

Area-Specific Amendment to the Sign By-law: 2 College Street

Date: March 4, 2025
To: Planning and Housing Committee
From: Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building (Interim)
Wards: 13 - Toronto Centre

SUMMARY

Adopted in 2010, Toronto's Sign By-law is a harmonized, City-wide set of regulations governing signs. Any member of the public may apply to City Council to amend the Sign By-law requesting permanent changes to regulations for specific properties or areas. Upon receiving an application, the Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building (the "CBO") assesses the proposal to determine if the proposed changes to the Sign By-law align with the objectives and purposes of the City's regulations, including the Sign By-law itself.

The Bader Group Inc. (the "Applicant"), authorized by the property owner, Gemstone Property Ltd., has applied for a Sign By-law Area-Specific Amendment (the "Proposed Amendment") for the property located at 2 College Street (the "Premises"). The Proposed Amendment, if approved, would not only permit an expressly prohibited sign type, but it would also institute regulations that significantly diverge from the current standards governing permissible third party signs in the area. Specifically, the Proposed Amendment would allow for and regulate:

- A third party electronic roof sign (the "Proposed Sign"), which is a sign type expressly prohibited, except if within the Dundas Square Special Sign District.
- A sign that would be 18 times larger and nearly 10 times taller than the existing regulations generally permit.
- Positioning a third party sign less than 100 metres of an existing third party sign and less than 30 metres of a controlled intersection, contrary to the minimum separation requirements.
- A third party electronic roof sign with two sign faces facing the same direction, rather than the generally permitted "back-to-back" configuration.
- A third party sign to be erected on a listed heritage building, which would not be permitted under the existing regulations.

Given that third party electronic roof signs are expressly prohibited by the Sign By-law, in order to obtain a permission for the erection of the Proposed Sign at 2 College Street, the Applicant must apply for a Sign By-law amendment. In 2024, City Council amended the Sign By-law, allowing the CBO to refuse applications that conflict with city policies or other by-laws. This change was intended to ensure consistency and prevent applications conflicting with other city policies or by-laws from advancing to Council. In addition to being expressly prohibited by the Sign By-law, the Proposed Sign is inconsistent with heritage policies for 2 College Street, and if made today, this application would be rejected until these conflicts had been resolved. However, since the application was submitted before the 2024 amendment, it may still proceed to Council.

Toronto Building, in consultation with City Planning and Transportation Services Divisions, conducted a thorough review of the Application and supporting materials. It is the opinion of the CBO that the requested area-specific regulations for 2 College Street are not consistent with the broader goals of the City, the objectives of the Sign By-law, or the regulations enacted for the Premises and surrounding area. Therefore, CBO does not recommend approval of the Proposed Amendment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building, recommends that:

1. City Council refuse the application to amend the Sign By-law to add an area-specific amendment to Schedule 'B' of Chapter 694, Signage Master Plans and Area-Specific Amendments, to replace the existing Sign By-law regulations concerning third party signs applicable to the premises municipally known as 2 College Street with regulations to allow for, and regulate, a single third party electronic roof sign, as described in Attachment 1 of this report.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The recommendation in this report has no financial impact.

DECISION HISTORY

PH11.6 - Improvements to the Sign By-law Amendment and Sign Variance Process

(<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.PH11.6>)

At its meeting of April 18, 2024, City Council adopted amendments to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 694, Signs, General, to modify the provisions concerning the processing Area-Specific Sign By-law Amendment – 2 College Street

of applications for amendments to, and variances from the provisions the Sign By-law, as well as to delegate authority to the Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building to implement amendments to sign district designations contained in Schedule A, Maps, and related matters.

COMMENTS

Annual Reporting

The CBO brings applications to amend the Sign By-law together on an annual basis for City Council consideration, this allows City Council to assess the overall and cumulative impact of these applications on the city's built environment, and the Sign By-law itself. This practice also allows for applications made throughout the year to be reviewed and considered in a more comprehensive manner.

The Sign By-law permits members of the public to apply for amendments that implement significant changes to the regulations for a specific property or area. These applications are not merely about approving an individual sign; they aim to alter the regulations governing signage at for a premises or area in perpetuity.

Given that third party electronic roof signs are an expressly prohibited sign type by the Sign By-law, to obtain a permission for the erection of the Proposed Sign at 2 College Street, the Applicant must apply for an amendment to the Sign By-law.

