



COUNCIL REPORT

Report Date: September 4, 2025
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Meeting Date: September 16, 2025
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TO: Vancouver City Council
FROM: Deputy City Manager
SUBJECT: Public Realm Advertising Framework

Recommendation

THAT Council approve the Public Realm Advertising Framework, as outlined in this report, to guide the City's approach to third-party advertising in the public realm.

Purpose and Executive Summary

This seeks Council's approval of the City of Vancouver Public Realm Advertising Framework, intended to guide the City's approach to third-party advertising visible in the public realm, with the goals of optimising non-tax revenue and managing impact to the public realm.

Council Authority/Previous Decisions

Relevant Council and Park Board decisions that inform the recommendations in this report are summarized in Appendix A.

City Manager's Comments

The City Manager concurs with the foregoing recommendation.

Context and Background

For the purposes of this report, the following are key definitions.

- **Public realm advertising:** Advertising visible by the general public in the public realm, such as digital and static billboards/signs. It may include advertising that is sited on private property that is visible in the public realm.

- **Public Realm:** All publicly accessible spaces including streets, sidewalks, parks, plazas, and other open areas.
- **Third-party advertising:** All signage or advertising that promotes, directs or draws attention to products or services for anything other than the primary business or service offered at that location. Advertising one's own business on the business' premises is not considered third-party advertising.

In 2023, Council endorsed *Vibrant Vancouver: City Council's Strategic Priorities, 2023–2026*, which includes an objective to “increase the City’s non-tax revenues via sponsorships, donations, fees, and other channels.” In January 2024, the Mayor’s Budget Task Force further emphasized the imperative for the City to identify new non-tax revenue sources. In this context, public realm advertising is a potentially significant source of non-tax revenue for the City.

Regulatory Context

Third-party advertising on private land in Vancouver is regulated by the Sign By-law (the “By-law”), including signs that encroach over streets or lanes.

The intent of the Sign By-law is to support business visibility and wayfinding while minimizing visual clutter, ensuring public safety, and preserving neighborhood character. It regulates sign types, placement, and illumination to balance commercial needs with aesthetic and environmental considerations. Key elements of this by-law include:

- Vancouver is divided into seven sign districts, each of which has tailored rules to reflect the nature of the district.
- Most signs require a permit, and the City has the authority to refuse, revoke or enforce compliance.
- The by-law allows for relaxations by the Director of Planning under specific circumstances. Relaxations can be requested for size, location, and/or number, copy area or dimensions, or new technologies not contemplated by the by-law.
- The By-law does not authorize the Director of Planning to make relaxations for sign types that do not adhere to the By-law such as for billboards and other large-scale digital media. These rather require Council to amend the By-law on a case-by-case basis, based on the perceived merits and drawbacks of the proposal at the time of review.
- The By-law does not apply to City parks, street rights of way, or lanes.

Current State: Public Realm Advertising in Vancouver

The City’s approach to public realm advertising varies depending on the land that the advertising occupies: (1) street rights of way, (2) City lands, and (3) non-City lands.

1. **Street rights of way.** The street right of way is defined as the full width of City streets and lanes extending between the adjacent property lines, including features such as curbs, sidewalks and roundabouts.
 - The City's primary approach to public realm advertising is through the City's street furniture contract on street rights of way. Advertising on the contracted street

- furniture such as bus shelters is managed by the contractor, and the advertising revenue funds the capital, installation and maintenance costs for the City's street furniture, and as well provides a cash dividend to the City (projected to be \$6.6 million in 2025).
- Digital panels under this contract provide a significant source of total value (cash, capital and maintenance) to the City. There are currently 20 digital ad panels, mainly in the downtown core, with the average location contributing between \$200,000 and \$230,000 per year in benefit to the City.
2. **City lands.** City-owned lands are defined as all properties owned by the City, including civic-use buildings and lands, and properties owned by the Property Endowment Fund and Capital Fund. Hastings Park-Pacific National Exhibition lands are included in this category.
- There are currently 36 billboard faces on City-owned lands, for which the City rents the land to a third-party advertising company. The average annual rent revenue to the City from each billboard is \$7,250, or total City revenue of \$261,000.
3. **Non-City lands.** Non-City lands are defined as properties owned by private individuals/entities, non-profit entities, and public sector entities such as the Province of BC, the Government of Canada, Metro Vancouver, and the Vancouver School Board.
- There are more than 700 static billboard faces in Vancouver on non-City lands, which were put in place either before the Sign By-law (By-law 11879) was enacted in July 2017, or through amendments to the By-law thereafter. These currently generate little value to the City beyond some community use agreements, which generally allow for the City to allocate advertising time on billboards for City programming (e.g., public art or civic information), or for use by non-profit agencies.
 - There are few digital billboards on private property approved in the City. Currently only three specific locations and two special Sign Districts that are listed in the By-law in which electronic billboards with third-party advertising is permitted. All are located where light and digital displays are generally not considered nuisance activities.
 - The provision of community/civic benefits, such as public art content and/or revenue for program management varies on a case-by-case basis.

