

County of Loudoun
Department of Planning
MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 2, 2009

TO: Sophia Fisher, Project Manager
Land Use Review

FROM: Sarah Milin, Senior Planner
Community Planning

SUBJECT: ZMOD 2008-0017, Belmont Executive Center Sign Plan

BACKGROUND

Belmont Land L.P. and Toll Land XV L.P. have submitted a Zoning Ordinance Modification (ZMOD) to modify the applicable provisions of Section 5-1204 of the Revised 1993 Loudoun County Zoning Ordinance in order to develop a Comprehensive Sign Plan that proposes changes to the permitted number, location, size and height of signs within Belmont Executive Center. The development is part of the Belmont Country Club, a mixed-use community consisting of residential, retail and employment land uses that is located on the south side of Route 7, between Belmont Ridge Road (Route 659) and Ashburn Road (Route 641). A sign plan (ZMOD 2004-0002, Belmont Country Club Comprehensive Sign Plan) for the residential, PD-H4 (Planned Development – Housing) component of Belmont was approved on May 10, 2005. The proposed sign plan would regulate signage in the PD-CC-CC (Planned Development – Community Commercial Center) and PD-OP (Planned Development – Office Park) zoned portions of the property.

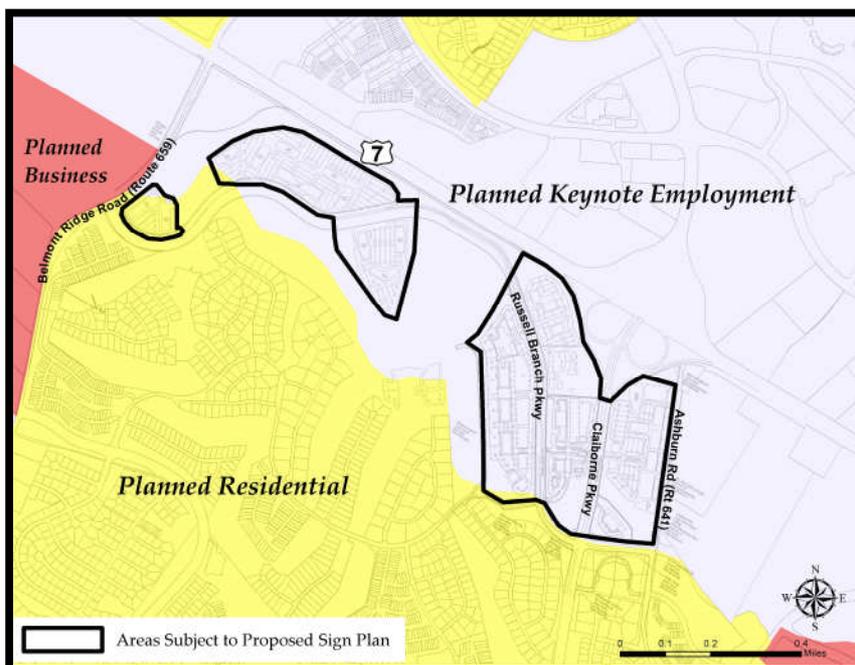
The proposed sign plan includes a variety of freestanding and building-mounted signs, including monument entrance signs, directional signs, façade signs, blade signs, and canopy signs that are designed to both identify the overall development and specific tenants and provide clear directional information. The submitted package includes sign location maps and detailed renderings depicting the proposed size, design, and materials of the signage. It also includes a matrix comparing the proposed signage with that permitted by the Zoning Ordinance. According to the sign plan's General Design Guidelines, a tenant shall have the proposed signage approved by the landlord prior to obtaining a sign permit from the County. The landlord shall provide a letter to the tenant indicating which signs types apply to their space and approve the site and style of the proposed signage.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The subject property is governed under the policies of the Revised General Plan. The policies of the Countywide Retail Plan Amendment (Retail Plan) also apply to the proposed retail signs. The site is located within the Ashburn Community of the Suburban Policy Area and is designated for both Keynote Employment and Residential uses (see Planned Land Use Map) (Revised General Plan, Chapter 7, Planned Land Use Map). Staff notes that the Statement of Justification erroneously states that the project area is identified in the Comprehensive Plan as appropriate for destination retail uses. No Destination Retail Overlay is present in this area of the County.

The proposed sign plan was reviewed using both the design guidelines provided in Chapter 6 of the Revised General Plan (Keynote Employment land uses) and the Retail Plan.

Although the sign plan includes signage for two buildings located within a planned Residential area (specifically two office buildings at the intersection of Belmont Ridge Road and Russell Branch Parkway), this area is located north of the planned alignment of Russell Branch Parkway within the portion of the development planned to be the Belmont Executive Center and therefore was evaluated for consistency with the Keynote Employment policies.



