

MEMORANDUM

To: Planning Commission

From: Emma Martin, Planner I

Date: June 25, 2020

Subject: RZN20-0001-Request for a Special Signage District in the DC Downtown Commercial Zoning District at the Lyric Theatre on 0.215 acres at 135 College Avenue (Tax parcel 256-A90) by Greg Boatwright (applicant) for Lester Properties (owner)

**SUMMARY OF REQUEST**

<b>Property Location</b>	135 College Ave.
<b>Tax Parcel Number</b>	256-A90
<b>Parcel Size</b>	0.215 acres
<b>Present Zoning District</b>	Downtown Commercial
<b>Present Use</b>	Theater
<b>Adjacent Zoning District</b>	<b>North:</b> University <b>East:</b> Downtown Commercial <b>South:</b> Downtown Commercial <b>West:</b> Downtown Commercial
<b>Adjacent Uses</b>	<b>North:</b> University <b>East:</b> Mixed Use and Commercial <b>South:</b> Mixed Use and Commercial <b>West:</b> Mixed Use and Commercial (across Draper Road)
<b>Adopted Future Land Use</b>	High Impact Commercial
<b>Proposed Use</b>	Theater
<b>Neighborhood Meeting</b>	5:30 PM, Wednesday, June 17, 2020

**BACKGROUND ON APPLICATION**

This is a request by Greg Boatwright, on behalf of The Lyric Theatre (“the Theatre”), to create a Special Signage District. The Lyric Theatre is part of a mixed-use development owned by Lester Properties. This is the first request for a Special Signage District at the Lyric Theatre. The existing signage at 135 College Avenue is nonconforming. The applicant wishes to replace the two existing Lyric hanging letter marquees with two new digital LED screens of similar size. In addition, the applicant is requesting to install LED tube lighting in the inscribed L-Y-R-I-C letters located on the second story of the building façade. The applicant also plans to fabricate window grilles to match the design of the original grilles of the Theatre. In addition to the proposed new sign elements, the applicant plans to retain several features that should be included in the Special Signage District. These elements include the metal poster cases that showcase coming

## 2 RZN20-0001 The Lyric Special Signage District

attractions, the existing illuminated LYRIC letters that are a part of the marquee structure, and the comedy and tragedy masks on the Theatre parapets. The applicant's need and justification for the proposed changes is detailed in the application text.

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/or to propose a cohesive signage plan for the subject parcel.

### KEY ELEMENTS

- Neon style LED lighting and drilling of holes in façade
- Brightness and color temperature of digital marquee
- Digital marquee style commitment
- Frequency of illumination commitment

### EXISTING ZONING/OTHER SPECIAL SIGNAGE DISTRICTS

The property included within the proposed signage district is zoned Downtown Commercial. Requests for Special Signage Districts are considered through the rezoning process. As with other rezoning requests, the Planning 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 parcel 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, the North End Center development, and the First & Main commercial center.

### NEIGHBORHOOD MEETING

The neighborhood meeting was held on June 17, 2020 at 5:30 PM and there was one citizen attendee. Notes and sign-in sheets from the meeting are attached to this staff report. The meeting was held in the Council Chambers at 300 South Main Street with appropriate Public Health Emergency provisions addressing social distancing in place. The meeting was also broadcast live on Comcast cable, WTOB Channel 2, and available for live stream on the Town's website.

### 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 the creation of a Special Signage District to apply to an existing developed parcel. 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 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.

### **Downtown Commercial Signage Regulations**

Business signage in the Downtown Commercial zoning district for a multi-establishment building would typically be limited to 15 square feet per business, with a maximum of two signs. These standards apply to primarily mixed use buildings with retail and restaurant tenants. The existing signage provides significantly more square footage for signage than the Downtown Commercial zoning district permits. However, a theater is a qualitatively different type of use than most downtown uses.

### **Existing Signage**

There is currently no Special Signage District for the Lyric Theatre. The existing signage is non-conforming based on size, type, and number of signs and can be maintained in its current configuration. However, it is important to identify all aspects of the proposed signage district that will remain in the Special Signage District due to the nonconformity. Existing features to remain in the Special Signage District include the following.