Currently, for all three of the above categories, no guidelines exist to inform staff recommendations and Council decisions concerning proposals for new signs.

Public Realm Advertising, Market Context

There is currently significant market interest in public realm advertising in Vancouver. Vancouver advertising currently receives a premium because of the market that Vancouver represents, and because of the limited amount of public realm advertising currently in Vancouver.

There is also a shift occurring in the public realm advertising industry towards digital billboards rather than static billboards. Digital billboards provide much greater revenue on a per-site basis than similar sized traditional static billboards – up to eight times. Most new proposals currently

received by the City are for new digital billboards, or the conversion of existing static billboards to digital.

Discussion

Without a set of overarching guiding principles, the City's approach to public realm advertising has been lacking a holistic, strategic approach. This has resulted in inconsistency in how different proposals are addressed, some unintended consequences, and importantly, substantial foregone revenues for the City.

The Public Realm Advertising Framework proposed in this report offers a more strategic and consistent approach in which public realm impacts can be managed effectively, while at the same time significant public benefits and non-tax revenues can be generated for the City.

Overview of the Public Realm Advertising Framework

The Public Realm Advertising Framework laid out in Appendix B provides principle-driven guidance to staff and Council to inform the evaluation and approval of public realm advertising proposals.

The Framework centres on six principles:

- P1. Public realm advertising impacts the experience of the public realm.
- P2. Public realm advertising impact should be offset with benefit.
- P3. There is a maximum public realm advertising threshold for both public realm experience and revenue.
- P4. Council determines the balance of benefit and impact, and the maximum threshold for public realm advertising.
- P5. Council should be supported with information and analysis, including relevant benchmarks, that allows Council to make well-informed decisions.
- P6. Local negative impacts should be minimized or mitigated, with an equity lens.

Next steps

RFEOI for billboards on street rights of way. If Council approves the Public Realm Advertising Framework, as an immediate next step staff will issue a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEOI) for Billboards on Street Rights of Way, soliciting entities to place digital billboards on City street rights of way. This RFEOI is intended to identify/clarify market interest in public realm advertising on the City's street rights of ways – including potential providers, advertising form factors, and locations of interest – and will provide important context for subsequent related decisions.

Once the RFEOI is completed, staff will report back to Council with what has been learned and recommended next steps.

Other public realm advertising opportunities. Staff will bring public realm advertising proposals/opportunities to Council for consideration as they arise.

Financial Implications

It is anticipated that applying the Public Realm Advertising Framework to future public realm advertising approaches will result in substantial incremental revenues for the City, e.g., through the rental of City lands to advertising providers. Once the RFEOI for Billboards on Street Rights of Way has been completed, staff will report back to Council with the order of magnitude of these potential new revenues, and this will also inform further approaches for Council consideration.

The recommended Public Realm Advertising Framework provides a strategic approach to public realm advertising that will manage the impact on the public realm and generate non-tax revenues to address Council priorities, thereby reducing pressure on annual property taxes and user fees. This work aligns with Council direction and the January 2024 Mayor's Budget Task Force recommendations.

Legal Implications

If Council approves the recommendation in this report, it will approve the Public Realm Advertising Framework set out in the report.

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APPENDIX A PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION

This appendix contains an overview of previous Council direction concerning sponsorship, advertising, naming rights, and donations.

- In 1995, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation adopted Sponsorship Guidelines governing corporate participation in programs, events and activities.
- In 1996, Council deferred entering into a major City sponsorship program, pending a review of sponsorship experiences at Park Board and Library Board.
- In 1997, Council approved the guiding principles and implementation of a City sponsorship program for revenue generation opportunities and the acquisition of goods and services. A City sponsorship program was not pursued. The guiding principles were not put into practice, and are not active today.
- In 1998, Council approved corporate sponsorship for limited components of the street banner program. Further sponsorship opportunities were not pursued.
- In 2003, the Library Board adopted a sponsorship policy including the naming of rooms within library buildings and in 2004 and approved related donor recognition guidelines.
- In 2005, Council approved the development of commercial and commemorative naming rights policies for City-owned buildings, including those operated by the City and those leased to non-profit tenants.
- In 2006, Council approved the City's Naming Rights Policy, Civic Community Facilities.
- In 2019, Council approved the *Sponsorship Policy* to encourage sponsorship to provide the City with additional revenue to enhance City Assets and operations. The City never entered into any sponsorship agreements under this policy.
- In January 2023, the Board of Parks and Recreation passed their "Think Big" Revenue Strategy, instructing Park Board staff to enable opportunities for increased commercial revenues.
- In February 2023, Council directed staff to "... develop strategies to address cost pressures in the multi-year financial plan through new revenue opportunities, process improvements to reduce costs or increase capacity, senior government funding and partnership that will inform the multi-year property tax increases for Council's consideration as part of future Budget processes."

