

CITY OF VAUGHAN

EXTRACT FROM COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES OF MAY 27, 2014

Item 2, Report No. 25, of the Committee of the Whole (Working Session), which was adopted without amendment by the Council of the City of Vaughan on May 27, 2014.

2 DYNAMIC DIGITAL SIGNS AT CITY FACILITIES

The Committee of the Whole (Working Session) recommends:

- 1) That the recommendation contained in the following report of the Executive Director, Office of the City Manager, dated May 21, 2014, be approved, subject to adding the words “and an estimate of City costs” to the end of recommendation 4.;**
- 2) That the deputation of Mr. Tony Romanelli, President RCC, Steeles Avenue, Toronto, be received; and**
- 3) That the presentation from staff and Communication C3, presentation material entitled, “Dynamic Digital Signs at City Facilities”, dated May 21, 2014, be received.**

Recommendation

The Executive Director in consultation with the Interim City Manager recommends:

1. That Staff proceed with renegotiation of the current bridge banner agreement with Canadian National Railway (CN) to add RCC Media Inc. (RCC) as a party and to convert existing CN Bridge Banners from vinyl to a digital format;
2. That the agreement require RCC to build to the City's specifications a Dynamic Digital Sign Network, including the associated operational software, for 10 monument style digital signs located at City facilities at no cost to the City;
3. That the agreement require RCC to maintain the Digital Sign Network including the digital display and monumental sign structure for a minimum of 15 years from the first operational date of the entire network or until a mutually agreed upon time;
4. That Staff identify and report back to Council no later than September, 2014 with the draft amended agreement that identifies the final location of each of the 10 digital signs;
5. That Staff in the Corporate Communications Department be assigned the oversight and ongoing communication management of the Digital Sign Network; and
6. That Staff in the Corporate Communications Department draft protocol and policy for the communication use and standards associated with the Digital Sign Network.

Contribution to Sustainability

Green Directions Vaughan embraces a Sustainability First principle and states that sustainability means we make decisions and take actions that ensure a healthy environment, vibrant communities and economic vitality for current and future generations. Finding and/or improving opportunities to communicate with our residents about programs, services and issues allows them to be better informed and more engaged which results in greater understanding, collaboration and action.

Economic Impact

The proposal by CN/RCC to convert the RCC bridge vinyl banners on overpasses owned by CN to a digital format in the City of Vaughan (Attachment 1) has no cost to the City.

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The proposed agreement also identifies that RCC will build and maintain a Digital Sign Network of 10 monument style signs for the City at no cost. However, the City would have to assume costs associated with preparing each site. This would include trenching, and electrical materials in addition to electrical indoor work. A complete cost estimate would be prepared once the 10 locations were identified and those costs would be requested via a 2015 capital budget submission.

The alternative solution for the City would be to build a Digital Sign Network of 10 signs as outlined in the report with an estimated cost of \$700-800,000 funded from taxation.

Communications Plan

If Council endorses Recommendation Six (6), Corporate Communications will draft a communication protocol and policy for the use and communication standards of the dynamic electronic signs prior to the “network” being operational. Messaging on each digital/electronic board would be undertaken from a central location; therefore, it is recommended in recommendation Five (5) of this report that the Corporate Communications Department manage oversight of the messaging as it directly relates to City communications.

Purpose

Staff were approached by CN and RCC who have identified that they would like to amend the current bridge banner agreement to convert the vinyl banner structures to a digital format. The current agreement allows for third party advertising on all north facing structures (vehicles driving from Vaughan toward Toronto). CN has a contract with RCC for this provision. The messaging on the south facing structures is dedicated for City of Vaughan messaging (vehicles travelling from Toronto toward Vaughan). As part of the proposed amended agreement, RCC will build a city-wide Dynamic Digital sign network consisting of 10 signs to be located at city facilities. In addition, RCC will provide messaging time on both the south and north facing bridge structures once the vinyl to digital conversion is complete.

The messaging on the City's 10 signs would be 100 per cent dedicated to the City. No third party advertising would be programmed. As identified in the current agreement with CN, RCC is the sole agent for the Canadian National Railway thus making it the only company in the position to make this offer (Attachment 2). The digital signs would be sited at 10 City facilities chosen by the City. RCC currently owns, maintains, and operates the CN Bridge Vinyl structures in Vaughan and has had an existing agreement since 2006 with the City for the current CN Bridge vinyl banner program.