### **Metal poster cases**

The four existing 30” x 48” metal poster cases located on the walls on both sides of the Theatre’s facade and inside the alcove are proposed to remain. These signs showcase coming attractions and there are no proposed changes for these cases.

#### 4 RZN20-0001 The Lyric Special Signage District

##### **Illuminated yellow LYRIC letters**

The applicant proposes to keep the existing 180" x 39" yellow illuminated LYRIC letters that are a part of the marquee structure. There are no proposed changes for the illuminated letters. The maroon background may be repainted in the same color.

##### **Parapet masks**

The applicant proposes to keep the existing 27" x 36" comedy and tragedy masks on the Theatre parapets. There are no proposed changes to the masks.

##### **Lighting under marquee**

The applicant states that the area under the marquee is lit by 72 small bulbs. These are illuminated during shows at the Lyric Theatre. There are no proposed changes to these lights.

##### **Proposed Signage Plan**

This rezoning application primarily applies to the removal and replacement of two existing signs on the building. This rezoning includes the following changes to existing signage.

##### **Marquee LED screens**

The application requests two new digital marquees to replace the two existing 31.5 square foot hanging letter marquees. The proposed marquees are programmable LED screen panels located on the front of the building with one angled to face the southwest and one angled to face the northeast. The application states that the digital signs will be configured to the same font and style of the hanging letter system that is currently used. Staff notes that while the digital marquees will look different than the existing hanging letter marquees, the applicant is committing to mimic the existing signs in font and style. The digital screens will be installed in the same location as the current marquees and will slightly alter the size of the display. The proposed panels will be 26 square feet each for a combined area of 52 square feet. The new LED screens are slightly smaller on all sides than the current signage. The marquee openings will be adjusted with brake metal to accommodate this size change and the new metal trim frame around the marquees will be painted with a bronze-brown color. No new holes will be drilled into the masonry façade to install the new marquees. The applicant has not provided information on lighting specifications such as brightness, luminosity, or color temperature. The application does note that the existing marquee signs are illuminated 24/7, and the replacement signs are proposed to be illuminated 24/7 as well. The applicant has provided visual examples of how the proposed digital screens may look in the application. The digital marquees will not have additional border lighting as is shown in some photos. The applicant may wish to provide additional detail regarding any commitments to lighting specifications and what is encompassed in the style of the marquee (colors, etc.).

##### **L-Y-R-I-C LED tube lighting**

The proposal includes the installation of red, double LED tubes inside the inscribed L-Y-R-I-C letters on the façade of the Theatre. The application indicates that neon tube lighting was an original design element and includes a photo showing holes in the inscribed L-Y-R-I-C letter spaces. This photo suggests that lighting was previously contemplated in this location. The replacement lighting is proposed to be red LED rather than neon due to the lack of availability and expense of servicing neon lighting. The tubes will appear white when not illuminated. The general depth of the inscribed L-Y-R-I-C letters is 2 inches, and the approximate height of each letter is about 22 inches. The width of each letter varies from approximately 8 inches (the letter "l") to 22 inches (the letter "R") depending on the letter. Two mounting points per letter will be drilled into the existing letter recess for the new LED tube lights and the conduit for electricity will

## 5 RZN20-0001 The Lyric Special Signage District

be installed behind the wall in the apartment ceiling, not visible from the street. The applicant has provided hyperlink examples of LED tube lighting in the application. The applicant stated at the HDRB meeting (discussed later) that the inscribed L-Y-R-I-C letter tube lighting will only be lit during Lyric Theatre shows, when the bulbs underneath the marquee are lit. The applicant may wish to include this commitment in the application. The applicant has not provided information on lighting specifications such as brightness, luminosity, or color temperature. The applicant may wish to provide additional detail regarding any commitments to lighting specifications.

