

The Wedge Times - Picayune

The Print Edition of [@WedgeLIVE](#).

[YouTube](#)

[2017 Candidate Survey](#)

[MSP Votes!](#)

[Newspaper Archive](#)

[Contact](#)

[Support Us](#)

[Store](#)

Monday, December 11, 2017

Lame Duck City Council Faction Pushes Billboard Deregulation Ahead of Super Bowl



Back in September, the City Planning Commission (CPC) unanimously rejected (6-0) the idea of more and larger billboards in downtown Minneapolis.

"I still fail to see the public benefit of adding billboards in the downtown" said Commissioner Alissa Luepke Pier.

Commissioner Matt Brown expressed concerns about billboard blight in a part of downtown that's rapidly changing for the better: "If we're adding a lot of really large, kind of permanently mounted billboards, that can almost be a barrier to new development in an area where all of our policies suggest we'd like to see it."

A man from an outdoor sign company called Blue Ox Media Group, Tom McCarver, testified in support of a more "robust" (meaning permissive) version of the amendment, saying it was "supported by people in the area and council member." The council member in the area is Jacob Frey in Ward 3, though it's possible McCarver was speaking of Abdi Warsame in adjacent Ward 6.

McCarver continued, "During committee of the whole we were looking at an ordinance that was a little more robust than this, talking about Washington Ave and parts of Hennepin. So we would encourage that discussion to continue and moving forward to Z&P as well." Just as McCarver desired, despite a lack of political support at every step,

Tweets by [@WedgeLI!](#)

Wedge LIVE!
Retweeted

 **Michael Peterson**
[@Adderley_J](#)

Replying to [@dbrauer](#)

Probably because billboard companies are persecuted at a rate second only to white Christians in America.

10h

Wedge LIVE!
Retweeted

 **David Brauer**
[@dbrauer](#)

I'm still stuck on why anyone would work pro bono for a billboard company.

11h

 **Wedge LIVE!**
[@WedgeLIVE](#)

Replying to [@WedgeLIVE](#)

Messages to the

[Embed](#)

[View on Twitter](#)

Receive Posts by Email

Blog Archive

▼ [2017](#) (46)

▼ [December](#) (2)

[My response to Rebecca Gagnon's campaign statement...](#)

billboard deregulation would continue to get more robust.

On October 26, the City Council's Zoning and Planning Committee was split 3-3 on whether to approve the billboard district expansion (the same version rejected by CPC in September). Barb Johnson, Abdi Warsame, and Kevin Reich voted to approve; Lisa Bender, Andrew Johnson, and Lisa Goodman voted against. The committee then voted to send the zoning code change back to staff for modifications that might make it more palatable. This meant it would return to the CPC.

Last Monday, the concept of allowing more and larger billboards was back in front of the planning commission -- only this time, the idea that was previously unacceptable to both CPC and the Z&P Committee had become even more expansive. The proposal now included allowing wall signs along stretches of Hennepin and Washington Avenues; and an expanded billboard district would go as far west as Portland Avenue, intruding into Commons park outside the new Vikings stadium.

If you want to read the details, you should be warned that **the staff report** has a number of errors. References to "painted wall signs" are actually meant to refer to "wall signs" of all types. Additionally, the map included in the report does not reflect the full scope of the proposed changes.

This lack of clarity in the staff report was the reason Commissioner Sam Rockwell said he was "profoundly uncomfortable voting for something where I don't know what it's supposed to be." Rockwell's motion to postpone the issue passed on a 5-2 vote. The billboard zoning change is now scheduled to be taken up again at the next CPC meeting on January 8.