Roof Signs

Since 2010, the Sign By-law has prohibited third party roof signs in order to avoid their potential negative visual impacts, which often undermine urban design objectives for the massing and built form of buildings. Roof signs are also difficult to integrate into a building's overall design and architecture, often making buildings appear taller and intruding into the skyline.

The only area in the city where roof signs are permitted, including electronic roof signs, is the Dundas Square Special Sign District (DS-SSD). In 2009, City Council adopted the "Signage Vision" for the Downtown Yonge BIA, providing guidelines for large-format signage on properties with principal frontages on Yonge Street and Sankofa Square (formerly Dundas Square). This "Signage Vision" recognized the vibrant and large-scale signage as a defining characteristic of this area, warranting exceptional rules compared to other city locations and guiding Sign By-law regulations for the DS-SSD.

The Proposed Amendment for 2 College Street, which seeks a permanent change to the Sign By-law to allow a third party electronic roof sign outside the DS-SSD, directly conflicts with the Sign By-law and Council's objectives regarding electronic roof signs.

2024 Amendment to the Sign By-law

In the spring of 2024, City Council amended the Sign By-law, granting the CBO the authority to refuse applications for Sign Variances and Sign By-law amendments that contravene City of Toronto policies or other by-laws. This amendment promotes consistency and coherence across the City's various by-laws and policies and helps prevent Sign Variance and Sign By-law amendment applications that conflict with the City's objectives or standards for land use, design, heritage, environment, accessibility, or public health and safety from proceeding to formal decision stages.

The building at 2 College Street is designated as a heritage property under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act. Since the Sign By-law is one of many by-laws regulating land and buildings in the city, any amendment to it should align with the heritage policies for the premises. Staff investigation indicates that the Proposed Sign directly contravenes various policies for conserving heritage resources. If the Proposed Amendment had been submitted after the 2024 Council decision, the application would have been refused by the CBO until Heritage approval had been received. However, since the application was submitted prior to the 2024 amendment, it is not subject to the current regulations and must proceed to consideration before Council.

