

Planning Staff Analysis

SD23-0002a/James Wood Autopark Special Sign District

City Council District #4

REQUEST:

Establish a Special Sign District for James Wood Autopark.

SITE DATA:

James Wood Autopark is a 54-acre site zoned Highway Corridor (HC) which includes an automotive sales dealership with several sales buildings, service, and collision centers with associated automotive sales display parking.

The site is bordered by two roadways:

- **Interstate 35E:** Interstate 35E is classified as a Freeway in the 2022 Mobility Plan. It is designed with a two-lane service road and three-lane freeway each direction. The subject site is designed with five driveway connections to the Interstate 35E service road. These driveway connections provide entrances to the various brand auto dealerships within the overall AutoPark as well as the collision center.
- **State School Road:** State School Road is classified as a Primary Arterial in the 2022 Mobility Plan. The site includes three driveway connections to State School Road. These connections serve the body shop and truck sales and service with connections to the other areas of the automotive dealership.

SURROUNDING ZONING AND USES:

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Northwest: Zoning: Highway Corridor (HC) Use: Undeveloped | North: Zoning: Mixed-Use Regional (MR) Use: Hotel, Automotive Sales, Medical Clinic | Northeast: Zoning: Highway Corridor (HC) Use: Auto Repair Shop |
| West: Zoning: Mixed-Use Regional (MR) Use: Auto Wash, Restaurant with Drive-Through | SUBJECT PROPERTY | East: Zoning: Highway Corridor (HC) Use: Automotive Sales |
| Southwest: Zoning: Public Facilities (PF) Use: Park, Open Space | South: Zoning: Highway Corridor (HC) Use: Undeveloped | Southeast: Zoning: Planned Development (PD) Use: Undeveloped |

CONSIDERATIONS:

- A. Section 33.18 of the Denton Sign Code (Chapter 33 of the Code of Ordinances) provides approval criteria applicable the creation of a sign district for any property which has more than three hundred (300) feet of continuous street frontage on one (1) public street:
1. *Provides a Comprehensive Plan for signs that would be clearly superior to what would be allowed without the plan*
Signs are needed as part of the urban built environment: they provide directions for residents and visitors and communicate messages for commerce and community. However, signs can create nuisances such as visual clutter on city streets, glare for nearby property owners, and distraction for drivers. Generally, sign regulations aim to balance a property owner’s sign needs with a community’s aesthetic and safety goals by limiting the type, size, number, and setbacks to minimize nuisances.

Due to the large size of James Wood Autopark, number of buildings, large automotive sales parking display area, diverse array of daily activities, various driveway connections, and arrangement of facilities, James Wood Autopark relies upon signage to effectively direct motorists to their desired locations within the site. Because of these conditions, some proposed ground sign designs and locations do not meet the regulations within the Code of Ordinances Chapter 33 Denton Sign Code. The proposed Special Sign District (JWASSD) establishes a comprehensive plan for ground signs for the James Wood Autopark property that is equal to or superior to the minimum standards under the Denton Sign Code by adapting the ground sign regulations to meet the distinct needs of an expansive automotive sales dealership while seeking to reduce impacts on the neighboring properties. A full listing of the JWASSD standards is provided in Exhibit 6, and the following demonstrate elements which are superior to what would be allowed without the plan:

- **Maximum Effective Area:** Per Section 33.14.2(b), signs on IH 35N, 35E, or 35W have a maximum effective area of 250 square feet. The signs proposed by the JWASSD do not exceed the maximum effective area for IH 35E. The effective area ranges from 15.6 square feet to 226.25 square feet, lower than the maximum allowed. This smaller sign size reduces potential visual impacts along the freeway frontage.
- **Maximum Height:** Per Section 33.14.2(b), signs on IH 35N, 35E, or 35W have a maximum height of 40 feet. As proposed, three ground signs in the JWASSD exceed the maximum height by 7 feet, while the Traffic Control 1 sign is under the maximum height by 32 feet. The increase in maximum height for the three ground signs would allow for greater visibility of the signs along the elevated IH 35E corridor. Additionally, the proposed 47-foot height is consistent with the height of these signs when they existed in the past, prior to being removed by TXDOT due to right-of-way acquisition, so it would not introduce anything new to the highway corridor.
- **Design:** The proposal includes cohesive materials, colors, and detailing which complements the dealership architecture, color palette, and materials. This unified sign package may reduce visual clutter with consistency and uniformity.

