



PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

STAFF REPORT

DATE: April 3, 2024

TO: Hearing Officer

SUBJECT: Sign Exception #11976

LOCATION: 224 N. Fair Oaks Avenue

APPLICANT: Michael O'Connell

ZONING DESIGNATION: CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General)

GENERAL PLAN DESIGNATION: Medium Mixed Use 0.0-2.25 FAR

CASE PLANNER: Jasmine Heredia

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Adopt the Environmental Determination and Specific Findings in Attachment A to **approve** Sign Exception #11976 with the conditions in Attachment B

PROJECT PROPOSAL: Sign Exception: To allow a wall sign on an existing building to be placed above a second story window at an approximate height of 42.2 feet, where the maximum height allowed is 25 feet, or the bottom of the lowest second story window, whichever is lower. A Sign Exception is required for a sign that deviates from the maximum allowable height.

The request also includes locating the sign at the southernmost edge of the building façade, where wall signs shall otherwise be located within the middle 70% of the building. A Zoning Administrator's approval is required to deviate from the Zoning Code regulations governing the horizontal location of a wall sign.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION: This project has been determined to be exempt from environmental review pursuant to the guidelines of the California Environmental Quality Act (Public Resources Code §21080(b)(9); Administrative Code, Title 14, Chapter 3, §15311, Class 11, Accessory Structures) and that there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class and, therefore, there are no unusual circumstances. This

section specifically applies to the construction or replacement of minor structures such as onsite signs.

BACKGROUND:

Site characteristics: The subject site is located on the northeast corner of North Fair Oaks Avenue and East Walnut Street. The subject site is an irregular 14,610 square-foot lot developed with a 18,190-square-foot, three-story commercial building and ancillary parking lot. The building is set back two feet from North Fair Oaks Avenue.

Adjacent Uses:
North: Schools – Public and Private
South: Vehicle Services – Service Station
East: Parking Lot
West: Lodging – Hotels, Motels

Adjacent Zoning:
North: CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General)
South: CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General)
East: CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General)
West: CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General)

Previous Cases: Sign Exception #11707 – Sign Exception to allow the sign to have a height of 45’ – 2” where the maximum allowed sign size is 25 feet or the bottom of the lowest second story window, whichever is lowest. Approved with conditions 11/3/2010.

Sign Exception #11438 – Sign Exception to allow two wall signs higher than 25 feet. Approved with Conditions 4/16/2003.

Variance #10531 – To allow construct a 3 -story, 18,190 sf office building, and 46 parking spaces (38 full-sized stalls and 8 compact-sized stalls) where 46 full sized stalls are required. Approved with conditions 5/22/1985.

Variance #10259 – To build a 3-story, 18,900 sf office building. Parking for 47 cars will be provided. Approved with conditions 6/1/1983.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

The applicant, Michael O’ Connell, has submitted a Sign Exception application on behalf of LA Financial Credit Union to allow for one, 87.75 square-foot wall sign to be installed above the third story windows on an existing commercial building. The sign would be located on the west elevation fronting North Fair Oaks Avenue. Per Zoning Code Section 17.48.090.C.1 (Table 4-20 - CD Zoning District Sign Standards), wall signs are permitted to be placed at a maximum height of 25 feet, or below the second story window, whichever is lower. The proposed wall sign would be installed above the third story windows at a height of approximately 42 feet, and a Sign Exception is required to allow a wall sign to deviate from an applicable development requirement.

This sign will be replacing an existing sign at the same location, approved under Sign Exception #11438. Condition of approval #4 of Sign Exception #11438 states that any future alterations to the signage that is not part of this sign exception (including change outs of existing signs) shall be subject to the review and approval of a new Sign Exception application. As such, the applicant has submitted the subject Sign Exception application.

The subject site is an irregular-shaped lot with approximately 114.9 feet of street frontage on North Fair Oaks Avenue. The property is developed with a 18,190-square foot, three-story commercial building, that is setback two feet from the North Fair Oaks Avenue, that was constructed in 1985.

The proposed wall sign specifications consist of individual halo-lit, illuminated reverse channel letters spelling the tenant's name "LA Financial CREDIT UNION" and their logo "LA". The sign area would be approximately 87.75 square feet in area. The sign is proposed to have a height of 78" (or 6.5 feet), length of 162 inches (or 13.5 feet), and maximum depth of two inches.