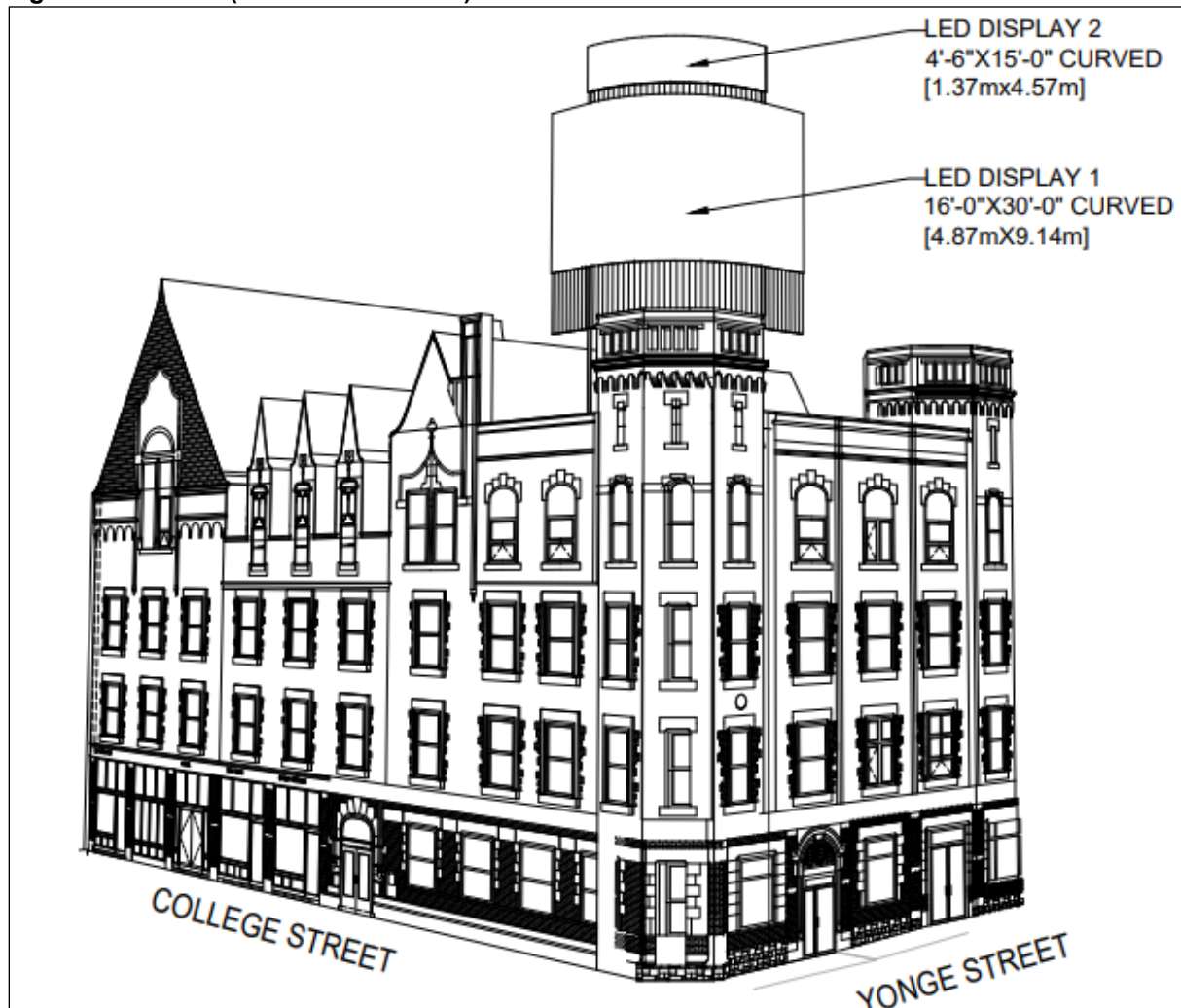
The Applicant's Amendment Proposal

The Applicant is seeking an area-specific amendment to the Sign By-law to replace the current regulations concerning third party signs for 2 College Street.

The Proposed Amendment would permit and regulate a third party electronic roof sign, a sign type that is expressly prohibited by subsection 694-15B(11) of the Sign By-law, except if located in the DS-SSD. According to the submissions, the Proposed Sign is a third party electronic roof sign, displaying electronic static copy, featuring two curved sign faces oriented southeast: the bottom face would measure 4.87 metres by 9.14 metres, and the top face would measure 1.37 metres by 4.57 metres. The aggregate sign face area would be approximately 54 square metres, and the overall height of the sign would not exceed 29.0 metres.

If granted, the area-specific regulations would permit the Proposed Sign to have two faces displayed one above the other, rather than the generally permitted "back-to-back" configuration. The area-specific amendment would also allow for the Proposed Sign to be placed with reduced separations from other third party signs than what would be typically required by the Sign By-law. The Proposed Sign would be erected on the top of the building located north of College Street and west of Yonge Street and would be less than 30 metres of the controlled intersection and of an existing third party wall sign at 2 Carlton Street.

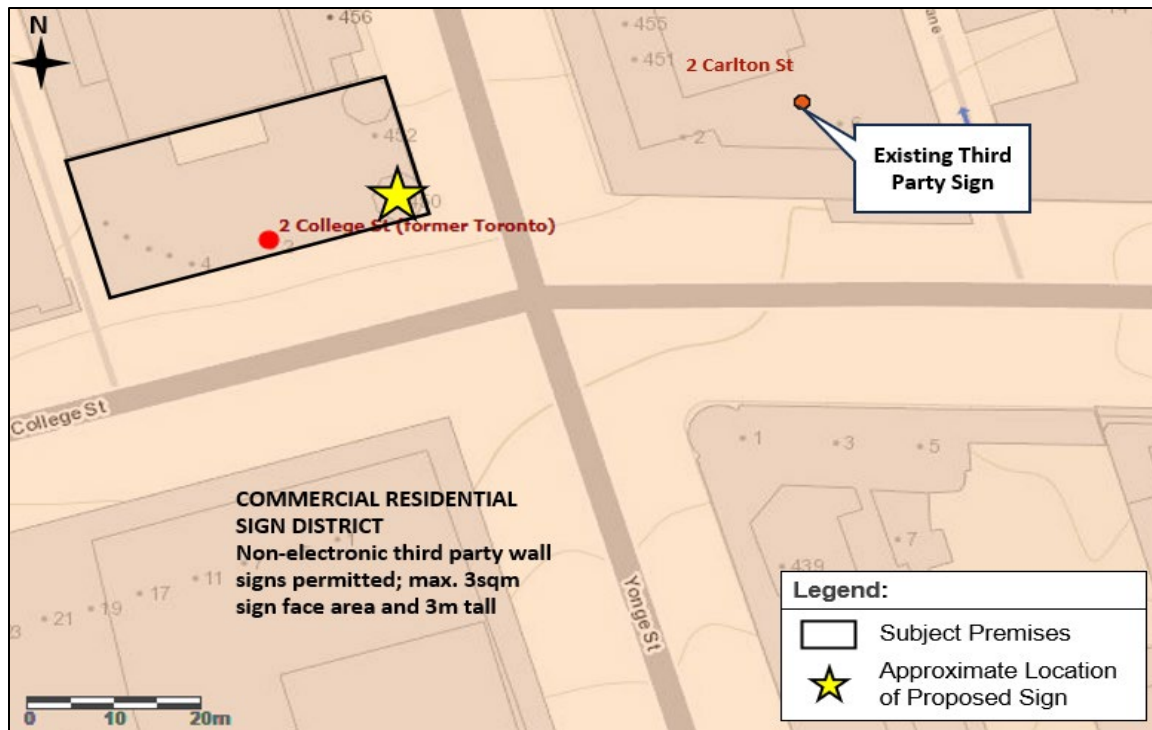
Figure 1: 3D View (from Submissions)



