

MEMORANDUM

To: Planning Commission

From: Anne McClung, Planning and Building Director

Date: September 13, 2019

Subject: RZN19-0008: Request to Amend Special Signage District for the 7 acre North End Center development by Carrie Woodring on behalf of the Virginia Tech Foundation, Skip Smith of W.M. Jordan Company and Carolyn Howard of Draper Aden Associates.

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**SUMMARY OF REQUEST**

**Property Location:** North End Center encompassing 211 Prices Fork Road, 460 Turner Street 400 Turner Street and 212 Turner Street

**Tax Parcel Number:** Tax Map Parcels Nos.226-A-105, 226-A-102, 226-A-99, 226-A-96, 226-A-95, 226-A-83, 226-A-98, 226-A-97,226-A-107, 226-A-135, 226-A-135B, 226-A-135C

**Parcel Size:** 7.17 acres

**Present Zoning District:** Downtown Commercial and DC with Conditions

**Adjacent Zoning District:** North: General Commercial, Planned Residential and RM-48 Medium Density Multi-unit Residential (across Prices Fork Road)  
East: Downtown Commercial  
South: University, RM-48 Medium Density Multiunit Residential  
West: University, RM-48 Medium Density Multiunit Residential

**Present Use:** Commercial Center, Office Building and Parking Garage

**Surrounding Uses:** North: Commercial, Residential (across Prices Fork Road)  
East: Commercial  
South: University  
West: University, Residential

**Future Land Use:** High Impact Commercial

**Neighborhood Meeting:** 5:30 PM, Wednesday, September 4, 2019

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## **BACKGROUND ON APPLICATION**

This is a request by Ms. Carrie Woodring, on behalf of the Virginia Tech Foundation, to amend the Special Signage District for the North End development. The Virginia Tech Foundation is the property owner of all of the parcels contained within the special signage district. The applicants also include the W.M. Jordan Company, Draper Aden Associates and signage graphics from TKA Architects.

The special signage district was originally approved in 2013 and was subsequently amended in 2014. The North End development encompasses the former Collegiate Square commercial center and the Turner Street office building and associated parking garage. The special signage district granted allows identification and branding of the different projects as one center. The purpose of a special signage district is to allow an applicant to request more signs, different sizes, types and locations of signs than would ordinarily be allowed under the base zoning district and to propose a cohesive signage plan for all development in the project.

The overall proposed signage program was designed to have continuity of signage appearance and meet the needs of the commercial retail, restaurant, service and office uses in the development. Many of the uses in the former Collegiate Square center are privately run retail shops, services or offices. Virginia Tech is also a tenant in some of the offices in former Collegiate Square; and its offices occupy all of the upper floors of the Turner Street office building (Building #300). The ground floor spaces of the Turner Street office building include Starbucks, HokieCentric, Velocity Care, and the Institute for Orthopedics and Neurosciences. The proposed redevelopment will include a new 6-story building fronting on Gilbert Street and Turner Street shown as Building #220 on the North End Signage District Plan Sheet 1.0. The new building will house Virginia Tech university offices and include commercial uses on the ground floor and a restaurant and event facility on the rooftop. With the new building and new types of larger retail tenants, the applicants would like to update the special signage district provisions. This application is being considered in conjunction with other related North End Center requests to amend the Downtown Commercial zoning, apply for a Conditional Use Permit for additional height up to 100 feet for Building #220 and request a right-of-way exchange on Gilbert Street. The special signage district does cover a greater area than the other applications which are limited to the former Collegiate Square property.