Background - Analysis and Options

Staff reported to Committee of the Whole Working Session, Item 1, Report No. 38, adopted by Council on September 17, 2013, about the benefits of having a city-wide network of digital signs to communicate with residents. Staff identified four potential options to erect a ‘network’ of 10 signs at the City's Community Centres. The options and costs associated with building and operating the network ranged from a 100 per cent city-owned, constructed and operated network to a 100 per cent privately owned, constructed, and operated network to a combination of ownership and operation -- all with varying costs.

The Committee raised a number of questions related to;

- Use and costs of mobile advertising signs
- Ongoing Maintenance costs
- Locating the city's digital sign network at Community Centres

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Use of Mobile Advertising Signs

The Director of Purchasing has confirmed that the City annually spends in the range of \$45,000-\$55,000 per year for the use of mobile signs. The mobile signs are used predominantly by two departments- Recreation and Culture and Public Works. However, local research that was conducted through the Staff initiated survey identified that residents would be in favour of an alternative to using mobile signs. At this time, Staff would recommend a target of a 50 per cent reduction in the use of mobile signs be established once the digital sign network was 100 per cent operational and current contractual obligations are fulfilled. Any further reduction in the use of mobile signs could be monitored and adjusted as needed.

Ongoing Maintenance Costs

The installation of the digital sign network will have manufacturer warranties for repair and replacement. However, the agreement in principle being proposed by RCC has identified that 100 percent of ongoing maintenance and maintenance costs will be assumed by RCC for a period of 15 years.

Locating The City's Digital Sign Network Solely at Community Centres

After further review of traffic counts and traffic patterns, (ATTACHMENT 3) Staff confirmed that the locations should not necessarily be limited to Community Centres. However, the location of the digital sign network should be equally distributed across the City, on City owned property, using traffic counts and traffic patterns as the baseline to achieve the communication goal of a Digital Sign Network. If Council agrees with this rationale, Staff will work with Legal, Building Standards, Building and Facilities and Corporate Communications to identify the 10 most appropriate locations. In addition, Staff will review and take into consideration sight lines and other site nuances.

Supporting Emergency Events

It should be noted that beyond the notion of increasing resident engagement and communicating city information such as; garbage and recycling efforts, Concerts in the Park, and other city events, the recent ice storm event of 2013 is an excellent example of why a digital sign network should be built and would prove to be a benefit to the residents of the City in communicating emergency information.

As previously identified in the report dated September 10, 2013, Staff have attempted to give Council an overview of the digital billboard industry and the results of a city-wide on-line survey asking residents about their opinion to having digital billboards erected at City facilities.

Future Considerations

Consolidated Sign By-Law

The last time City Council considered amendments to the City's Sign by-law respecting Poster Panel Signs [3rd Party Billboards was Report No. 32, Item 1 of the Committee of the Whole, approved by Council on June 28, 2011, Public Meeting 1, Proposed Amendments to the City's Sign By-Law, Poster Panel Signs (Billboards), (By-law Number 107-2011)]. Council approved a recommendation requesting City Staff to review the matter of Digital Boards and bring forward a report recommending possible amendments to the City Sign By-law. Therefore, amending the CN/RCC agreement could be an initiative to better inform a new consolidated sign by-law.

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First Type of Use

Although municipalities around North America use bridge structures to affix vinyl banners and other banner-styled messaging, research that Staff has undertaken to date in assessing the proposal has found that digital signage on bridge structures has very little precedent. It is believed that Vaughan could be the first municipality to allow this location for digital signage. The 407ETR in the past two years has begun implementing digital messaging affixed to a traditional pole design that sits directly above the right most lane of the highway but not currently affixed to an overpass.

In other locations around the world, the use of digital billboards above a roadway have been put into use. In London, England at the Euston Road Underpass a large format digital billboard serves more than 100,000 cars per day as does the bridge structures on the Pacific Motorway in Queensland Australia.

About Digital Billboard Technology: Digital technology is changing the delivery of information

On billboards, digital technology produces static images which are changed via computer (typically every six or eight seconds), providing a non-manual way to change billboard “copy.” Digital billboards do not scroll, flash, or feature motion pictures.

Electronic billboards offer advantages, giving the City a greater versatility and flexibility in reaching its residents. Messages can be changed quickly, including multiple times in one day.

Print and broadcast news media use digital billboards to deliver headlines, weather updates, and programming information. Law enforcement and other public safety officials use digital billboards to reach mass audiences quickly. The image of a missing person or emergency information can be displayed in minutes. Safety and community concerns have however been vocal in numerous jurisdictions about the potential distractions which Digital signs could pose for drivers and illumination impacts to community.

To control digital billboards, brightness levels on signs are equipped with light sensors, which measure the amount of light available in the surrounding environment. In the brightest sun, the billboard is at its brightest to provide the necessary contrast to let the billboard be legible. At night, the billboard is much dimmer to adjust to surrounding light conditions. The billboards use the minimum amount of light necessary to provide legible copy.