The surrounding properties are also designated as CR Sign Districts in the Sign By-law and Mixed Use Areas in the Official Plan. There is a four-storey heritage building with office and retail uses on the Premises. The property to the south contains College Park, a mixed-use complex with a commercial building immediately south of the Proposed Sign's location, residential towers and open space areas less than 250 meters from the Proposed Sign. The property to the west is the Maple Leaf Medical Arts Clinic. The adjacent properties to the north and east are mixed-use buildings with residential units. The identified building uses are compatible with what would be expected for Mixed Use Areas and CR Sign Districts.

The Premises is situated on the northwest quadrant of the intersection of College Street and Yonge Street. Submissions indicate that there is an existing and currently operating static copy third party sign at 2 Carton Street, around 30 metres east of the Proposed Sign's location.

Figure 2: Sign District Map



Area Compatibility

The area predominantly consists of mixed-use buildings, with residential properties immediately to the north and east. The premises and surroundings are designated as CR Sign Districts in the Sign By-law, which generally aligns with the land uses found in the area. While third party signs are permitted, regulations for CR Sign Districts do not allow third party electronic signs of any type.

A comparison of the Sign By-law regulations for third party wall signs in a CR Sign District and the Proposed Sign is as follows:

- **Sign Type:** Permitted signs include wall signs or topiary wall signs, whereas the Proposed Sign is a roof sign.
- **Sign Copy:** Permitted signs may have static copy, mechanical copy, or topiary sign copy, while the Proposed Sign displays electronic static copy.
- **Size:** The sign face area for permitted signs cannot exceed 3.0 square metres, while the Proposed Sign has an aggregate sign face area of 54 square metres.
- **Height:** Permitted signs cannot exceed 3.0 metres in height, while the Proposed Sign would be almost ten times this height.
- **Location:** Permitted signs should not be erected facing a street or within 30.0 metres of the intersection of a major street with any other street. The Proposed Sign faces Yonge Street and College Street and is less than 30.0 metres from their intersection.
- **Number of Faces:** Permitted signs may have no more than one sign face, while the Proposed Sign has two sign faces.

The building at 2 College Street, which contains offices and retail spaces, aligns with the area's designation and surroundings. A key distinguishing feature of the property is its heritage status, which significantly conflicts with the Proposed Amendment.

Third party electronic signs are generally inconsistent with Official Plan objectives for Mixed-Use areas, given the sensitive uses expected and encouraged for those lands. The provisions regulating signs in CR Sign Districts are intended to promote more pedestrian-oriented signs and advertisements, primarily to identify local businesses. The Applicant's Submission does not demonstrate how the Proposed Amendment, which would permit a prohibited sign type eighteen times larger and nearly ten times taller than what is allowed for a third party sign in the CR Sign District, would be compatible with the area.