Planned Land Use Map

ANALYSIS

The Revised General Plan envisions that the County will sustain a high quality built environment (Revised General Plan, Chapter 5, Built Environment Policy 1). Within planned Keynote Employment areas, the Plan envisions that the large-scale buildings anticipated in such developments will be the prominent feature when viewed from periphery roads (Revised General Plan, Chapter 11, Light Industrial and Regional Office Design Guidelines, text). Signage in these areas should thus exhibit a high quality of design and materials that complement, but do not overwhelm, the buildings themselves. Guidance regarding the development of retail signs is contained in the Retail Plan, which states that retail signs should be developed as an integral part of the overall

center design and exhibit a unified graphic design scheme (*Retail Plan, Signs and Lighting Design Guideline 1*). The signage, in conjunction with the landscaping, site layout, and architectural design of the buildings, should all contribute to a high visual quality that defines Keynote Employment areas. Collectively, the location, quality, and clarity of signs help define the general perception of a business or commercial center and its surroundings.

The submitted sign plan includes detailed regulations for signage within Belmont Executive Center, including a hierarchy of freestanding and building-mounted signage that will serve various purposes in the development. The largest signs are entrance monument signs along Claiborne Parkway and Russell Branch Parkway that will identify the overall community, its commercial retail and office sections, and larger tenants. Site directional signs are proposed to assist pedestrian and vehicular traffic to navigate throughout the development. Lastly, a variety of building-mounted signage is included to identify specific buildings and tenants. Overall, the proposed signs appear to be consistent and compatible in design due to the use of high-quality materials and a complimentary architectural style. They will contribute to and enhance Belmont Executive Center's sense of place and aesthetics while at the same time creating an overall sense of hierarchy and coordination that will assist visitors, residents and employees to navigate throughout the development. In these regards, the submitted sign plan appears to be generally consistent with the Revised General Plan and Retail Plan.

However, the proposed sign plan significantly increases both the number and size of signs that will be permitted in the development in comparison to the regulations of the Revised 1993 Loudoun County Zoning Ordinance and appear to be substantially larger than similar signs found elsewhere in the County. The proposed plan also does not provide sufficient commitments that proposed signage will be consistent with existing signs for the residential sections of Belmont Country Club that have been already built per the approved Belmont Country Club Comprehensive Sign Plan (ZMOD 2004-0002). To fully conform to Plan policies, staff recommends that the proposed sign plan be revised to address the following comments.

1. Consistency with Approved Sign Plan

The residential portion of the Belmont Country Club development south of Belmont Executive Center has been developed with signage per an approved Comprehensive Sign Plan (ZMOD 2004-0002). No information has been provided demonstrating that the signage proposed for Belmont Executive Center will be consistent and complementary with these existing signs.

Given that Belmont Executive Center is part of a larger development that already has been developed with signage, it would be appropriate for the proposed sign plan to expand upon the previously approved sign plan and provide greater and more specific

commitments regarding signage design, materials, fonts, colors, etc. For example, the proposed General Design Guidelines (pg. 7) indicates that signs will primarily use one of five colors (off-white, black, light tan, dark tan, green) and four typologies. Other materials such as stone, pre-cast concrete and metal may be used as support structure or as sign elements. Specific regulations for freestanding signs specify that such signs will consist of the following materials: jaramite, natural stone, and metal. This flexibility is not appropriate in this case given that a specific sign design has already been established for freestanding signs within the residential portion of Belmont Country Club, as shown in the pictures below.



Staff recommends that the proposed sign plan commit to freestanding signage (specifically entrance monument and directional signs) that is compatible with similar signage that has already been constructed within the residential portion of Belmont Country Club. Revisions to the General Design Guidelines (pgs. 5 – 7) are recommended.

2. Size and Number of Freestanding Signs

The sign plan proposes a large number of ground-mounted entrance monument and directional signs, including the following:

- 6 primary entrance signs (A₁ and M₁₋₀) that, including the background structure, are approximately 27 feet wide by 5 feet tall;
- 1 vehicular entrance sign (M₁₋₁) that is approximately 36 feet wide by 7 feet high;
- 2 primary retail signs (M₂) that are approximately 20 feet wide by 21 ½ feet tall;
- 1 secondary retail signs (M₃) that is approximately 22 feet wide by 8 ½ feet tall;
- 15 secondary entrance signs (A₂) that are approximately 5 ½ feet wide by 4 ½ feet tall;
- 8 primary directional signs (A₃ and M₄) that are approximately 5 ½ feet wide by 4 ½ feet tall;
- 6 secondary directional signs (A₄) that are approximately 4 feet wide by 4 ½ feet tall; and,

- 4 church signs (F₁ and F₂) that are approximately 5 ½ feet wide by 4 ½ feet tall and 2 feet wide by 6 feet tall, respectively.