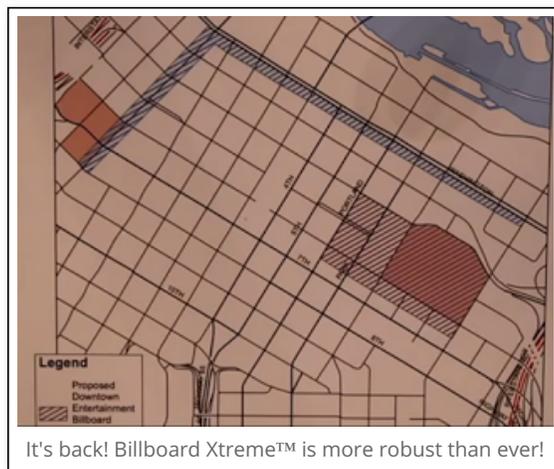
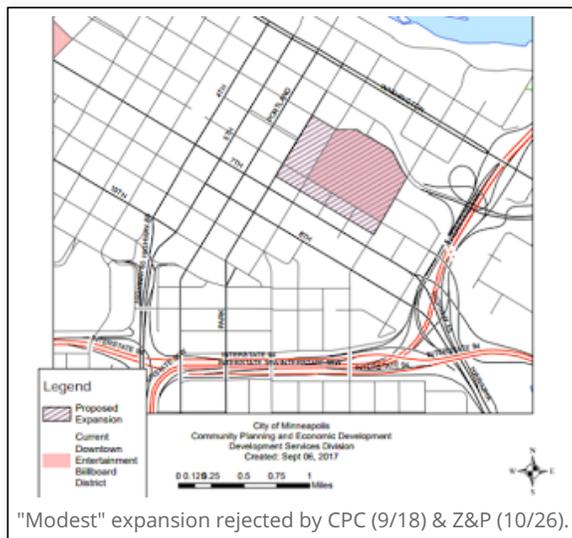
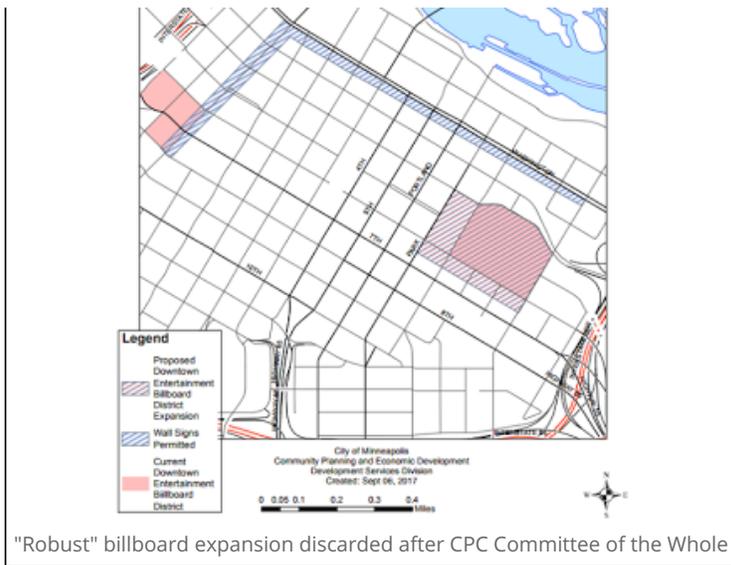
Lame Duck City Council Faction Pushes Billboard De...

- ▶ November (10)
- ▶ October (4)
- ▶ September (5)
- ▶ August (2)
- ▶ July (4)
- ▶ June (5)
- ▶ May (1)
- ▶ April (2)
- ▶ March (7)
- ▶ February (3)
- ▶ January (1)

- ▶ 2016 (39)
- ▶ 2015 (45)
- ▶ 2014 (26)

A vertical sidebar on the right side of the page. At the top is a black tag with a white circle and the text "-40%". Below it is a small blue play button icon. The rest of the sidebar consists of several empty rectangular boxes of varying heights, stacked vertically.





Commissioner's daughter is lobbyist for billboard company

Commissioner Rebecca Gagnon, who is also a member of the Minneapolis school board and **candidate for the Minnesota House of Representatives**, was not happy to see the process delayed. Gagnon urged action: "This has just come to us so much, I feel like we should be able to make a decision on this." (The commission had made a decision - a unanimous decision -- to reject the zoning change in September.

Gagnon was absent.)

Gagnon continued:

And there's also urgency around, I know it's not our business, but there is some Super Bowl thing coming here, and I think there was some decisions that people wanted made so work could be done, which was one of the reasons. Right now there's a monopoly on this industry. You may or may not like that. I don't like that. I think it also just... there's no sense and one of the big reasons is because people just want to get some work done. *[emphasis mine]*

The company that wants to break up what Gagnon refers to as an outdoor signage "monopoly" (in the form of Clear Channel), is called Blue Ox Media Group.

It's curious that Gagnon would be so outspoken on the obscure issue of billboard regulation. As a frequent viewer, I can tell you it's unusual for Gagnon to be outspoken on any issue during CPC meetings. (It was so unusual that it prompted me to look into this story.)



During the meeting, Gagnon continued to pour on the urgency: "Is there a way since we're already here at 7:38. We're now getting paid \$17 an hour. Is there just a way we can just move this forward, please?"

Gagnon is right that she's only paid a very small amount per meeting. But it's important to note that Rebecca Gagnon's daughter, Samantha Gagnon, gets paid **as a registered lobbyist for Blue Ox Media Group**. Blue Ox Media is interested in easing restrictions on billboards in downtown Minneapolis. When Rebecca Gagnon talks about how she doesn't like our current billboard "monopoly" downtown, she's talking about helping one company in particular: Blue Ox Media Group.