## **EXISTING ZONING/OTHER SPECIAL SIGNAGE DISTRICTS**

The properties included within the proposed signage district are zoned Downtown Commercial. Requests for special signage districts are considered through the rezoning process. As with other rezoning requests, the Commission should consider the Comprehensive Plan, the Zoning Ordinance, the need and justification for the change, and the potential effects of the district overlay on the property, surrounding property, and on public services and facilities. In this case, the underlying zoning of the parcels would not change. The signage district functions more as an overlay signage district to the base zoning district. Other examples of Special Signage Districts approved within the Town include the University City Boulevard commercial area, Lewis Gale Montgomery Hospital and the First & Main commercial center. Staff anticipates changing how signage districts are processed as part of the update to the Town's sign regulations.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD MEETING**

The neighborhood meeting was held on September 4, 2019 at 5:30 PM. The neighborhood meeting was held to discuss all of the North End/Gilbert Street requests including RZN 19-0007, CUP 19-0006 and ROW 19-0001. Notes and sign-in sheets from the meeting are attached to the staff report for RZN 19-0007.

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Most of the comments at the neighborhood meeting were related to the proposed building #220 and were not specific to the amendment to the special signage district.

#### **EVALUATION CRITERIA**

Section 1151 of the Zoning Ordinance requires the Commission to study all rezoning requests to determine:

- 1) *Whether the proposed amendment conforms to the general guidelines and policies contained in the Comprehensive Plan.*
- 2) *The relationship of the proposed amendment to the purposes of the general planning program of the Town, with appropriate consideration as to whether the change will further the purposes of [the Zoning Ordinance] and the general welfare of the entire community.*
- 3) *The need and justification for the change.*
- 4) *When pertaining to a change in the district classification of the property, the effect of the change, if any, on the property, surrounding property, and on public services and facilities. In addition, the Commission shall consider the appropriateness of the property for the proposed change as related to the purposes set forth at the beginning of each district classification.*

#### **COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

##### **Future Land Use**

The property is designated High Impact Commercial which is defined as

*“Small or large commercial developments with a need for high visibility and have a high impact on the surrounding environment, including but not limited to factors such as lighting, noise, parking, traffic and hours of operation. Examples include large retail establishments, restaurants, hotels/motels, and auto related uses.”*

*Typical Implementing Zoning Districts for High Impact Commercial classified land include Downtown Commercial (DC), General Commercial (GC), Planned Commercial (PC), and Mixed Use (MXD).*

The request is not for a change in zoning but for an amendment to an approved signage district to apply to existing developed parcels. Thus the type of analysis that would be included for a proposal that requested a change in zoning and future development is not applicable in this case.

#### **ZONING ORDINANCE REQUIREMENTS**

In reviewing the Zoning Ordinance the following discussion is provided.

##### **Downtown Commercial - Intent of District**

The purpose of the DC district is intended to be a predominately pedestrian area, catering to bicycle and pedestrian traffic with shops and storefronts close to the road, pedestrian scale, wide sidewalks, street trees, and limited well screened off-street parking. Signage should aid in wayfinding whether in a vehicle, on a bike or on foot.

##### **Approved Signage Plan**

The 2013 special signage district approved included specific provisions for the types of signs listed below. The 2014 amendment was filed to allow all tenants with multiple street frontages to have a sign on each

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of two street frontages. The street frontages include Prices Fork Road, Turner Street, Gilbert Street and the private roadway leading to the parking garage. The allowance for signs on two frontages includes future tenants in the buildings not yet constructed.

- **Boundary Sculptural Sign:** Three district boundary sculptural signs mark the outer boundary of the district.
- **District Monument Sign:** One district monument sign is located on Prices Fork Road at the entrance to the former Collegiate Square center.
- **Building Monument Signs:** Six building monument signs. A sign is shown for existing buildings #460, #400, #211, #300, and #212 (parking garage). A sign is also shown on Gilbert Street for a new building to be constructed in the future in the interior of the existing Collegiate Square center now the proposed Building #220. Buildings #211 and #400 are proposed for demolition to allow construction of new Building #220.
- **Directional Pylon Sign:** Two monument signs near the main vehicular entry points on Prices Fork Road (interior to the parking area) and Gilbert Street to identify locations of specific tenants in the various buildings.
- **Tenant Wall Signage:** Wall mounted signs of 15 square feet in size to identify individual building tenants. The common design for all of the tenant wall signage is a perforated aluminum background panel with the tenant name on the panel. The signs have internally illuminated channel letters. The signs can be seen throughout the development. An illustration of the wall signage is included in the application.
- **Signage Design:** The monument sign for Building #300 and the parking garage sign were approved to use the University signage palette as part of the Town's approval of the special signage district. This was requested by the Virginia Tech Foundation for continuity particularly with signage identifying parking locations for university uses.