Public Perception

Independent Research Finds Digital Signs Provide An Important Community Service

A review of North American jurisdiction has found varying degrees of acceptance and policy components for roadside digital signs.

In 2008, Arbitron, the global media research firm, conducted a research project: “What does the public think of digital billboards”. In the first study of its kind, Arbitron researchers found that people are aware of and positively inclined toward this technology.

The Arbitron study focused on the metro area of Cleveland, OH, where digital billboards have been operating since 2005. Through telephone surveys, researchers found “the vast majority of commuters (four out of five) feel the digital signs provide an important community service.” More than half of the commuters polled had noticed digital billboards in the past month. The vast majority of those commuters remembered at least one ad running on the boards. Eight out of ten people said digital billboards help the community with emergency information, while the majority said they were attractive.

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Among younger demographics, digital billboards have an even bigger impact. The Arbitron study found 60 percent of those 18-34 found digital billboards to be attractive, while 86 percent agreed digital billboards help the community with emergency information. Nearly one in five viewers discussed an ad seen on a digital billboard with other people. The study found that 83 percent of all respondents can recall at least one advertisement on a digital billboard and 65 percent of viewers can recall at least two ads. Furthermore, 77 percent of 18-34 year olds said digital billboards are a 'cool' way to advertise, according to the study.

Local Research Concludes Digital Signs Would Be Effective

Although not requested, Staff undertook an online survey of residents with the purpose of gauging perception and appropriateness of electronic digital signs at City facilities.

The electronic survey was created using SurveyMonkey.com. It was advertised on the City's website through a homepage banner with a link to the survey. An e-Bulletin linking to the survey was distributed to approximately 8,400 of the City's e-newsletter subscribers. In addition, the survey also went to the Recreation and Culture department's client database of more than 6,500 registered emails.

Although the online survey is not projectable to the entire population of Vaughan (statistically valid) it is extremely useful for understanding how people perceive electronic signs - much like a focus group. The questions in the survey were:

1. Overall how would you rate the way that the City of Vaughan keeps you informed about City?
2. In your opinion, it is important that you receive timely information about which of the following topics:
3. Would it be beneficial to you if City updates were advertised on outdoor electronic / digital signs located throughout the city?
4. Would the placement of outdoor electronic/digital signs at all community centres and City facilities enhance the delivery of City information?
5. What is your overall impression of outdoor electronic/digital signs?
6. In addition to City information, would it be beneficial to you if the outdoor electronic/digital signs also included advertisements from businesses in and around the community?
7. How often do you use your community centre?
8. Please indicate your gender
9. Please indicate the range which includes your age
10. What community do you live in?

The results came back very positive about the use of Electronic signs as a communication initiative. In total, 81 percent of the responses to question three – *"Would it be beneficial to you if City updates were advertised on outdoor electronic/digital signs located throughout the city?"* responded – Yes. Furthermore, 77 percent of residents thought that electronic signs would enhance the City's communication efforts as responded to in question four.

However, when asked in question six, *"In addition to City information, would it be beneficial to you if the outdoor electronic/digital signs also included advertisements from businesses in and around the community?"* The residents expressed (66 percent) that allowing advertising would not be a welcome aspect to this communication initiative.

The survey also had an open field for additional comments. The more than 150 additional comments were reviewed and were grouped into themes- Positive, Negative, Aesthetic, Cost, and Neutral. Grouping the comments into themes allowed staff to put a percentage total to each group. Below is the total percentage of comments for each theme with an example.

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An example of each themed comment –

Positive: (48 percent)

"It would be nice to be made aware of project updates such as when the new hospital will be started, etc. I can likely look that up online...but to have the info readily available on a digital board would be handy and easier. Thanks"

Negative: (13 percent)

"There is enough signage out there distracting from safety."

Aesthetic: (3 percent)

"While I find that this type of signage can be informative, these signs must be well placed so as not to be a distraction to drivers in traffic. Maybe they should be placed in the parking areas of community centres and libraries."

Cost: (13 percent)

"Same thing happened with Catholic Schools in Vaughan, needed outdoor signs. Quit spending tax dollars on signs outside of building. Reduce our Taxes (property tax) if you have enough money. I should not be paying for signs on community centres with my hard earned money. It is an unnecessary waste."

Neutral: (22 percent)

"We don't drive by a community centre regularly due to the location of our home. Electronic signs would be beneficial to those only driving by on a regular basis or in a more central location."

