



# Legislative Department Seattle City Council Memorandum

**Date:** December 6, 2010  
**To:** Regional Development and Sustainability (RDS) Committee Members  
**From:** Sara Belz, Legislative Analyst, Council Central Staff  
**Subject:** **Council Bill (CB) 117065 – Downtown Sign Code Amendments**

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On Tuesday, December 7, staff from the City's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) will brief the RDS Committee on the content of CB 117065. This legislation would amend the City's sign code (Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 23.55) to allow large, illuminated wall signs that identify major tenants in downtown buildings to be installed more than 65 feet above ground level. A public hearing on CB 117065 will also take place at the December 7 RDS meeting.

## **Summary of Legislation**

CB 117065 would allow tenants that lease at least 200,000 square feet of floor area in a single downtown building to place illuminated identification signs on the exterior walls of that building. Currently, six downtown tenants would qualify to install such signs. Those tenants are as follows: Safeco Insurance (qualifying tenant in two buildings), Bank of America, Perkins Coie, Nordstrom, Russell Investments, and K&L Gates. The signs would be required to be installed more than 65 feet above ground level and within the highest 25 percent of the tallest portion of a building.

For buildings less than 500 feet in height, qualifying tenants could install up to four signs. Each of those signs could measure up to 324 square feet in area. For buildings taller than 500 feet, qualifying tenants would have a second option. Instead of installing four signs with a total area of up to 324 square feet each, they could install two signs with a total area of up to 648 square feet each. Sign installations would be restricted to no more than one per façade. The signs would only identify one tenant per building and the maximum height of the signs would be limited to 18 feet regardless of building size. Hotels and public buildings that are located in downtown Seattle are currently allowed to install up to four illuminated signs that are more than 65 feet above ground level provided the total area of each sign does not exceed approximately 324 square feet. Images of some of the existing, permitted signs that comply with these standards are attached to this memorandum.

Under CB 117065, wall identification signs for major tenants would be permitted in most downtown zones; Pioneer Square, the International District, and the Pike Place Market area would be the primary exceptions. Before issuing a permit, DPD staff would consult with the Seattle Design Commission on the design, materials, and scale of the proposed signs. Sign permits would be issued by the DPD Director as non-appealable, Type I decisions. Rotating, flashing, and roof signs would not be permitted.

DPD completed SEPA review of this proposal and issued a Determination of Non-Significance (DNS) earlier this year. The DNS was appealed by one party; however,

the Hearing Examiner issued a decision in August that upheld DPD's original decision to issue the DNS.

### **Possible Amendment – Councilmember Burgess**

Councilmember Burgess has suggested one possible amendment to CB 117065. It is summarized below.

#### ***Building height threshold for permitted signs.***

CB 117065 would permit up to four illuminated signs to be installed on buildings that are less than 500 feet tall provided the the signs are installed more than 65 feet above ground, placed in the highest 25 percent of the tallest portion of the building's façade, and do not have a total area of more than 324 square feet each. Councilmember Burgess has suggested that these provisions be removed from CB 117065 and that illuminated signage that identifies major tenants in downtown buildings only be permitted on buildings that exceed 500 feet in height. By limiting the installation of illuminated wall signage to the tallest downtown high-rises, this amendment could help to reduce the number of signs that are installed over time and mitigate the visibility of such signage from street level. Currently, there are nine buildings in downtown Seattle that are more than 500 feet tall. Most of the existing downtown tenants that lease more than 200,000 square feet of space are located in these buildings, so this amendment would have little impact on the number of large wall signs that are installed in the short-term. However, it could have a more significant effect in the future if increasing numbers of large tenants move into downtown high-rises that are less than 500 feet in height.

#### **Committee Direction:**

### **Possible Amendments – Russell Investments**

Three amendments to CB 117065 have been proposed by Russell Investments (Russell). Their amendments are as follows:

#### **1) *Increase the maximum area of permitted signs.***

CB 117065 would allow major tenants in buildings that are more than 500 feet tall to install two illuminated signs, each up to 648 square feet, within the highest 25 percent of the tallest portion of their building's façade. Russell has requested that the legislation be amended to allow one sign of up to 1,080 square feet rather than two signs of up to 648 square feet. This change would allow companies with longer names (e.g. Russell Investments, Bank of America) to install signs that would be legible from a greater distance. However, companies with shorter names (e.g. Safeco, Nordstrom) that may not need a 1,080 square foot sign might prefer to retain the 648 square foot option and install two signs.

Scaled renderings that illustrate what a 1,080 square foot sign would look like on the Russell Investments Center will be displayed at the December 7 RDS Committee meeting.

Options:

- a) Retain current language in the legislation regarding the maximum area of permitted signs.
- b) Amend CB 117065 to allow one sign of up to 1,080 square feet to be installed on buildings over 500 feet tall and remove language that would permit the installation of two signs of up to 648 square feet on those same buildings (Russell proposal).
- c) Amend CB 117065 to allow one sign of up to 1,080 square feet to be installed on buildings over 500 feet tall and retain existing language that would permit the option of installing of two signs of up to 648 square feet on those same buildings.

Committee Direction:

**2) *Establish a maximum letter height.***

The legislation, as it was introduced, proposes a maximum sign height of 18 feet but does not put forward a maximum letter height. If CB 117065 is amended to allow signs of up to 1,080 square feet to be installed on buildings that are more than 500 feet tall, Russell has requested that a maximum letter height of 10 feet be established for this subset of signs. This amendment could help to reduce the visual impacts of the largest illuminated signs that are installed on downtown high-rises. However, it could also benefit qualifying tenants with longer names over those with short ones, particularly if the option of installing two 648 square foot signs is removed. With a maximum letter height of 10 feet, companies with shorter names may find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to design a sign that is anywhere near 1,080 square feet.

Scaled renderings of an 1,080 square foot sign on the Russell Investments Center with letters that do not exceed 10 feet in height will be displayed at the December 7 RDS Committee meeting.

Options:

- a) Do not establish a maximum letter height for signs installed on buildings that are more than 500 feet tall.
- b) If the maximum area of permitted signs is increased to 1,080 square feet and the 648 square foot option is removed, amend CB 117065 to establish a maximum letter height of 10 feet for signs installed on buildings that are more than 500 feet tall (Russell proposal).
- c) If CB 117065 is amended to allow signs of 1,080 square feet to be installed on buildings over 500 feet tall and existing language in the legislation regarding the installation of 648 square foot signs on these same buildings is retained, establish a maximum letter height only for signs that exceed 648 square feet in area.

Committee Direction:

**3) *Expand illumination standards to allow for LED lighting.***

The illumination standards for large downtown signs that are proposed in CB 117065 are for neon lighting. Russell has suggested that these standards be amended to require the use of LED lighting when it is practical to do so. The legislation, as it is currently written, does not specifically prohibit the use of LED or any other form of lighting. Rather, it just states that the installed lighting “shall not be brighter than the equivalent of 30 milliamp neon tubing behind a diffuser panel.” LED lighting is generally more energy-efficient than neon lighting.

Options:

- a) Retain current language in legislation regarding illumination standards.
- b) Amend CB 117065 to require the use of LED lighting where possible (Russell proposal).

Committee Direction:

**Next Steps**

A second discussion and possible vote on CB 117065 is currently scheduled for the December 17 RDS Committee meeting. If you have questions about the legislation or any of the proposed amendments, please feel free to contact me at any time ([sara.belz@seattle.gov](mailto:sara.belz@seattle.gov) / 4-5382).