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New sign code downtown

Business says economic conditions a hardship

By Denise L. Scott

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About 25 percent of businesses in the downtown Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Area will be affected by new sign codes that go into effect today.

However, code enforcement won't ring in the New Year by banging down their doors.

Frank Cassidy, the city's code compliance division manager, said they will begin the process with an educational campaign.

"We'll let them know why they're out of compliance and what they need to do," he said, referring to those businesses that have signs mounted on freestanding poles or flat-faced plastic signs.

"We're working with the CRA to establish a full-time code enforcement officer for that area. He will be a liaison between the CRA and the community."

Ed Tisdale, owner of Family Hardware Do-it Express on 47th Terrace, is hopeful the liaison will be more responsive than City Council. He sent an e-mail and a letter asking council to consider delaying the new sign codes until business picks up again. He got no response.

"My problem is the timing of changing out perfectly good signs. City Council passed it before the downturn in the economy," he said. "Cash flow is at a premium. I can buy a sign I don't need or upgrade my computer system, which I desperately need."

Councilman Eric Grill said he will talk to other downtown business owners when he returns from hiatus to find out if there is widespread concern. If so, he will consider putting it on the agenda for discussion at the Monday, Jan. 14, meeting. But he doesn't remember hearing from anyone but Tisdale.

"How do you address it? Selective enforcement or suspend it until things turn around? We don't know how long it will be until things turn around.

"We can't stop everything we want to institute because there's a downturn. It's the time to fix things because we don't have the pressure of growth."

Cassidy said after a business owner is notified of a sign violation, the amount of time given to meet the new code will depend on the extent of work required.

"Several factors weigh in," he said. "Demolition, removal or a permit can take up to 30 days. It will be case by case. We'll work with them to find a way to get into compliance as quickly as possible."

He said if a business owner refuses to comply, the last resort is a fine of up to \$1,000 per day.



[Stephen Hayford/news-press.com](#)

Ed Tisdale, owner of Family Hardware Do It Express, wrote a letter to the city of Cape Coral to urge reconsideration of a Community Redevelopment Agency mandate on acceptable business signs. Local businesses are required to change to ground-mounted or individual letter signs by Jan. 15. Internally lit signs, such as Tisdale's, are not approved. Tisdale argues that the timing of this deadline, in a sharp economic downturn, will hurt many local businesses.

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NEW SIGN CODES

NEWLY PROHIBITED:

- Free-standing pole signs
- Plastic fascia signs

LIGHTING:

- All lighted signs shall be externally lit, except for individual letters and symbols, which may be internally lit or backlit.

PERMITTED MATERIALS:

- Painted, stained or natural wood
- Metal
- Plastic, when used for individual letters and symbols only
- Painted canvas (not glossy-finish or back-lit)
- Non-flashing neon
- Painted/engraved directly on facade surface

— Source: The City of Cape Coral Land Use and Development Regulations on Signage

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"We're going to try to avoid that," Cassidy said.

One element of code enforcement's education process is telling business owners about a facade grant available through the Community Redevelopment Agency.

CRA interim executive director Richard Orth said the agency offers a matching grant of 50 percent, up to \$5,000, to help offset the cost of a new sign and other exterior improvements.

"It helps to relieve the financial pain of having to make these modifications," he said. "Pole sign is one that will have a large impact. They'll have to change it to a monument."

Orth said staff members of the CRA and the city's Department of Community Development wrote the new codes a few years ago. They were finalized and approved in April.

"They were trying to conform to a more village-style, uniform signage that followed a theme," Orth said. "Community redevelopment is all about improving the downtown economy and facade."

After the new codes were approved, Orth said, the CRA worked with city officials to notify businesses applying for a permit of the pending changes.

"I think the facade grant really helps," he said, noting that the reaction of business owners to the new codes has been mixed. "A good majority of them understand and support the change."

Beverly O'Connor has owned Off the Top Barber Shop at Cape Coral Parkway and Vincennes Boulevard for 24 years. She appreciates the grant.

"When they offered us the grant, they said they didn't want box signs," she said. "I really wanted channel letters, but I couldn't afford it before. When I found out they'd pay for half of it, I thought it was great."

In addition to upgrading her sign, O'Connor used the money to stucco, paint and fix lighting.

"I got the place in tip-top shape," she said, noting it cost her about \$6,500, but she'll be reimbursed half.

O'Connor said her business is still busy, unlike some others that have been harder hit by the economic downturn.

"Some are hurting bad," she said. "I feel bad if they force people to take (their signs) down."

Instead, O'Connor said, the new sign requirements should only kick in when a business applies for a new sign permit or its existing sign is deteriorating.

"I think that would be fair to people who already have signs," she said. "These are bad times. People are going out of business like crazy. They need to be careful how forceful they are."

Mary Medoff, co-owner of Fitness Grille on Cape Coral Parkway, also benefitted from the grant after opening her restaurant a year ago. She agreed that now is not a good time to make struggling business owners pay for new signs.

The topic of signs is already a sore one for Medoff, who said business dropped 60 percent after code enforcement made her stop sticking small, temporary signs in the ground near the parkway at lunchtime.

"We're recessed off the parkway. They don't see us," she said. "Here we are, trying to stay alive in an economic recession, and we're being henpecked by code enforcement."

Orth said the CRA is trying to be sensitive to business owners during the implementation of the new sign codes.

"We understand the issues with the economy," he said, encouraging them to apply for the grant.

Orth said business owners should also make sure their sign builders get permit approvals before ordering any materials.

"Hopefully these signs will perform better in hurricanes, too," he said. "Hopefully, there's a positive benefit there."

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