Blue Ox Media Group															
Association information	Financial disclosure	Lobbyist reports	Subjects of												
Blue Ox Media Group Reg Num: 7352 7221 North Shore Trl Forest Lake, MN 55025 Contact: Tom McCarver Principal Phone: (312) 515-1906 Website: No website		<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Lobbyist</th> <th>Registration</th> <th>Te</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Cherryhomes, Jackie</td> <td>11/22/2017</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Gagnon, Samantha</td> <td>8/23/2017</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hylden, Nancy</td> <td>8/23/2017</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Lobbyist	Registration	Te	Cherryhomes, Jackie	11/22/2017		Gagnon, Samantha	8/23/2017		Hylden, Nancy	8/23/2017		
Lobbyist	Registration	Te													
Cherryhomes, Jackie	11/22/2017														
Gagnon, Samantha	8/23/2017														
Hylden, Nancy	8/23/2017														

(In 2014, [the Star Tribune reported that school board member Rebecca Gagnon had taken the unusual step of hiring her college sophomore daughter Samantha as her campaign manager](#). Gagnon was the only school board candidate to pay a campaign manager.)

Shades of the failed plastic bag ordinance

Samantha Gagnon works for the lobbying firm of Nancy Hylden. When an issue in front of the city council has some inexplicable political force behind it, just dig a little, and you might find the Hylden firm on the winning side.

An example: [the recent city council decision to abandon a five cent fee for single-use shopping bags](#). The ordinance was defeated even though the same council had passed an outright plastic bag ban a year earlier, which had included the same five cent fee for paper bags.

The author of the bag ordinance, Council Member Cam Gordon, was taken by surprise when so many of his colleagues changed their position to vote against his ordinance. And the only explanation offered for that change of heart -- they didn't like the five cent fee -- didn't make sense. As Gordon [wrote at the time](#), "Under both proposals the bags you could get in a store would have cost five cents. Any argument that can be made against a fee applies to both ordinances equally."

The winner was the plastic bag lobby, [represented by Hylden Advocacy](#).

In the interests of fully disclosing family-lobbyist connections among powerful people in Minneapolis, I should mention that current Council Member and Mayor-elect [Jacob Frey is married to Sarah Clarke, a lobbyist at Hylden Advocacy](#). Clarke has lobbied against material bans in metro area cities on behalf of Holiday gas stations, though [she reports that she does not lobby the city of Minneapolis on the subject](#). UPDATE: I should also mention that Nancy Hylden is married to Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin.

Urgency ahead of new city council and the Super Bowl

At the planning commission last Monday, city staff person Steve Poor was blunt in explaining why it was so urgent that the commission take action on the billboard zoning change:

I prefer not to get into this level of explanation of the mechanics of the city. But if the ordinance is not acted on, and is postponed, it will likely have to be adopted by a new council member moving in, or Warsame picks it up. So there's a procedural thing here that's going on, not to mention that we don't have committee assignments. That is presumptuous to think that it will be on an automatic timetable going forward. I think I've spoken to the intent and will of this council before, but I don't think you can make assumptions about if it doesn't come out of here that it will just proceed on January 8. I don't think that's a realistic expectation to be blunt about it. [emphasis mine]

Commissioner Rebecca Gagnon echoed this, saying, "We're going to have a lot of turnover on January 1."

This is an important point. With five new members of the city council elected last month, a new council president on the way, and new committee assignments coming, there's a good chance that a zoning change to allow more and larger billboards wouldn't even make it out of committee.

At the October 26 city council committee meeting, Abdi Warsame (initiator of the zoning change) and Barb Johnson very strongly urged their colleagues to pass the billboard zoning change out of committee. Both explicitly noted the financial boon to outdoor sign companies during the upcoming Super Bowl.

- Barb Johnson: "This modest expansion would allow for some revenue to come to the vendor in light of the Super Bowl coming."
- Abdi Warsame: "If we push this back there's no guarantee that either party [Clear Channel and Blue Ox Media] will get any updated billboards for the Super Bowl, which is the intention that they had in the first place."

Barb Johnson, Abdi Warsame push for more billbo...



On December 4, city staff person Steve Poor highlighted the Super Bowl as a motivating factor for certain members of the city council:

To be frank about it, this came back in short order because staff was told that this council wanted to act on it. [...] There was a lot of intense discussion back and forth about that, but

I think it's fair to say the council felt they wanted to have a vote on this, whether it's because of the large circus coming to town soon, or the super bowl, or what have you. I would just tell you that one of the reasons staff worked with some diligence to get this before you is because the policymakers directed us to do so. *[emphasis mine]*

Why Does Minneapolis Need More Billboards?

With all the talk about Super Bowl 52 and the financial well-being of Blue Ox Media and Clear Channel, I couldn't find anyone making the case for why *Minneapolis* needs larger billboards in more places. A change like this, and any additional billboards it creates, would be with us long after the Super Bowl leaves town.

And why does this idea, that seems not very popular, keep coming back in forms that are less appealing, but more pro-industry? Maybe a friend of the billboard industry thinks they've rustled up enough votes to pass it -- if only they can get it in front of the full council we currently have, but probably not the council we'll have next month.

*I watched hours and hours and hours of public meetings to bring you this story. **Please support that work by becoming a Wedge LIVE patron!***

Posted by John Edwards at [6:57 AM](#)



[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)