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Council approves signs for plaza

3-2 decision reverses prior recommendations from city staff, Planning Commission.

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SUN POST NEWS

Shopping center developer Steve Craig will get most of the freeway-facing signs he wanted under terms of a sign-exception permit issued by a 3-2 vote of the City Council late Tuesday night.

Critics of Craig's Plaza San

Clemente sign request were stunned. The council's vote reversed a September recommendation from city staff and the Planning Commission that had called the requested signs excessive and unable to meet required justifications in the code. Opponents said the 24 signs will destroy San Clemente's village character and

devalue homes.

Proponents asserted that signs facing traffic are crucial if San Clemente wants a successful center along I-5 at the Avenida Vista Hermosa exit. They said the muted tones, limited colors and halo-lit design that the city will require will be less visible than garish colors seen at many malls.

The permit ends three years of processing a sign request, after the rest of the outlet center's design had won City Council approval. The project

can re-start now, Craig said, having lost six to 12 months. "We had discontinued the architecture on the project," he said. "It was such an important issue. We had to have finality to this. We couldn't go forward without it."

First stores could open in 2009, Craig said.

He said he'd been prepared to cancel the outlet center if the city didn't grant him the signs he needed, saying it would be "suicide" to go forward with first-class architec-

ture that will cost nearly double the industry norm, with uncertainty how the market would respond.

Craig said he understood hillside homeowners' concerns about having to see the signs 24/7 and is committed to making the signs as unobtrusive as possible. He said colors will be visible by day, but at night the letters will only be a halo, which will blur at a distance.

"I know what the Denny's

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sign does to them," he said. "That's precisely why we designed the signs the way we did."

Critics said the council's vote on what was termed a sign compromise was a sad moment for San Clemente. "Blatantly excessive," Karen Ahola called it. "Mr. Craig may as well have written this himself."

Craig had numerous supporters. "Please don't chase him out of town," Mimi Johnson told the council.

"Signage is No. 1 to the success of any business," Sally Jeisy said.

Gilbert Brown said the signs will "uglify" San Clemente. "Spanish Billboard by the Sea," Chris Ahola called it.

Lynn Sobel told council members their vote "is the heritage that you set down for future generations." She asked why the 180-degree switch in staff recommendation from categorical denial in September. Community Development Director Jim Holloway replied that the City Council had asked in November for a compromise, so staff worked to craft one.

"It's important that this succeed," Councilman Steve Knoblock said. "We won't look at this project in five years and say it's an albatross. We'll look at it and say it's a successful project, it's a good-looking project and the signage is as classy as it can get ..."

Council members Wayne Eggleston and Lori Donchak voted no. Donchak wanted fewer signs. Eggleston said he had problems with "quantity, location, size and color."

Councilman Joe Anderson said the center is important to San Clemente. Mayor Jim Dahl said some residents don't want any project. "We've gone past that," he said. "We've spent years beating this project to death. It's time to get it done."

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Craig said the city recruited him here, and he has compromised since 1999, from the time he agreed to turn the buildings inward - the original plan had stores facing the freeway. He redesigned, he said, on assurances he could still have freeway visibility.

Wednesday, Marblehead resident Marge Sosa said "I didn't see much compromise. He gave up four signs." She and Mary Ann Comes had been involved in a referendum that had contested a prior Marblehead Coastal shopping center proposal. It was disqualified on a legal technicality. "It's too bad the way it is," Comes said. "I don't know if there's anything we can do."

David Sanner, whose company is investing in Plaza San Clemente, said Craig has developed 25 centers and knows what he needs. The signs, he said, will not be obtrusive.

"You don't need to put signs in people's faces," resident Clark McGillivray said.

Sheila Kessler, a Broadmoor resident, disagreed with the council's decision but congratulated Craig afterward and said she hopes to work with him to minimize impacts. "This is a defining moment for San Clemente," she said. "There is no question, this will give us a more urban look."