The Applicant proposes a total of 43 development entrance and directional signs, significantly more than Zoning Ordinance regulations which allow two development entrance signs per vehicular entrance for the PD-OP zoning district and one commercial entrance sign (no more than three total) per vehicular entrance for the PD-CC zoning district. An excessive number and size of signs may be distracting and confusing to drivers instead of facilitating the movement of traffic and providing clear directional information. It can also lead to visual clutter, inconsistent with the Plan's overall vision for Keynote Employment areas. Staff is particularly concerned with three of the primary entrance signs (A₁) as they are not located at vehicular entrance points and are internal to the development, specifically the one that is located at the northern edge of the site adjacent to Route 7, the one northeast of the hotel, and the one on the opposite side of Russell Branch. Staff is also concerned with the number of directional signs (A₃, A₄, and M₄) that are proposed, the majority of which do not seem to be needed given that they are not located where a change of direction occurs and that the layout of the proposed development ensures that the majority of the tenants will be easily visible from both Claiborne Parkway and Russell Branch Parkway. A large number of freestanding signs internal to the development are not generally needed when the building-mounted façade, blade, awning, and canopy signs identify these establishments for people already within the area.

Staff is also concerned regarding the size and scale of some of the proposed signage, in particular the primary entrance signs (A₁ and M₁₋₀), vehicular entrance sign (M₁₋₁), the primary retail signs (M₂), and the secondary retail signs (M₃). These signs appear to be excessively large and are not consistent with the existing entrance monument signs for the residential sections of Belmont Country Club or the other signs proposed in this sign plan. Due to their size and design, they will function as separate architectural features rather than supportive elements identifying the development. They may also block views of the buildings and amenities within the development.

Staff recommends that the Applicant reevaluate and significantly reduce both the number and size of freestanding signs that are proposed in the sign plan. Overall, the proposed signs should create a sense of hierarchy, with the largest signs at the periphery of the development, scaling down to smaller signs at internal vehicular entrances. They should be limited to the minimum number necessary (for example, one per vehicular entrance), serve a clear need at that location, and not be distracting to drivers. All signs should also be designed to be human-scale and consistent with other freestanding signs in the development, including those that currently exist within the residential sections of Belmont Country Club.

3. Building-Mounted Signs

The proposed sign plan establishes a hierarchy of building-mounted signs for the retail and office buildings within Belmont Executive Center whose size is based on the length of frontage of the building. They are intended to identify specific buildings and tenants or the services and goods they will provide. Like the freestanding signs, staff has some concerns with the proposed number, size and design of building-mounted signage, particularly the retail signs.

A. Office Signs

The proposed guidelines for office signs (B₁₋₀) would allow two signs per façade placed at the top floor of the building, no more than three per building, with a total aggregate sign area of 0.5 square feet per linear foot of building frontage. The signs are to be backlit with a color per the tenant signage program. In general, the proposed building-mounted office signs are reasonable and consistent in terms of size, location, and design with the signage typically associated with 4 and 5-story office buildings located in the County. However, it is not clear whether the office signs depicted in the proposed sign plan accurately reflect the maximum size of signs that would be allowed. According to staff's calculations, the two signs shown on pg. 22 have a total aggregate sign area of 90 square feet, less than the 125 square feet that would be permitted for a 250-foot wide building. It also does not depict the situation where only one sign (at 0.5 square feet per linear foot of building frontage) could be constructed. Staff also notes that the sign plan, under "Additional Regulations", states that the name and message of the signs on each façade must be the same. It is not clear whether the same design and colors would also be used. A single color and design scheme for each office building would be consistent with the simpler type of signage anticipated for Keynote Employment areas. However, staff questions the need for two identical signs on the same façade of the planned office buildings.

Staff requests confirmation that the illustrations depicting the proposed building-mounted office signage accurately show the maximum size of signs that would be permitted per the proposed regulations. An illustration depicting the alternative situation (i.e., one large sign at 0.5 square feet per linear foot of building frontage) should be provided. Staff also recommends that the Applicant commit to a consistent color and design for signs that are located on the same façade.