In Sign Districts where third party electronic signs are permitted, they are required to be set back at least 60 metres from sensitive land uses and, if located within 250 metres of a sensitive land use, they are not permitted to face those properties. The Residential and Open Space areas identified in proximity to the Proposed Sign's location are deemed sensitive; however, the submissions lack information on the potential impacts of the Proposed Sign on nearby lands.

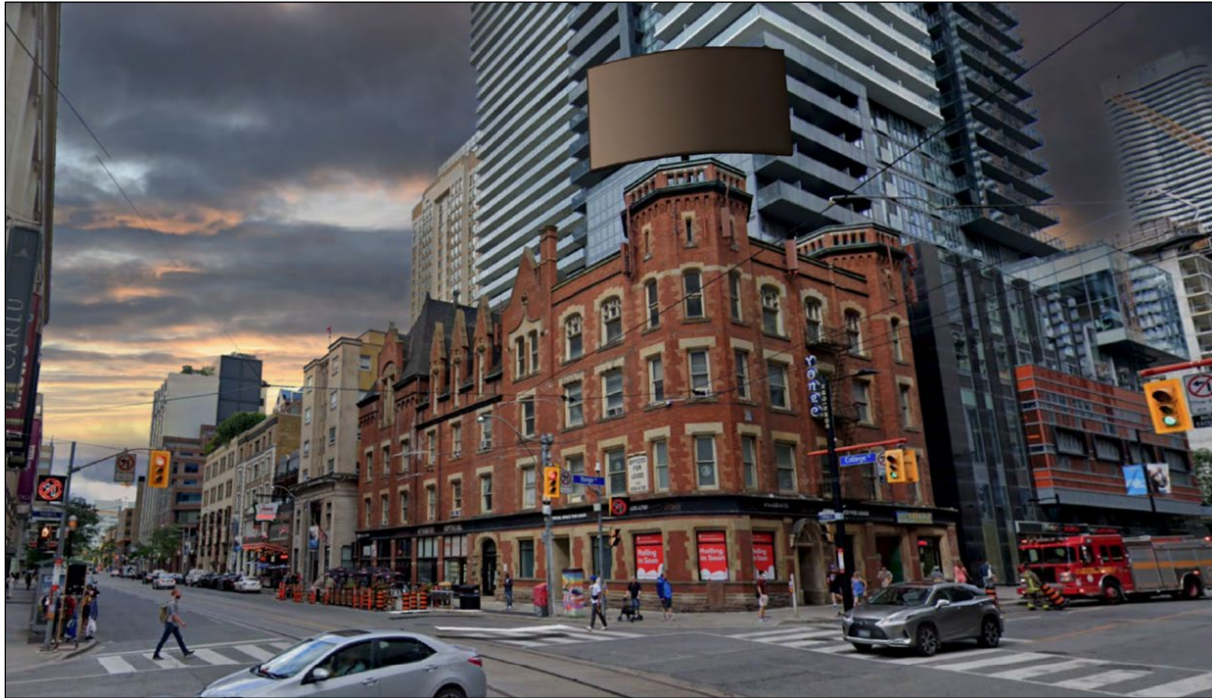
As previously mentioned, the building located at 2 College Street is designated as heritage under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act, By-law 176-97. The Sign By-law does not permit third party signs to be erected on either a listed or designated heritage building.

In consultation with Heritage Planning, Toronto Building staff were informed that the Proposed Sign conflicts with several heritage guidelines. The southernmost tower, a significant heritage attribute per By-law 176-97, would be obscured by the sign's size and location, detracting from the building's heritage character. Furthermore, heritage guidelines discourage digital display screens. Other concerns include the possible removal of bricks on the parapet wall to attach the Proposed Sign, an action that would alter a designated heritage attribute. Heritage Planning flagged this as potentially problematic and emphasized that a heritage permit would be required.

The Premises are also regulated under the North Downtown Yonge Site and Area Specific Policy. Policy 6.1.4 which establishes that Heritage Impact Assessments will be required for development applications that affect identified and potential heritage properties within this policy area. The Applicant has not provided a Heritage Impact Assessment for the Proposed Sign, and the submissions do not provide any evidence of alignment of the Proposed Sign with the building's heritage attributes. Given that the Sign By-law is one of several by-laws regulating land and building use in the city, any amendments to the Sign By-law must align with the city's broader policies and objectives. Staff assessment indicates that approving the Proposed Amendment would directly contravene other city objectives for land use and undermine the heritage policies and guidelines.