APPENDIX B

PUBLIC REALM ADVERTISING FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The purpose of this Framework is to provide guidance to the City's strategic and operational management of Public Realm Advertising across the City of Vancouver.

Definitions

For the purposes of this Framework, the following definitions apply.

- **Public Realm Advertising:** All Third-Party Advertising visible by the general public in the public realm; signs themselves may or may not be located in the public realm.
- **Public Realm:** All publicly accessible spaces including streets, sidewalks, parks, plazas, and other open areas.
- **Third-party advertising** All signage or advertising that promotes, directs or draws attention to products or services for anything other than the primary business or service offered at that location. Advertising one's own business on their premises is not considered third-party advertising and is not addressed by this Framework.
- **Sign By-law:** By-law No. 11879 applies to all signs on private property.

Scope

The scope of this Framework encompasses all Public Realm Advertising in the City of Vancouver.

Guiding principles

The following principles guide the City of Vancouver's management of Public Realm Advertising and serve as the foundation for staff advice and recommendations to Council:

P1. Public Realm Advertising impacts the experience of the public realm

- The public realm is a key component of civic and community life. The City has invested funding, programming and regulatory effort into creating a vibrant public realm, and has an interest in managing the public realm on behalf of its citizens.
- All Public Realm Advertising has an impact on the public realm. These impacts include visual clutter, distraction, and potential conflicts with the character of neighbourhoods. There are also potential impacts to road safety, if not properly managed. The extent of impact differs based on location, size and type/format.

P2. Public Realm Advertising impact should be offset with benefit

- Given the importance of the Public Realm to civic and community life, the City should receive benefits from Public Realm Advertising that impacts the Public Realm.
- Given that the agreements related to Public Realm Advertising generally extend over multiple Council terms, the benefit should generally be a financial contribution to the City

to allow for Council policy flexibility rather than non-revenue benefits proposed by applicants.

- As both advertising revenue and public impact are driven by the visibility of the advertising, benefits to the City should increase in correlation to the scale of the advertising.

P3. There is a maximum Public Realm Advertising threshold for both Public Realm experience and revenue

- The total amount of advertising in the City has implications for both public realm experience and advertising revenue from each advertising instance.
- As advertising increases, the overall public realm impact increases, but the revenue potential of both new and existing advertising decreases due to market saturation and share of consumer attention.
- In order to maximize benefit relative to impact within the headroom of that threshold, the City's efforts should focus on maximizing benefit from a more limited set of Public Realm Advertising opportunities, while allowing flexibility for future additional opportunities.

P4. Council determines the balance of benefit and impact, and the maximum threshold for Public Realm Advertising

- The trade-off between Public Realm impacts and benefits received from Public Realm Advertising is fundamentally a values-based decision, best decided by City Council, supported by advice and recommendations from staff.

P5. Council should be supported with information and analysis, including relevant benchmarks, that allows Council to make well-informed decisions

- Advice to Council should include improved and consistent information regarding impact, benefit, and the broader strategic context of Public Realm Advertising in Vancouver.
- Decisions regarding managing the public realm impact of private land advertising should be informed by the existing Sign By-law. While not regulated by the Sign By-law, Council decisions related to approaches in the City's street rights of way and other non-regulated spaces should be informed with considerations in line with the guidance of the Sign By-law, regarding public safety, visual clutter, and neighbourhood character.
- In making decisions concerning Public Realm Advertising, staff should provide Council information regarding:
 - the market value/revenue potential of Public Realm Advertising proposals,
 - the benefit to the City, including appropriate benchmarks of benefits generated by other forms of Public Realm Advertising, and
 - strategic considerations regarding the overall Public Realm Advertising market in Vancouver.

P6. Local impacts should be minimized or mitigated, with an equity lens

- The Sign By-law includes specific provisions intended to mitigate and minimize impact to local neighbourhoods, to ensure and maintain public safety, reduce visual clutter, and preserve neighbourhood character (e.g., Sections 5.1–5.9). These standards will continue to guide staff analysis and advice regarding Public Realm Advertising on private land. Areas not regulated by the Sign By-law will include considerations of these same issues and be part of the advice and recommendations to Council.
- When evaluating Public Realm Advertising approaches, attention should be given to limit unintended or unmitigated consequences for equity-deserving communities where signs may be located.