### **Window grilles**

In addition to signage, the Lyric is proposing to fabricate and install window grilles to replicate the original grilles that were a part of the façade of the building. The applicant states that the window grilles will be  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch laser cut steel plate with steel hinges and latch. The grilles will be painted to match the façade. The window grilles will cover an area of about 33 square feet in size. A visual of the proposed grilles is included in the application as well as a historical photograph of the grilles from 1940. While not considered signage, these grilles were part of the historic review (see below) and do change the front façade.

### **ADVERSE IMPACTS**

Specifications about glare, brightness, and frequency of lighting were not provided as part of the application. Staff has concerns about glare on the street and color temperature. A photometric plan is not required but may be recommended to help evaluate adverse impacts. In lieu of a photometric plan, the applicant has chosen to provide a description of the existing and proposed lighting and associated impacts. The applicant may wish to consider a commitment regarding the glare, brightness, and color temperature to ensure minimal adverse impacts.

### **HISTORIC OR DESIGN REVIEW BOARD**

On March 26, 2020, the applicant submitted an application for HDRB review for the installation of the two new digital marquees, window grilles, and LED tube lighting for the Lyric Theatre, a contributing structure in the Blacksburg Historic District. The HDRB proposal was included in the rezoning application for a Special Signage District for the Lyric Theatre. The HDRB review of the application occurred prior to the Planning Commission and Town Council's review of the Special Signage District rezoning.

The Historic or Design Review Board met on June 8, 2020 at 4:30 PM to review the application for the Lyric Special Signage District. The applicant clarified some information from the application, including that new holes may need to be drilled into the facade to mount the LED tube lighting. The Board discussed that it would be preferred if existing holes were used to mount the LED tube lighting, rather than drilling new holes. The Historic or Design Review Board determined that the removal of the hanging letter marquees from the building facade does not constitute demolition in a 3-2 vote. The motion to approve the application as proposed passed 5-0. There were no recommendations. The applicant may wish to consider a commitment to using the existing holes for mounting where feasible based on the meeting discussion.

### **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.

## 6 RZN20-0001 The Lyric Special Signage District

### **PROFFERS**

1. The property shall be developed in substantial conformance, as determined by the Zoning Administrator, with the submitted rezoning application entitled Request for change of zoning classification, Lyric Council, Inc. special sign district (the "Application") dated April 27, 2020.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Aerial Map

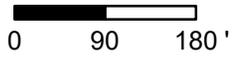
Zoning Map

Future Land Use Map

Neighborhood Meeting Notes and Sign-in Sheet

# RZN20-0001 Lyric Special Signage District Aerial

- Parcels
- Subject Area



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# RZN20-0001 Lyric Special Signage District Zoning