#### Proposed Changes to Signage Plan

##### Boundary Sculptural Signs

There are three sculptural pieces that mark the boundaries of the special signage district. The signs are a gray metal cube shape with the letters NE in the cube. The sculptures are located at the Prices Fork Rd./Turner St. intersection, the roadway on Turner St. leading to the parking garage and near the St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall on Prices Fork Road. The applicant is not proposing any changes to the size or location of these signs but is proposing to add lighting to the signs. In the supplemental materials dated September 11, 2019, the applicant indicates the lighting will consist of up lighting that will be UL listed for damp/wet locations and carry 12V to 24V operation. The lights will be located to reduce light pollution to adjacent properties and streets. The lights will need to comply with the lighting section of the Zoning Ordinance.

##### Monument Signs (Directional and Pylon)

The approved plan has a Directional Pylon sign located at the Prices Fork entrance to the commercial center. The applicant proposed relocation of this sign due to the parking reconfiguration as part of the

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amendment to the rezoning. In the supplemental materials dated September 11, 2019, the applicant has indicated the sign will be removed and not relocated.

The existing Directional Pylon sign located on Gilbert Street is proposed to be removed. This sign is currently located at the access driveway that connects Gilbert Street to the parking lot on Prices Fork Rd. providing directional information to motorists. This access connection is proposed to be eliminated in the revisions to the rezoning and the directional sign is proposed to be removed.

- No changes are proposed to the Building #212 monument sign for the parking garage.
- No changes are proposed for the signage for the future building on Turner St. next to Building #300.
- No changes are proposed for the District Monument sign at the project entrance on Prices Fork Rd.
- The Building #400 monument sign will be revised so that it reads “220” instead of “400” to reflect the new building proposed in the redevelopment.

### **Wall Signage (small tenant, major tenant, building identification, and blade signs)**

#### **Small Tenant Signage**

The applicant is not proposing any changes to the current size, location, materials or color palette of the wall signs for small businesses. Each business has a 15 square foot sign mounted on a gray mesh panel. Building #220 does show some 15 square foot signs labeled “retail specific logo and signage mounted on aluminum canopy or future tenant signage”. This would imply that this signage could be used by the major tenant as additional signage or these signs could identify a separate smaller tenant. The applicant will clarify this at the work session.

#### **Major Tenant Signage**

The applicant is proposing a distinction between smaller scale and larger tenants in the former Collegiate Square portion of the development. Any tenant leasing 12, 500 square feet or greater would be considered a major tenant and allowed 60 square feet of signage as opposed to 15 square feet. The larger signage allowance is appropriate for a large tenant often serving in anchor tenant capacity. The applicant has only identified one major tenant location in Building #220. Major tenants would be allowed the 60 square foot signs on two sides of the building; facing Gilbert Street and facing Prices Fork Road. These signs are shown on the East and West revised elevations provided in the supplemental submittal dated September 11, 2019. These signs would include retail specific logos. Staff would like clarification if the signage will consist of individually illuminated letters or an illuminated box sign. An illuminated box sign would not be in keeping with the quality of development. The larger signs are limited to the new Building #220 and no larger signage on any other buildings in the development are allowed regardless of the amount of space leased.

It would be helpful if a commitments were made to prohibit other color building design features or site design features that while not considered signage are functioning as visual brand reinforcement. Sometimes this type of brand reinforcement blurs the lines of what is considered signage. The additional branding features often occur in the form of colored bollards or other external color patterning. In a smaller community such as Blacksburg, and especially in this Downtown location, additional branding is not needed for residents, students, or visitors to locate a business. The additional brand reinforcement is more common in suburban large-scale retail centers.