Costs and Installation –

Staff contacted various sign companies in the Greater Toronto Area to better understand the costs associated with erecting electronic digital signs at all ten (10) Community Centres and potentially at other City facilities that might be deemed appropriate in the future. The anticipated cost to install digital monument signs at all 10 Community Centres is approximately \$700,000.

The criteria used when speaking with a sign company was based on the sign – typically in a "Monument-Style" that can be viewed by people entering and exiting the facility or driving on the street. Effective sizing was also an important factor as it is critical in that the sign should not overwhelm those that may be walking but can be seen clearly from a passing vehicle. Effective sizing of the monument structure should be approximately 10'W x 16'H and the display should be no less than 50 3/8"H x 113 3/8"W (4 ft x 9 ft).

Messaging on each digital/electronic board would be undertaken from a central location, therefore, it is recommended that Corporate Communications would take oversight of the messaging as it directly relates to City communications.

Proposed Agreement with RCC

CN/RCC has proposed that the current agreement be amended with the City where RCC would construct and maintain the City's Digital sign network at no cost to the City with the exception of preparing the site for the sign. The estimated costs for preparing a site would be in the range of \$100-\$130 per meter required for trenching, and electrical materials. In addition, further costs would be incurred for indoor electrical work. A complete cost estimate would be prepared once the 10 locations were identified.

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Highlights of the CN/RCC proposed agreement are as follows;

- RCC will supply, construct, and maintain the City's the 10 monument style signs
- Content/messaging delivered on both 'faces' or sides of the City's digital sign network for the life of the sign would be dedicated exclusively for City messaging.
- In addition to building and maintaining the proposed City network of dynamic digital signs, RCC will, as with its current vinyl banner agreement, give the City a specified amount of "free" time on the newly constructed digital bridge banners and four billboards that it will convert as part of the proposed agreement. Currently the City has 100 per cent use of the South facing vinyl banners on the CN bridges and RCC has 100 per cent use of the North facing vinyl banners. RCC will assume 100 per cent of the media for both North and South facing structures. However, the City will have as part of the agreement a negotiated amount of access to these digital signs.
- No live motion video, animation or flashing images

Compliance with City Sign By-laws and Other Approvals

As the proposed signs would be considered "public information signs", neither the City's Sign By-law 203-92, as amended, or the City's Public Property Sign By-law 178-2003 apply to these signs.

To ensure proper construction, the City will require the sign construction drawings to be submitted for approval. These drawings must be approved by a professional engineer and CN Engineering prior to being submitted to the Building Standards Department.

As the proposed signs are to be located on CN overpasses extending over Regional roads, the Region of York has been contacted by CN and RCC Inc. for their comments and conditions of approval.

Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020/Strategic Plan

This report is consistent with the priorities previously set by Council and the necessary resources have been allocated and approved. This report supports Vaughan's Vision Goal to Run our City with objectives that advance operational excellence. This proposal is one vehicle in support of the Corporate Communications Strategy of ensuring the City communicates effectively by promoting and enhancing the City's image, and provide timely, accurate information to all stakeholders.

Regional Implications

As the proposed agreement with RCC identifies full City ownership and content of the signs (no third party advertising) at City facilities that are located on Regional roads, the by-law regulating signs on regional roads does not apply to any sign placed by or under the direction of the federal or provincial government, a municipality, the Region, a public utility or a transit authority, or any other sign prescribed by statute. (THE REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF YORK - BILL NO. 74 - BY-LAW NO. R-1232-2000-074).

Where the proposed signs abut a Regional Road, the proposed locations must be approved by the Regional Municipality of York – Engineering Department. (This applies to the location of the signs only.)

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Conclusion

In order for the City to continue to expand its approaches to communication and engagement with its residents, new ideas need to be considered. Electronic/Digital signs can be one of the most cost effective methods of communication for the City on an on-going basis. Messaging can range from community events, road construction/maintenance updates, city building initiatives, emergency preparedness or action – to name a few.

One single communication medium, such as e-newsletters, social media, traditional magazine/newspaper print, and broadcast will not achieve the level of communication that the residents desire nor the level of communication that the City wishes to have. The CN/RCC proposal attempts to achieve a balance between the benefits of providing cost-effective advertising solutions with ensuring the City communicates information to its citizens.

The addition of electronic/digital signage would be a positive addition to the 'tools' that would assist Council in keeping the residents of Vaughan informed of current events and issues.

Attachments

Attachment 1: RCC Proposal
Attachment 2: Letter from CN
Attachment 3: Map of City Facilities with Traffic Count

Report prepared by:

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(A copy of the attachments referred to in the foregoing have been forwarded to each Member of Council and a copy thereof is also on file in the office of the City Clerk.)