The LA Financial Credit Union sign is primarily comprised of aluminum-faced, custom painted turquoise, reverse channel letters. All letters would feature white LED internal illumination with clear poly-carbonate backs for a halo effect and would be affixed to the raceway with three and a half-inch metal bolts encased with a 1.5-inch aluminum spacers. The raceway will be painted the same color as the wall. Conduit to electrify the sign would be run on the interior of the building wall, and would not be visible from the street.

ANALYSIS:

A "wall sign" is defined as a sign that is attached to or painted on the exterior wall of a structure with the display surface of the sign approximately parallel to the building wall. Wall signs are a permitted sign type in CD-MU-G (Central District Specific Plan, Mixed Use General) zoning district and may be placed at a height or location outside the area permitted under the Zoning Code subject to the review and approval of a Sign Exception.

The purpose of the City's sign ordinance is to provide standards for signs to safeguard life, health, property, safety, and public welfare, while encouraging compatibility, creativity, variety, and enhancement of the City's visual image and economic activity. The sign standards are designed to provide each sign user an opportunity for effective identification by regulating the number, size, location and height according to standards consistent with each zoning district. However, not all buildings are designed to accommodate the sign standards set forth in the zoning code. In these cases, a Sign Exception may be granted to allow proposed signage to deviate from certain development standards due to unique, historical, and/or architectural features associated with existing buildings. A Sign Exception is a form of a Minor Variance, which allows the deviation from the specific sign standards. A Sign Exception may be approved provided all required findings identified in Attachment A of this report are met.

In addition, per Zoning Code Section 17.48.090.H.5, wall signs shall be located within the middle 70 percent of the building or occupancy's frontage measured from lease line to lease line. Per Section 17.48.110.H.5, the Zoning Administrator may allow for a sign to deviate from the "middle 70%" location requirement where it can be clearly demonstrated that conforming severely limits proper sign placement. As analyzed in the "Location Requirement" section further below in this

report, the Zoning Administrator recommends that the location requirement be modified and be included as part of the approval of the Sign Exception.

With the exception of the requested Sign Exception for height, and the deviation from the location requirement within the middle 70 percent of the occupancy frontage, the proposed wall signs comply with the remainder of the applicable standards contained in Sections 17.48.090.C (CD Zoning District Sign Standards) and 17.48.110.H (Wall Signs). Such standards include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Not exceeding the maximum number of signs of two signs per ground floor occupancy per frontage;
- (2) Not extending above an eave or parapet;
- (3) Being comprised of individual channel letters that are externally illuminated;
- (4) Having no exposed raceways;
- (5) Not projecting more than 12 inches from the wall;
- (6) Not blocking any windows or architectural features; and
- (7) Not exceeding the sign area of 1.5 square feet per foot of a building per primary building frontage.

Additionally, the proposed wall sign complies with the illumination requirements in Section 17.48.100.D that apply to all signage.

Sign Exception – To allow a Wall Sign higher than 25 feet

LA Financial Credit Union is one of two tenants that occupy the approximately 43-foot tall, three-story building. The building has two designated street frontages, one on the west elevation along North Fair Oaks Avenue, and one on the south elevation along on East Walnut Street. The entrance to the building is located at the southwest corner of building, along these street frontages. Above the entrance, the second and third floor have floor-to-ceiling windows. The proposal consists of one business identification wall sign positioned above the third floor windows on the west elevation located above the building entrance.

In order to comply with the height requirement, a sign would be required to be placed on the first floor. As stated above, the first-floor entrance, as well as the second and third floor above the entrance, have floor-to-ceiling windows, and per Zoning Code Section 17.48.110.H.6 signs shall not be placed to obstruct a portion of a window. A sign that is placed north of the entrance of the building, where there are no floor-to ceiling windows, would be on a façade that is set back an additional five feet further than the third floor, and would limit the visibility of the sign.