Larger signage, 60 square feet per sign on two street frontages, is also proposed for the rooftop restaurant/event facility. Staff has concerns about illumination of the signs mounted at the top of the

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building for the restaurant/event facility. There are no other buildings of the height proposed (up to 100') in Downtown or with the size of sign proposed. Illumination of a wall sign at that height will be visible and distracting in the night sky. An illuminated sign at that height is not appropriate for the Town of Blacksburg.

### **Façade Facing St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall**

No signage is shown, or proposed, on the side of the building facing the St. Luke and Odd Fellows Hall. There is a small portion of the north façade shown as qualifying frontage for signage depicted with a yellow line on the 8 ½ by 11 color North End Signage Plan graphic dated September 11, 2019. However, no signs are shown on the north façade. The applicant may want to remove the yellow line on that portion of the building façade to avoid any confusion later. Restricting signage is appropriate to provide a better interface with the adjacent historic building.

### **Building Identification Signage**

General building identification signage is shown on the middle of the Building #220. The building is being identified by the building number which also serves as the street addressing. More detail on the maximum size of this signage and proposed materials is needed. Other than the retail tenants on the first floor and the rooftop restaurant/event facility, no other individual users in the building will be identified with external wall signage. The intervening floors of the proposed buildings would be occupied by Virginia Tech university offices. A directory will likely be provided in the lobby of the building to direct visitors to the appropriate floor.

### **Blade Signs**

Blade signs extending from the building façade, on Building #220 only, are shown in the application. The blade signs will be 20 square feet in area and in the locations as shown on the Amended Signage Elevations. The blade signs are to identify the major retail tenant and the rooftop restaurant/event facility. The applicant will need to clarify how far from the building the blade signs will extend and provide information on the materials. Current sign regulations allow only up to an 18" extension. The applicant will also need to provide more information on the materials and illumination for the blade signs. The blade signs for both the large tenant and the rooftop restaurant/event facility are shown are ground level which would indicate the signs are intended more for pedestrians.

### **Signage Square footage totals for Building #220**

For special signage districts, the total square footage of signage allowed and the signage by type is often calculated. For this amendment staff has calculated the totals below but staff will continue to work with the applicant to verify these maximums.

- Small tenants have a maximum of 30 square feet of signage possible (with two street frontages)
- Large tenants have a maximum of 160 square feet of signage possible with two 60 square foot wall signs (one on each of two street frontages) and two 20 square foot blade signs (one on each of two street frontages).
- Building identification signage information to be provided by the applicant.

## **SUMMARY**

The Planning Commission is asked to consider and make a recommendation of approval or denial of the proposed request. The decision to grant or deny the rezoning request is a discretionary decision, and should be made according to the criteria outlined in §1151, and as analyzed above.

## **PROFFERS FOR RZN#19-0008 CAN BE FOUND IN APPENDIX E OF THE SPECIAL SIGNAGE DISTRICT APPLICATION**

1. The Applicant has established the special signage district substantially in accordance with the Request for Change of Zoning Classification for North End Development Special Sign District, dated June 30, 2013, amended September 27, 2013, and as further amended May 1, 2014. The North End Signage District Plan 1.0, dated August 1, 2019, sets for the boundaries of the North End Special Sign District and the number, type, dimensions, and locations of proposed signs. The Signage Elevation, dated August 1, 2019 sets for the proposed signage locations, number, type and size of the signs to be installed on the Gilbert Street Mixed-Use Building. The Applicant will erect signage on the Property in conformity with the attached North End Signage District Plan 1.0 and the Signage Elevation. Existing signage in the Collegiate Square Shopping Center located at Building 460 (460 Tuner Street) will remain.
2. No signs within the North End Special Signage District shall contain electronic changeable copy.
3. The provision of the original Proffer Statement dates October 10, 2013 remain in effect except as revised by this Revised Proffer Statement.

### Attachments:

Aerial

**RZN 19-0008  
North End  
Special  
Signage District**

**Aerial**

-  Special Signage District
-  Parcels

