



CITY OF WATERTOWN

Department of Community Development and Planning

Staff Report

This Report provides the Department of Community Development and Planning's staff recommendation to the Planning Board for the public hearing on a Zoning Amendment relating to sign special permits for the Regional Mixed Use District.

ZONING AMENDMENT:	Article VII, §7.07, to allow greater flexibility for signs erected on a building at a height exceeding 100 feet in the RMUD
DATE OF CITY COUNCIL FIRST READING:	April 26, 2022
STAFF RECOMMENDATION:	Adopt Zoning Amendment
DATE OF PLANNING BOARD HEARING:	Scheduled July 13, 2022

I. PUBLIC NOTICE

A. Procedural Summary:

As required by the Watertown Zoning Ordinance § 9.22, notice was given as follows:

- Published in the newspaper of record (Boston Globe) on June 24 and July 1, 2022;
- Posted at the Administration Building on June 21, 2022; and,
- Mailed to parties of interest on June 21, 2022

B. Planning Board Public Notice:

*"Watertown Planning Board Public Hearing: **Wednesday, July 13, 2022 at 7:00 pm.** Council Chambers, Watertown Administration Building, 149 Main St., Watertown, MA with remote participation link on the Agenda 48 hours prior to the meeting.*

1. ***Sign special permit for Regional Mixed Use District. Section 7.07 to be amended to add a new category that allows a special permit to be granted in the Regional Mixed Use District for a wall-mounted or rooftop sign erected at an elevation exceeding one hundred (100') feet above the existing grade of the building, with certain limitations.***

II. DESCRIPTION

A. Nature of the Request

Boylston Properties, developer of Arsenal Yards, has proposed a zoning amendment to allow by Sign Master Plan special permit in the RMUD a wall-mounted or rooftop mounted sign at an

elevation exceeding 100 feet above the existing grade of the building. The proposed amendment includes limitations on the signage. The wording is set forth in Exhibit 1.

The applicant includes as an example, a rooftop sign on 100 Forge Street, a lab/office building now under construction. The proposed sign would be erected facing Greenough Boulevard, set back 10 feet from the roof edge. The height would be approximately 130 feet above existing grade. The sign would be 105 feet long with 10 foot letters. The overall square footage would be 1,050. Since the immediate request is for a favorable report to the City Council, the applicant would need to make an amendment to the existing approved sign master plan at a later date if the zoning amendment is enacted.

III. STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

While Applicant focuses specifically on a proposed Arsenal Yards sign, the issue is: should Watertown allow large-scale signage and, if so, under what circumstances? Arsenal Yards is not the only location in the RMUD that could qualify for a special permit under the proposed zoning amendment. If enacted, the zoning amendment could be used as precedent in arguing for zoning that allows large-scale signage elsewhere in Watertown. For the reasons set forth below, staff believes that large-scale signage can potentially benefit the city, the RMUD is distinctly appropriate for such branding and that the proposed zoning amendment is narrowly drawn and leaves sufficient discretion with the special permit granting authority.

Arsenal Yards makes the case that a prominent and highly visible sign is important for branding it as a regionally-important mixed use development. As it points out, the sign will be visible from the Mass Turnpike. Arsenal Yards argues that this branding benefits Watertown, contributing to the sense that it and the city are a destination. Staff agrees that promoting a place name can be advantageous for both a private development and a city. The “Schuylkill Yards” sign shown in the submission—like the proposed Arsenal Yards sign—is an example where large, illuminated lettering brands a major redevelopment and links it to a distinct geographic area (Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River). In addition, a sign may benefit a community just by helping to build an enterprise’s brand and thereby increase its property values.

The chief argument against large-scale illuminated signage is that it contributes to light pollution. This is a legitimate concern and provides a strong reason to limit such signage and to carefully assess both the proposed dimensions and the particular context. The other is visibility from the Charles River or Greenough Boulevard. The applicant has demonstrated that signage envisioned with this amendment would not be visible to any extent from either of these places.

The 2015 Comprehensive Plan and the 2016 RMUD zoning amendment saw the RMUD as a place for large-scale mixed-use developments, with the hope that it would become a regional destination. This vision makes the RMUD a zoning district where large-scale branding is distinctly appropriate. Under present zoning, there is no other district that aspires to draw a large number of consumers throughout the Greater Boston region. It would therefore be reasonable to limit large-scale signage to the RMUD.

The proposed amendment is narrowly drawn and provides sufficient discretion to the special permit granting authority. With one exception—discussed below—any proposed sign must meet

with the design requirements of Section 7.07. The proposed amendment prohibits “animated, flashing or other attention getting devices.” It limits sign locations (wall-mounted or rooftop signs more than 100 feet above existing grade, and setback 10 feet from the roof) and dimensions (length of sign, height of lettering). By requiring that the size be appropriate “considering the distance from which it is viewed,” the language gives the special permit granting authority the ability to assess the particular surroundings.

As Applicant points out, there are many examples, in Greater Boston and elsewhere, of large-scale signage. Some are larger than the proposed 11 feet maximum for height. Based on the existing zoning and development to date in the RMUD, this is a reasonable maximum.

The proposed amendment departs from the existing design requirements in one important way: it allows a sign facing Greenough Boulevard. Staff has previously noted concerns about signage directly facing the Charles River corridor. Signs lower on a building could impact the river’s buffer even with existing and proposed tree canopy associated with site development along Greenough Boulevard and the Charles River. Allowing large-scale signage facing Greenough Boulevard could affect this view, but this amendment has several restrictions to ensure that signage cannot be directed specifically toward the river corridor. Signs set high on a building and having a setback requirement for rooftop installation will ensure the signage is minimized at the ground level and minimize potential impacts along the river corridor.

Staff believes this amendment serves the city’s interest in promoting the RMUD as a regional destination and suggests that the Planning Board (which serves as the special permit granting authority in the RMUD) can assess the particulars of a site-specific sign master plan request, including the Arsenal Yards proposal or any others in the future.

Based on these facts and findings, Staff recommends that the Planning Board **favorably** report on the requested Zoning Amendment to amend Section 7.07 to add a new category as sub-paragraph (d) that allows a special permit to be granted in the Regional Mixed Use District for a wall-mounted or rooftop sign erected at an elevation exceeding one hundred (100’) feet above the existing grade of the building, with certain limitations.

Exhibit 1 – Sign Special Permit for RMUD Zoning Amendment

Amendment:

Amend Section 7.07 add as new subparagraph (d):

Notwithstanding any other provision of this Article VII, where the proposed Sign Master Plan includes a wall-mounted or rooftop sign erected at an elevation exceeding one hundred (100') feet above the existing grade of the building, the SPGA may approve the Plan, and the sign provided that the sign a) complies with the Design Requirements of Section 7.07 (c) (1) (A, B, C, D, & E); b) is illuminated but contains no animated, flashing, or other attention getting devices; c) is appropriate in size considering the distance from which it will be viewed; d) the overall length of the sign shall not exceed 67% of the facade length on which the sign is mounted; e) no individual letter or portion of the overall sign shall exceed eleven (11) feet in total height; and f) the placement of the sign on the roof shall be setback a minimum of ten feet (10'-0") from the roof edge of the sign.