▭ Parcels

▭ Subject Area

### Zoning

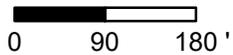
▭ OTR Old Town Residential

▭ R-5 Transitional Residential

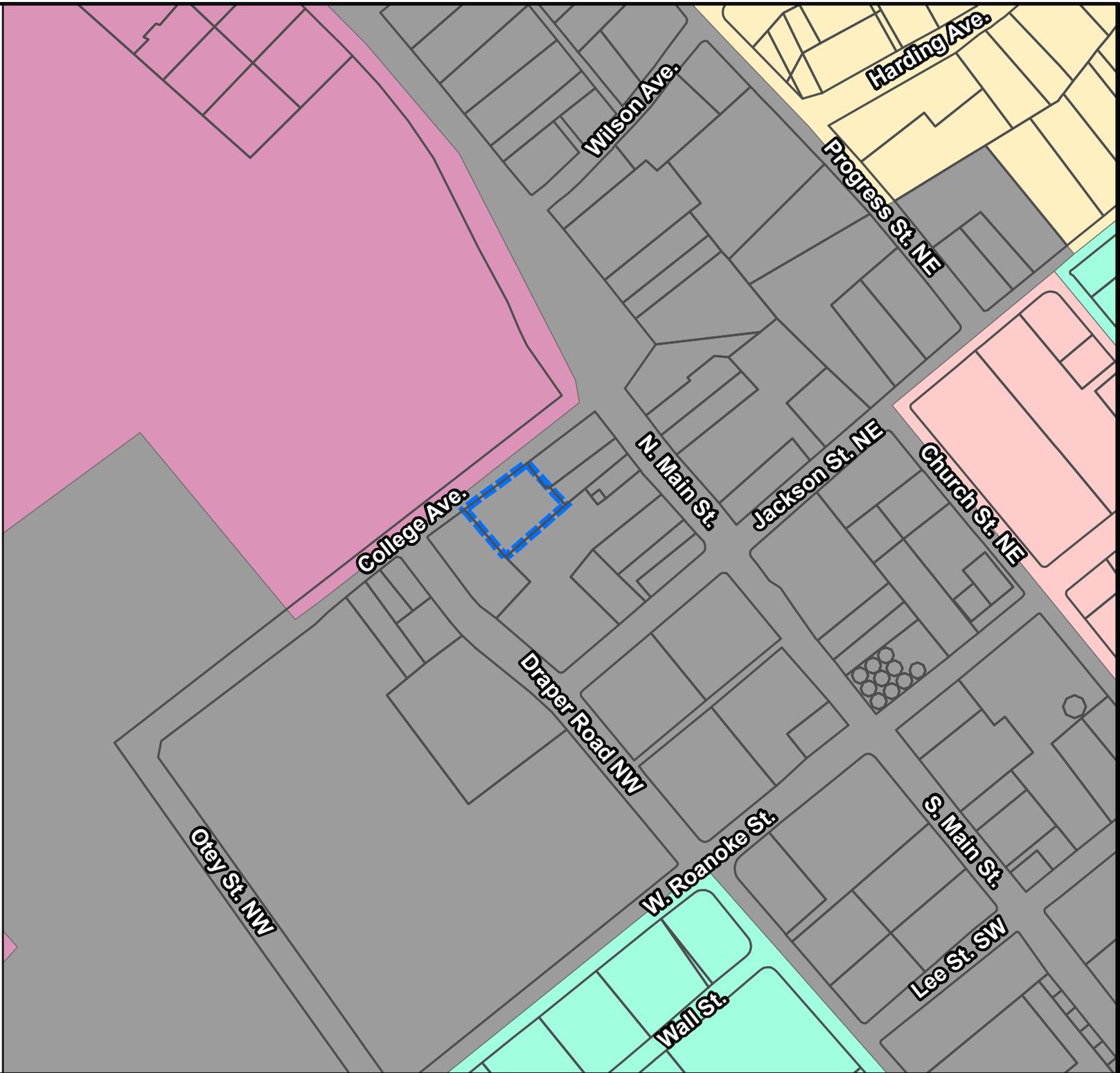
▭ DC Downtown Commercial

▭ O Office

▭ UNIV University



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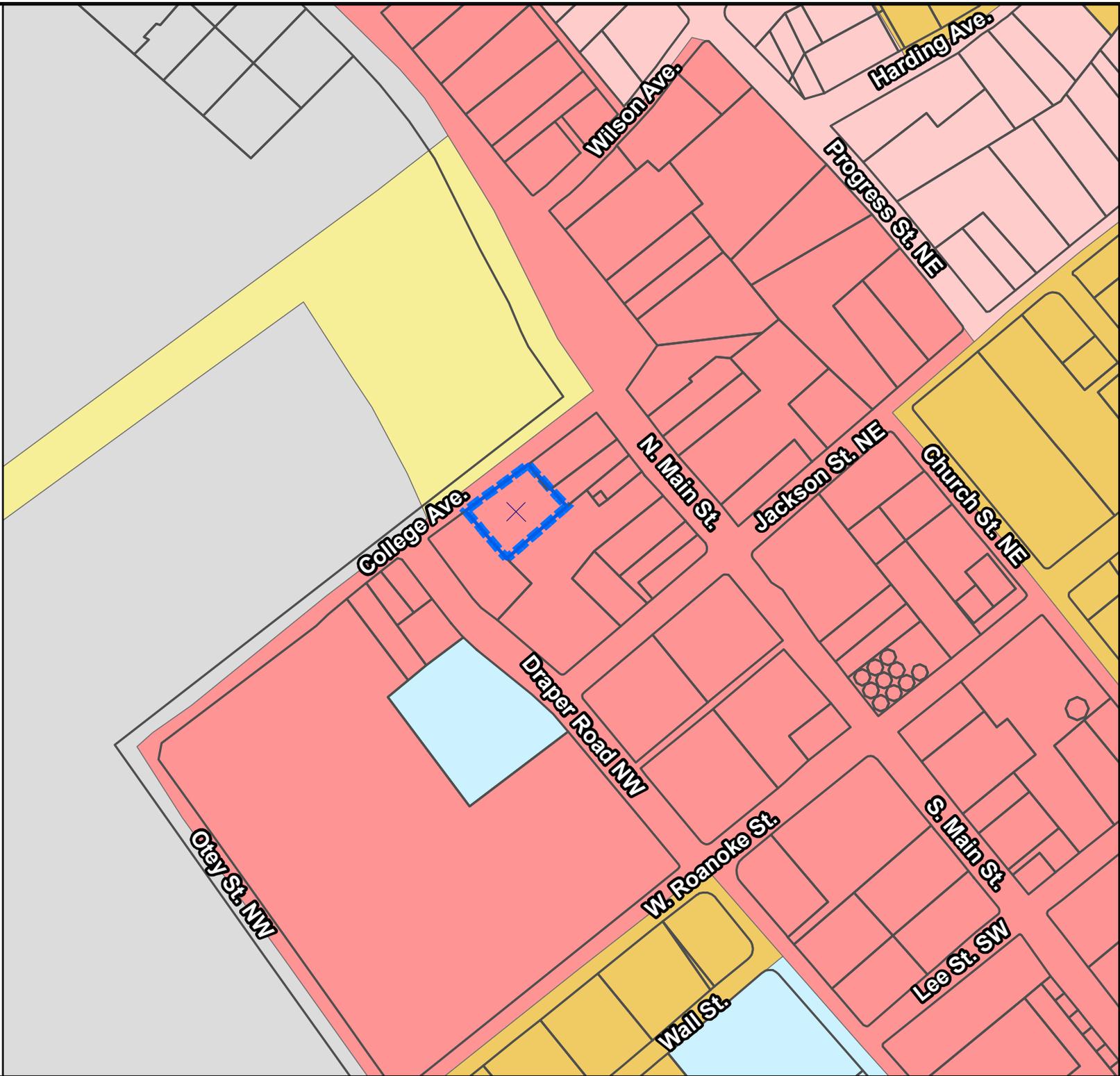


# RZN20-0001 Lyric Special Signage District Future Land Use

-  Parcels
-  Subject Area
- Future Land Use**
-  Civic
-  High Impact Commercial
-  Low Impact Commercial
-  Medium Density Residential
-  Park Land / Open Space / Resource Protection
-  University



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RZN 20-0001 Lyric Theatre Special Signage District  
Neighborhood Meeting  
Wednesday, June 17, 2020  
5:30 PM

Town staff in attendance was Emma Martin, Kali Casper and Kasey Thomsen  
Greg Boatwright, Lyric General Manager was in attendance as the applicant.

The meeting began at 5:30 pm.

Emma Martin opened the meeting by discussing the schedule of meetings yet to come, planning department review and responsibilities in relation to this project, the purpose of the Neighborhood Meeting, and overview of the parcel in question. She also directed all those in attendance to the Town of Blacksburg website where the current application, meeting schedule and any future documents and additions to the application could be found.

Mr. Greg Boatwright gave a brief presentation about how these desired changes would not alter the Lyric façade drastically, thus keeping the character in tact. He mentioned the changes would save time and help ensure staff safety by not having to physically change the marquee each time a new event occurs.

There was one attendee at the meeting.

Ms. Betty Anderson, a Lyric volunteer, is in favor of the digital marquee and agrees that this change would be much safer and easier to Lyric staff and volunteers.

There was no further comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:37 pm.

