s view that LED billboards detract from the overall visual aesthetic of the City of Cranston.
- Digital LED billboards can compromise traffic safety on arterial roads as they distract passing drivers, particularly younger, elderly, and inexperienced drivers. The most recent studies have found a positive relationship between attention grabbing billboards and vehicle crashes, meaning that the more attention-grabbing a billboard is to drivers the frequency of crashes increases in kind.
 - Advertising companies typically cite a report called *“Driver Visual Behavior in the Presence of Commercial Electronic Variable Message Signs (CEVMS)”* by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) claiming that these digital billboards create minimal distractions ([report linked here](#)). Staff reviewed the following critique of the report by Jerry Wachtel entitled *“A Peer-Reviewed Critique of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Report Titled: “Driver Visual Behavior in the Presence of Commercial Electronic Variable Message Signs (CEVMS)””* [Article linked here](#). The critique states that the FHWA report has serious flaws in its methodology and comes to conclusions that are not reflected in the data.
 - Staff refer to the collection of research entitled *“Compendium of a Decade’s Worth of Research Studies on Distraction from Digital Billboards...”* that was prepared for the California State Department of Transportation Legal Division on October 16, 2020.” by the Engineering firm “Veridian Group.” [Linked here](#). This collection of academic, industry, and government research provides more recent and robust evidence demonstrating that digital billboards are more distracting than traditional billboards and thereby are associated with more crashes.

- LED billboards can be very bright, contributing to light pollution and may disrupt the natural environment, including waterways, or wildlife habitats.
- The applicant has not provided specific details regarding the type of graphic to be displayed on the proposed LED sign (i.e., static image/logo, changing graphics/text, banner messages, color/monochrome, frequency etc.), which may be out of character with the surrounding area and more distracting to drivers.
- There are no guidelines for signage development that would allow the LED billboard to fit in with the existing commercial centers or highway/arterial commercial areas. Therefore, the installation of the billboard is inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan's economic development goals and policies.
- Staff could not find any language within the Cranston Comprehensive Plan that provides for any additional policy direction to suggest that the proposed signage is appropriate at this location. Therefore, this application is viewed as inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan.
- The Comprehensive Plan outlines goals, policies, and action items pertaining to commercial (re)development which Staff find support the denial of this Application, specifically:
 - CG-1A: Improve and maintain and efficient flow of traffic, particularly in commercial centers and along major arterials.
 - The installation of a digital LED billboard could potentially create a distraction for drivers and affect traffic safety, which could contradict the goal of maintaining an efficient flow of traffic and the policy of maintaining the functional integrity of roadways.

Recommendation:

In accordance with RIGL § 45-24-41(b) and Section 17.92.010(A) of the Zoning Ordinance, Staff finds this Application to be inconsistent with the goals and purposes of the Comprehensive Plan and determines that it is not compatible with the general character of the surrounding neighborhood. Staff therefore recommends that the City Plan Commission adopt the Findings of Fact documented above and forward a **NEGATIVE RECOMMENDATION** on the Application to the Zoning Board of Review.

Staff would also like to note that any positive consideration of this matter should include review of the following conditions of approval:

1. LED billboards shall be prohibited from 1 Wholesale Way in perpetuity.
2. The approved LED billboard shall not have any animations.
3. The frequency at which images are changing shall be limited to no less than 1 minute.
4. The digital ambient brightness shall adhere to state and federal regulations on the matter.

Respectfully Submitted,



Jonas U. Bruggemann, MSCRP
Senior Planner/Administrative Officer

Cc: City Planning Director
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