

## **The Downtown Atlanta Arts and Entertainment District** **Sign Plan**

### **Purpose of the Arts and Entertainment District**

The Downtown Atlanta Arts and Entertainment District is a part of an overall economic development program that is expressed in the interaction between the streets, sidewalks and public spaces and the unique character of the buildings in the District and their more specialized uses. There are examples in other cities. Denver has created the Denver Theater District and Los Angeles has created the Los Angeles Sports and Entertainment District. Both of these initiatives were spearheaded by their municipal governments and used permissive signage plans mixed with art installations as a way to create and define their districts. The Los Angeles Sports and Entertainment District included detailed zoning and land use guidance which the City has implemented in part through the creation of the Downtown Special Public Interest District. The introduction of this new signage concept in the Downtown Atlanta Arts and Entertainment District will build on the work begun by the creation of the Downtown Special Public Interest District and will be managed by the Downtown Atlanta Community Improvement District ("DACID") with the input of other Downtown stakeholders who will assist with both signage and art.

### **What is the "Sign Plan" for the Arts and Entertainment District?**

The Downtown Atlanta Arts and Entertainment District Sign Plan (the "Sign Plan") does not reference a plan to be followed but rather describes a concept which guides the management role of DACID. In addition to intent and purpose set forth in the text of the Ordinance, the purpose of this document is to provide general information about the way in which signage within the Downtown Atlanta Arts and Entertainment District (the "District") will be managed.<sup>1</sup> By supplementing the types and amount of signage allowed by right and entrusting a partner like DACID with the greater flexibility allowed by a managed program, the execution of the Sign Plan concept will:

- (1) Facilitate the creation and recognition of a unique Downtown Arts and Entertainment District that will highlight Atlanta's cultural attractions and that will support Atlanta through tourism, economic development and City based branding;
- (2) Provide a higher standard of visual interest through quality sign design and artistic context by giving flexibility in the size, type and location of signs within the District in recognition of the economic development purpose that is best met by a managed process; and
- (3) Generate light and activity Downtown, while using a managed process to mitigate possible adverse impacts of large format sign installations on surrounding locations and structures.

### **District Sign Plan Background**

The visual focus of the "arts and entertainment" concept is to create an identity for the District as a unique urban location and encourage pedestrian movement between the Downtown MARTA stations, Atlanta Streetcar stops and the hotels clustered around Peachtree Street and the great public spaces of the Georgia World Congress Center, Centennial Olympic Park, Philips Arena, Pemberton Place and other established Downtown locations which are easily accessible by a short walk.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sign Plan is a descriptive document that is intended to serve as a general guideline and provide information. The application of the actual regulations

Permissive signage overlay regulations managed through a cooperation agreement with DACID which still gives the City control over traffic hazards and structural safety expresses a public policy of the City towards the development of the intersection between public and private spaces in a way that traditional signage ordinances could never accomplish. Where text is traditionally used as the basic regulatory tool, the result is often the limitation of expression and creativity. If visual guidelines are provided to allow a more expansive and creative approach to the urban streetscape and are managed for the public good by a partner like DACID, a more cohesive and unified design, even one consisting of individually created parts, is more likely to result. Because the Sign Plan *supplements* the existing regulations, the individual business operator and property owner will still have the opportunity to display their individual messages and will lose none of their present entitlements.

## **Signage Types**

The Sign Plan contains descriptions of signs and displays (i) contribute visually to the creation of an “arts and entertainment” context for the Downtown locations; (ii) promote tourism, economic development and City based branding and (iii) and support cultural initiatives within the District.

The Sign Plan was created with two primary guiding principles: (i) a mixture of commercial signage and the display of art installations is visually appealing and serves the public interest; and (ii) if additional commercial signage is to be permitted in the District it must adhere to a higher standard of quality than would be expected in typical commercial signage.

### **1. Non Standard Signage**

Typical billboard advertising has become standardized to allow interchangeability both by size (300 sf, 672 sf or 1200 sf) and format. Billboards are horizontal, typically with a ratio of one foot of height for each three and a half feet of length.

As a guiding principle, commercial signs in the District should be non-standard in size and dimensions. Both the commercial and artistic signage in the District should take their orientation from the façade of the structure they are attached to, convey the individual creative design of the graphic and copy they display, and complete the assemblage of the other signs they are displayed with. The signage may often be square or vertical portraits, rather than the standardized proportions in the landscape orientation of standard outdoor signs.

### **2. Concentrated, Assembled and Mixed**

Typical urban signage regulation includes forced separation between signs either directly, by specific spacing requirements, or indirectly, by careful budgeting of the number and size of permitted signs.

In the District, signs will purposely and aggressively assembled, concentrated and focused at intersections and pedestrian gathering points, and contain a mixture of commercial and artistic signage. Without this focus and resulting critical mass of commercial and artistic signage at intersections and along pedestrian gathering points in the District, the urban excitement will be more difficult to achieve

### **3. Oriented to the Street**

While individual signs and assemblages of signs in the District can be quite tall because of the scale of the buildings, their basic orientation must be to the street. With a few careful exceptions, each sign or assemblage of signs will be oriented from the bottom up, rather than the top down. Further, this focus will be supplemented by street level kiosks that mix commercial applications with artistic content and promotions in an interactive platform.

## Strategies for District Success

Five strategies are proposed in the Sign Plan to assure the District's objectives are achieved:

**Strategy One:** *Recognize and use the unique Downtown street locations as a focus on art and entertainment in each zone complimenting the new media platforms.* Downtown Atlanta has unique conditions and the complexity of relationships between streets, sidewalks and public spaces and the unique character of the buildings in the District highlight the need for strong coordination by the District and its Downtown stakeholders. The overall focus on attaining critical mass at intersections and providing interesting activity, especially along Peachtree Street, must be anticipated during implementation of the Sign Plan. Pedestrian and vehicular gathering points lend themselves to strong signage assemblages and LED sites that can be programmed for art and entertainment activities on a consistent basis.