As proposed, the sign would be placed on the uppermost area of the building's façade. The design of the building does not provide a logical area for the sign above the first-floor entrance at the corner of North Fair Oaks Avenue and East Walnut Street. As described above, the proposed sign would replace an existing sign, and mimic the sign height and location of another existing sign on the south elevation. Thus, it is an aesthetic improvement to locate the sign higher than 25 feet and above the second story windows, and it will enhance the visibility of the sign with an appropriate location and size.

Zoning Administrator's Approval – To allow a Wall Sign to be located outside of the middle 70 percent of the building façade

Pursuant to Pasadena Zoning Code Section 17.48.110.H.5 (Standards for Specific Types of Permanent Signs – Wall Signs) wall signs shall be located within the middle 70-percent of the building or occupancy's frontage measured from lease line to lease line. The Zoning Administrator may allow for a sign to deviate from the “middle 70%” location requirement where it can be clearly demonstrated that conforming severely limits proper sign placement. The subject wall sign is proposed outside this middle 70-percent area at the southernmost edge of the building facade that is more readily visible to vehicles traveling east on East Walnut Street and in either direction on North Fair Oaks Avenue.

Furthermore, the placement of the sign at the southernmost edge of the building façade would be above the entrance to the building and above floor-to-ceiling windows located on the second and third floor. The proposed location is situated in such a way as to be complimentary to design of the building as well as the other existing sign located on the Walnut Street frontage.

As such, placement within the middle 70 percent of the subject building frontage limits proper sign placement and the visibility of the sign from the street. Therefore, the Zoning Administrator recommends that the location requirement be modified and that the request be included as part of the approval of the Sign Exception.

GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY:

The proposed Sign Exception is in conformance with the goals, policies, and objectives of the General Plan, the purpose and intent of the Central District Specific Plan, and the purposes of this Zoning Code. The proposed sign would not constitute a grant of special privilege inconsistent with the limitations on other properties in the vicinity and the same zoning district in that the intent of the Sign Ordinance is to maintain and enhance the quality of a sign in the City, which this sign accomplishes. Granting the Sign Exception would be consistent with General Plan Land Use (GPLU) Element *Policy 4.11 - Development that is Compatible* and GPLU Element *Policy 11.1 - Business Expansion and Growth*, which support the growth and success of businesses.

In addition, the project is also compatible with GPLU Element *Policy 4.3 - An Active Central District*, by continuing to reinforce the Central District as a vital, pedestrian-oriented place, linked to local and regional transit designed for all ages and serving as the focal point of community identity, business activity, employment, living, governance, and culture.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW:

This project has been determined to be exempt from environmental review pursuant to the guidelines of the California Environmental Quality Act (Public Resources Code §21080(b)(9); Administrative Code, Title 14, Chapter 3, §15311, Class 11, Accessory Structures) and there are no features that distinguish this project from others in the exempt class; therefore, there are no unusual circumstances. This section specifically applies to the construction or replacement of minor structures such as onsite signs.

REVIEW BY OTHER CITY DEPARTMENTS:

This Sign Exception application has been reviewed by the Design and Historic Preservation Division, Public Works Department, and Building Division. There were no concerns expressed. The Design and Historic Preservation Section has provided a comment which is incorporated in Attachment B of this report as recommended conditions of approval. The sign would be subject to the City’s plan check process where they would be required to be designed and installed in compliance with building and safety code requirements.

CONCLUSION:

The proposed Sign Exception would permit the placement of a wall sign to be located at a height exceeding the maximum allowed requirement. In consideration of the context of signage in the CD-MU-G zoning district, staff is recommending conditions of approval, which would ensure that the sign is compatible with other signage within the Central District Specific Plan area. The proposed sign, as conditioned, would be architecturally and aesthetically compatible with the existing building on the subject site, is harmonious with the character of the Specific Plan, and consistent with the general surroundings. Therefore, staff recommends that the Hearing Officer approve the application with the findings in Attachment A and the Conditions of Approval in Attachment B.