B. Retail Signs

The submitted Comprehensive Sign Plan identifies as many as six different types of retail signs (band, window, plaque, awning, fringe and blade) which could be used in any combination for the proposed retail/commercial tenant spaces. The guidelines

specify different regulations for signage with and without awnings and includes both front and rear façade signs. Alternative guidelines are provided for specific tenant types, including hotel, child care center, pad site restaurant, and service station uses. The color and design of all building-mounted retail signage is based on the tenant's specific signage program and subject to change with complete branding.

Although the illustratives show signs that are appropriately sized and complement the high-quality character of the proposed retail buildings, it is not clear whether these drawings accurately depict the size and number of signs that would be permitted. For example, the proposed sign plan would allow inline retail tenants (S1-1) allows five signs per public entrance; the illustrative, in contrast, depicts only one sign. Furthermore, the proposed sign plan does not commit to the types of signs that would be permitted. The number and possible combinations of proposed signs for each tenant space creates the potential for visual clutter and may detract from the overall quality of the retail/commercial center. Staff recognizes the Applicant's attempt to retain some design flexibility by providing a variety of options for sign locations and types, but without a commitment to such details it is impossible to determine if the proposed Comprehensive Sign Plan will provide a unified graphic design for the entire retail/commercial center as outlined in the Retail Plan. Using the pad site retail tenant signs (O₁₋₀) as an example, an appropriate commitment could be that two band signs will be permitted for the primary façade, one band sign for the secondary façade, and then the tenant could choose any other combination of signs for a total of 18.

Lastly, the size and number of signs, in several instances, appear to be greater than needed and may overwhelm the buildings themselves. For instance, the proposed sign plan would allow primary inline retail tenants to display up to 20 signs on their front facade, far more than the one sign per façade, no more than three signs, than the Zoning Ordinance would otherwise allow. Similarly, restaurant pad sites would be allowed up to six signs per primary façade. Providing a similar comparison for the size of proposed signage is difficult given that the proposed sign plan does not establish maximum sizes for signs.

Staff requests clarification on the potential combination of signs being requested in order to assess the sign plan in relation to the guidelines found in the Revised General Plan and the Retail Plan for unified graphic design. Overall, the Applicant should reexamine the overall size and number of the building-mounted signage for the various retail tenants and confirm that the signage depicted in the proposed sign plan accurately illustrates what would be permitted should it be approved.

4. Temporary Signs

The general design guidelines refer to both permanent and temporary signs. However, the sign plan does not include any regulations for temporary signs.

Information should be provided regarding whether the Applicant seeks to modify the Zoning Ordinance regulations governing temporary signage.

5. Lighting & Landscaping Commitments

The Plan promotes the use of lighting for convenience and public safety without the nuisance associated with light pollution (Revised General Plan, Chapter 5, *Light and Night Sky Policies, Policy 1*). The Retail Plan also specifies that all lighting should be designed to reduce glare and spillage of light onto adjoining properties and streets and that fixtures should be attractive site elements that are compatible with the architecture of the retail center (*Retail Plan, Design Guidelines, Signs and Lighting, Policy 2*). Plan policies also encourage landscaping along streets and the incorporation of indigenous vegetation into the landscape (Revised General Plan, Chapter 5, *Plant and Wildlife Habitat Policy 7*).

The proposed comprehensive sign plan includes sections within the General Design Guidelines regarding landscaping (pg. 4) and lighting (pg. 5). Plant material focuses on trees, shrubbery, sod and flowers for year-round color and texture and will consist primarily of native plant species. The sign face will be kept free of landscape overgrowth for visibility and safety purposes. Lighting for freestanding signs may be by external illumination, including ground-mounted up lights and sign-mounted down lights. It shall be directional to illuminate the surface of the sign only and shall not spill upward or reflect or cast glare onto adjacent properties or roadways. The letters on all building signs shall be internally illuminated channel letters with metal sides, and trip cap and color acrylic faces. Certain lighting types, including flashing, rotating, moving, blinking or animated type, are not permitted.

Staff recommends a condition of approval that individual signs and associated landscaping materials will be maintained in good condition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The general concept of the proposed sign plan appears to be consistent with the guidelines found in the Revised General Plan and the Retail Plan for unified graphic design. However, staff recommends that the Applicant reexamine and reduce the overall number and size of both freestanding and building-mounted signs. The proposed sign plan should also provide commitments that the proposed signage will be consistent with existing signs for the residential sections of Belmont Country Club that have been already built per the approved Belmont Country Club Comprehensive Sign Plan (ZMOD 2004-0002). As always, staff is happy to meet with the Applicant regarding the application.

cc: Julie Pastor, AICP, Planning Director
Cindy Keegan, AICP, Community Planning Program Manager – via e-mail