**Strategy Two:** *The responsibility for implementation of the District Sign Plan should be carefully managed.* Because DACID is managing what is a *supplemental* allocation of signage, it can enter into contracts for the display of signage as a part of an economic development program designed to highlight Atlanta's cultural attractions and that will support Atlanta through tourism, economic development and City based branding.

Management of the Sign Plan by DACID allows (i) creation of an appropriate mix of commercial signage and art centered displays in a way that will contribute visually to the creation of a "arts and entertainment" context for the Downtown locations outlined in the Plan; (ii) a choice of location and sites that will concentrate signs in a manner that furthers the quality and character of the District; (iii) the location of commercial signage and art centered displays so that they are oriented to the street; and (iv) the balancing of the opportunities provided by the Sign Plan with quality of life issues for business owners and residences.

**Strategy Three:** *Use the District to further economic development through the acquisition of large-scale national and international events.* These large events typically have sponsorship deals with the organization holding the event and have typically paid large premiums for their association. Under a managed sign package, event organizers and sponsors will have access to the most significant signage near the major Downtown venues. Large and prestigious events are especially vulnerable to "ambush marketing" which is a way for those that do not have the right to participate as sponsors or associated advertisers to use the event to market their products which tend to favor the short term rental of signage close to the venue. The use of a managed sign program by an entity like DACID that can maximize the availability of significant signage will mitigate the effect of those signs which cannot be controlled and will contribute to the attractiveness of Atlanta as a venue for these large events.

The managed area of supplemental signage will be focused on supporting activity at (i) the Georgia World Congress Center; (ii) the Mercedes Benz Stadium; and (iii) Phillips Arena. Managed signage which is contractually committed will support the siting of large events in Downtown Atlanta by providing a unified look and feel through the management of the significant signs that will be allowed. DACID's control of the supplemental signage through contracts with property owners and media providers will enhance ability of Atlanta to offer events an area around their event to have a unified look and feel that will be advantageous in the highly competitive arena of event and convention acquisition.

**Strategy Four:** *Recognize and encourage the contribution that existing signage can make to the image of the District.* The Sign Ordinance provides certain signage allowances in the District as a matter of right and some signage in the District is legally nonconforming. The City must continue to regulate those signs which are allowed by right or which have a vested right to continued operation in a manner that will recognize those rights. However, property owners and businesses within the District could choose to become a part of the District process managed by DACID in order to contribute to and reinforce the exciting arts and entertainment image that is the objective of the District's supplemental regulations.

**Strategy Five:** *Manage the general types of sign forms to create of an appropriate mix of sign forms in a way that will contribute visually to the creation of an “arts and entertainment” context.* Examples of these sign forms include: *Public Art:* This sign type includes commissioned or reproduced site-specific artwork with no commercial message but which may reference the local artist and commissioning institution. Local artists will be encouraged to submit work to DACID for evaluation, and partnerships will be created with art and cultural institutions throughout Atlanta for works and recommendations; *Public Information:* This sign type may feature area events, non-profits, or arts organizations; relevant information such as area history; guides to local attractions; and public information such as weather, time, and temperature. A focus will be mixing functional facts (time and temperature) with fun facts or trivia about Atlanta and its residents. *Sponsored Content, non-commercial in nature:* This sign type could include abstract imagery, graphics or text that features a product, but may not be readily or primarily associated with a particular brand. *Primary Commercial:* This sign type would include all other forms of sponsored sign types generally thought of as general advertising signage. Includes large logos, slogans or tag-lines.

### **General Criteria for District Signage**

- i. The aesthetic and architectural compatibility of the proposed sign to the building upon which the sign is to be displayed or suspended;
- ii. The use of the building mass and orientation in the placement of the sign so as to define and place strong visual emphasis on the street and other important public open spaces;
- iii. Whether the sign will enliven building facades and avoid extensive blank walls that would detract from the visual interest and appearance of an active streetscape and unify a building's appearance so as to add to a street facade's interest, scale and three-dimensional quality;
- iv. Whether the signage will direct attention to street level architecture and building uses in a manner that adds richness and variety to the pedestrian experience of the District;
- v. Whether the signage will assist buildings to display a clear pattern of openings and create shadow lines that enhance the street wall;
- vi. Standard outdoor advertising billboard proportions of 14'x48' should be rejected unless used as one component of a multiple sign array of varying proportions;
- vii. Where signage is at street level, it should present dynamic, state-of-the-art facades with expressive lighting, audio-visual effects, and dimensional signage;
- viii. Signs should appear as an integral part of the building design so as not to appear as an afterthought application;
- ix. Whether the sign uses means of illumination such as neon tubes; fiber optics, incandescent lamps, LEDs, cathode ray tubes, shielded spotlights and wall wash fixtures so as to provide visual interest during nighttime hours is appropriate for the placement of the sign when considering the safety of vehicular traffic and the residential uses that will be affected;
- x. The relationship of the scale and placement of the sign to the building or premises upon which it is to be displayed.

## Service Agreements

DACID will manage the Sign Plan and in order to accomplish the goals set forth in the five strategies, will use a Services Agreement between a business or property owner seeking to use the supplemental entitlements made available by the Ordinance. DACID will be providing not only management of the applications for the supplemental signage but will be able to market the entire District signage package for a unified look and feel associated with large events to be held at venues within the District.

## The District Boundaries