The Proposed Sign would be placed in proximity to an intersection controlled by traffic lights. The City has existing regulations to adequately address the potential for adverse safety impacts for all signs, including signs displaying electronic static copy (e.g., set back from intersections, distance from street lines, and pedestrian triangles). There is also a requirement for a minimum distance of 30 meters between any third party electronic signs and major street intersections; the Proposed Sign does not meet this required distance from the College Street and Yonge Street intersection.

Figure 3: Concept Rendering (from the Applicant's Submission)



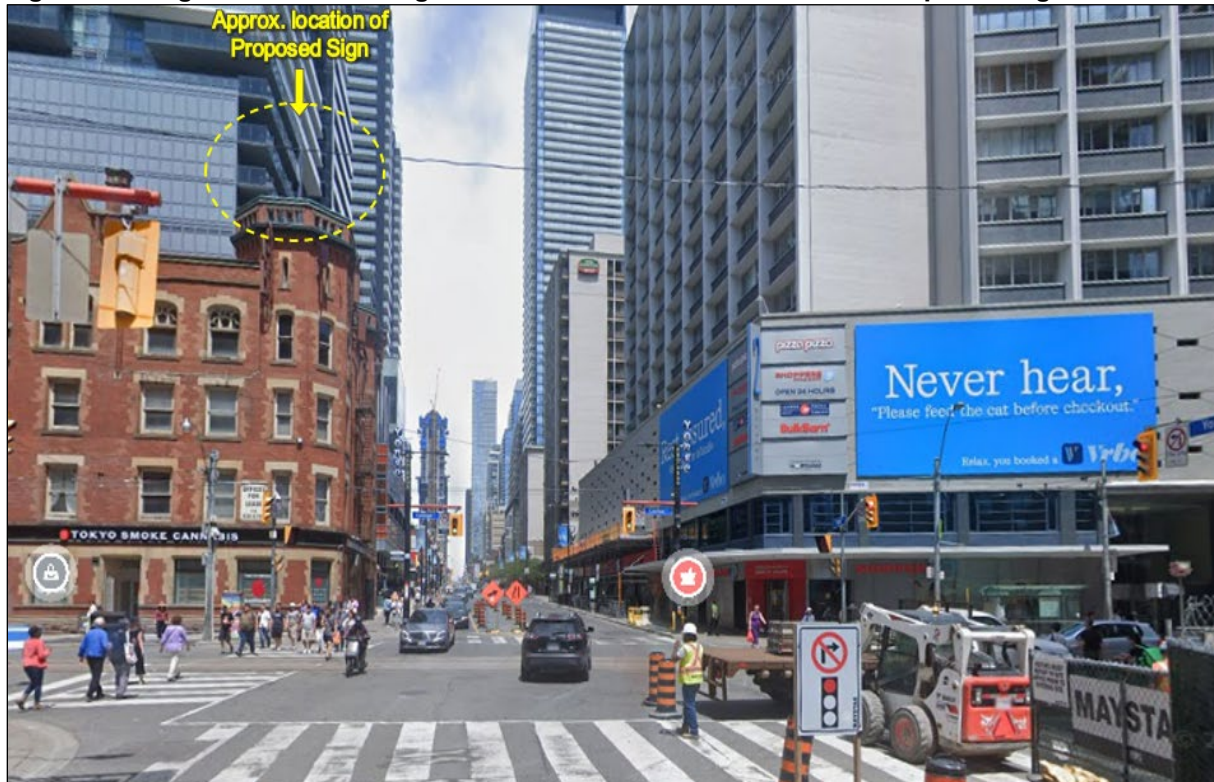
The Sign By-law also sets out specific configurations and separation distances between third party signs to avoid multiple sign faces being visible at the same time. The Proposed Sign configuration conflicts with these requirements, which could result in sign clutter detrimental to both aesthetics and traffic safety. Having two electronic sign faces that change from one message to the next, visible simultaneously, could result in drivers being more likely to observe a change in the message being displayed, which could pose a risk and a potential for driver distraction. Transportation Services has been consulted on this application and was not supportive of the Proposed Amendment.