Attachments:

- Attachment A: Recommended Specific Findings
- Attachment B: Recommended Conditions of Approval

ATTACHMENT A
SPECIFIC FINDINGS FOR SIGN EXCEPTION #11976

Sign Exception - To allow a Wall Sign higher than 25 feet

1. *The proposed sign is architecturally and aesthetically compatible with the major structures on the subject site and the adjacent sites and is compatible with the character of the established neighborhood and general environment.* Approval of the Sign Exception will allow the sign to be located at a position that is more visible to patrons or members of the proposed business. The building on the property is a three-story commercial office building that fits modestly into its environment without attracting attention. The proposed height and prominent location will enhance the character of the building and promote economic activity. Strict adherence with the requirements for the wall sign would limit the location of the sign to the pillars between the first floor windows that would constrain the size, and would greatly limit the visibility of the sign to both pedestrians and vehicular traffic. The design of the building does not provide a logical area for the sign above the first floor entrance doors on the west elevation, since the area above the entrance has floor-to-ceiling windows, and pursuant to Zoning Code Section 17.48.110.H.6 signs shall not be placed to obstruct a portion of a window. Thus, it is an aesthetic improvement to locate the sign above the third-story windows, and it will enhance the readability of the sign with an appropriate location and size.
2. *Granting the application is in conformance with the goals, policies, and objectives of the General Plan and the purpose and intent of any applicable specific plan, and the purposes of this Zoning Code and would not constitute a grant of special privilege inconsistent with the limitations on other properties in the vicinity and the same zoning district.* The proposed Sign Exception is in conformance with the goals, policies, and objectives of the General Plan, the purpose and intent of the Central District Specific Plan, and the purposes of this Zoning Code. The proposed sign would not constitute a grant of special privilege inconsistent with the limitations on other properties in the vicinity and the same zoning district in that the intent of the Sign Ordinance is to maintain and enhance the quality of a sign in the City, which this sign accomplishes. Granting the Sign Exception would be consistent with General Plan Land Use (GPLU) Element *Policy 4.11 - Development that is Compatible* and GPLU Element *Policy 11.1 – Business Expansion and Growth*, which supports the growth and success of businesses. In addition, the project is also compatible with GPLU Element *Policy 4.3 - An Active Central District*, by continuing to reinforce the Central District as a vital, pedestrian-oriented place, linked to local and regional transit designed for all ages and serving as the focal point of community identity, business activity, employment, living, governance, and culture.
3. *Granting the application would not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity of the subject site, or to the public health, safety, or general welfare.* The Sign Exception application has been reviewed by the Design and Historic Preservation Division, Building Division, and Public Works Department. There were no concerns expressed regarding the safety of the sign. The sign will be subject to the City's plan check process where it will be required to be designed and installed in compliance with building and safety code requirements.

ATTACHMENT B
RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL FOR SIGN EXCEPTION #11976

The applicant or successor in interest shall meet the following conditions:

General

1. The site plan and elevations submitted for building permits shall substantially conform to the plans submitted with this application labeled "Approved at Hearing, April 3, 2024," except as modified herein.
2. The applicant or successor in interest shall meet the applicable code requirements of all other City Departments. The applicant shall submit building plans for approval prior to the installation of the sign.
3. The Decision Letter and Conditions of Approval shall be incorporated into the submitted building plans as part of the Plan Check process.
4. This approval is for a Sign Exception to allow the proposed wall sign to be located higher than 25 feet. The wall sign shall have a maximum sign height of 42.2 feet to the top of the sign, as measured from existing grade, and shall be at the southern edge of the building façade. The sign is approved to be located outside of the middle 70 percent of the building façade, as depicted in the approved plans.
5. The proposed project, Activity Number **ZENT2024-00002**, is subject to a Final Zoning Inspection. The Final Zoning Inspection is required for the project prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy. Contact Jasmine Heredia at jheredia@cityofpasadena.net or (626) 744-6817 to schedule an inspection appointment time.
6. The right granted under this application must be enacted within 36 months from the effective date of approval. It shall expire and become void unless an extension of time is approved in compliance with Section 17.64.040.C of the Zoning Code.

Planning

7. Any future alterations to the signage that is not part of this Sign Exception shall be subject to the review and approval of the Zoning Administrator.
8. The wall sign shall not exceed 87.75 square-feet, with a depth of not more than 5.5 inches from the building.
9. The sign height shall not exceed 42.2 feet to the top of the sign.

Design and Historic Preservation

10. Design review will be required for new signs on the property, whether or not the sign exception is approved (staff-level).