The Applicant referenced an existing electronic sign at 2 Carlton Street, located at the northeast corner of the intersection of Yonge Street and Carlton Street, less than 30 metres east of the premises. Historical data on the existing sign, which displays static copy, indicates that the installation this sign predates the current Sign By-law. The fact that pre-authorized signs, which do not align with the current City Council's vision for development and have not yet been replaced by signs that do, is of limited relevance in

determining whether the Proposed Sign is compatible with the development of a premises or the surrounding area.

Despite pre-dating the current Sign By-law, the sign at 2 Carlton Street does influence current regulatory requirements concerning the minimum separation between third party signs. The Sign By-law requires a minimum separation of 100 metres between third party signs, and the Proposed Sign, only 30 metres to the west, falls short of this requirement. This, combined with the fact that the Proposed Sign and the sign at 2 Carlton Street would be visible at the same time, raises further concerns about sign clutter in the area.

Figure 4: Google Street View –Sign at 2 Carleton St. in relation to the Proposed Sign’s location



As stated before, third party electronic roof signs are expressly prohibited by subsection 694-15B(11) of the Sign By-law, except in specific contexts like the DS-SSD, where animated signs are considered a contributing feature given its unique character. The Proposed Sign is not within or near this area.

Since 2010, the Sign By-law has expressly prohibited third party roof signs to prevent negative visual impacts that may undermine urban design objectives. Staff investigation indicates that the Proposed Sign would detract from the building’s heritage features, and the Applicant has not provided substantive rationale to demonstrate that amending the Sign By-law to allow for, and regulate, the Proposed Sign would be appropriate. It is the CBO’s position that granting the requested amendment would not be in keeping with

broader city goals and be contrary to Council's vision for 2 College Street and the surrounding area.

Comments from Other City Divisions

Heritage Planning was not supportive of the Proposed Amendment, given that the Proposed Sign directly conflicts with heritage policies and guidelines.

City Planning staff reviewed the application and also do not support the Proposed Amendment. They raised concerns about the negative impact of the Proposed Sign on nearby residential areas and its incompatibility with the built form and existing signage in the vicinity.

Transportation Services, consulted throughout the Sign By-law development, support regulations restricting third party signs from being located within 30 meters of major intersections. They do not support the Proposed Amendment, as it is not in keeping with the Sign By-law requirements.

Community Consultation

In compliance with the Sign By-law requirements, notice of the application for the Proposed Area-Specific Amendment was provided to all property owners within a 250-meter radius of the Premises. Additionally, the Applicant was instructed to post a notice of the application in a publicly visible location on the Premises where the sign is proposed to be erected, for a minimum of 30 days prior to the City's consideration of the application, as stipulated in the Sign By-law.

The CBO also conducted an additional virtual Community Consultation session on the evening of February 13, 2025. During this session, community members expressed significant concerns about the Proposed Sign's impact on intersection traffic safety, its compatibility with the surrounding area, and the historical building. Furthermore, as of this report's date, the City has received several objection letters, emphasizing that the Proposed Sign would detrimentally affect the historical building's architecture and increase light pollution, negatively impacting local residents. Additionally, residents strongly urged the City to prevent the College and Yonge intersection from resembling Sankofa Square.

Conclusion

The Applicant has not provided sufficient justification to support an amendment to the Sign By-law which would substantially alter the regulations for third party signs at 2 College Street. The area-specific amendment would permit a large third party electronic roof sign, a sign type expressly prohibited by the current Sign By-law at this location.

The Applicant's Submissions did not demonstrate that the premises, located in a CR Sign District where third party electronic signs are not permitted, could accommodate

the Proposed Sign. The building at 2 College Street is designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act and the Proposed Sign conflicts with heritage guidelines, potentially obscuring important features and detracting from the building's heritage character.

The addition of a new third party electronic sign of this size and height also represents a significant departure from the regulations governing CR Sign Districts. Furthermore, the Proposed Sign faces sensitive land uses, two streets, and an intersection, yet the Applicant's submissions lack detailed impact assessments. The Proposed Sign also fails to meet the 100-metre separation requirement from other third party signs, raising concerns about potential sign clutter.

Staff believe that the Proposed Amendment conflicts with the objectives of the Sign By-law, contradicts the city's broader goals and the Council's vision for the Premises and surrounding area, and should not be approved. Therefore, it is the position of the CBO that the current regulations for the Premises are appropriate and should not be modified as requested by the Applicant.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

1. Proposed Area-Specific Amendment – 2 College Street