2. *Would be compatible with surrounding properties. In considering whether a district and sign plan is "compatible" and "clearly superior", the commission and council shall consider, but are not limited to considering the following:*

a. *Scale. The relationship between and compatibility of sign scale, site scale and the scale of nearby buildings.*

The buildings throughout the subject site and on adjacent properties containing automotive sales uses are large and can be challenging to locate while driving at a high speed on the freeway, the service road, or within the expansive auto dealership site. The property as a whole is large and complex, with 54 acres, 8 structures, a large amount of covered and uncovered parking for vehicle sales display, employee and visitor parking, 8 driveway connections, and many drive aisles. Given the scale of the site and facility, JWASSD includes numerous ground signs and a traffic control sign to ensure visitors are able to locate their desired locations. Additionally, while the ground signs exceed the maximum height, the proposed height is appropriate with the scale of the subject site and other signage commonly located along the IH 35 corridor.

- b. *Color. The relationship between and compatibility of sign color to the color of nearby buildings and landscaping: The degree to which sign colors are complimentary to its surroundings.*

The sign colors correspond to the brand colors and coloring of the buildings for each brand. The Chevrolet sign and building both contain blue, the Cadillac sign contains a black background that aligns with the logo on the building, and the Buick sign contains a black background that aligns with the logo and trim of the building. The service traffic control sign and Chevrolet sign are also compatible with the blue color used for the covered parking areas.

- a. *Material. The materials of the signs and how they relate to their surroundings.*

The materials for the signs include a pole for visibility with the dealership branding and business name contained in the upper portion of the sign. Materials for the sign types are appropriate in an automotive sales use setting and consistent with the architectural style of similar uses.

- b. *Shape. The shape and design of the signs and how they relate to their surroundings.*

The shape and design of the proposed ground signs are compatible with the site architecture and typical of signs found on freeways to provide visibility for businesses:

- **Ground Signs 1, 2, and 3** are designed with a square shape and traditional detailing. The lettering and brand logo elements are provided on the sign near the driveway location for the building for each brand or department. The signs are consistent in shape with the existing Pre-Owned sign located on the site today.
- **Traffic Control 1** sign is smaller in size, with a rectangular shape, with white lettering and directional arrow. The service building is located behind other buildings and set further back from the freeway, and the directional arrow will assist visitors in locating this building.

- c. *Landscaping. The relationship of signs to landscaped features in and outside the district.*

The ground signs would be installed adjacent to the Interstate 35E service road. Landscaping was previously installed along some portions of the service road frontage; however, all landscaping along the service road was removed along with the dealership's signs when TxDOT acquired this portion of the subject site as right of way. If this site were to redevelop in the future and compliance with the landscaping standards in Denton Development Code (DDC) Section 7.7 was required, landscaping could be planted around the proposed signs and street trees with compatible heights could be planted along the frontage, outside of the TxDOT ROW, or in other locations throughout the subject site.

- d. *Traffic safety and traffic circulation. The impact of the signs on driver's view, the degree to which view obstructions are created or improved, avoidance of confusion with or obstruction of traffic control signs and devices, and the time it takes a motorist to read the sign.*

The signs proposed within the JWASSD are not anticipated to obstruct drivers' view or create confusion. Rather, each ground sign will help provide legible directions to various locations within the site.

- e. *Illumination. The impact and compatibility of sign illumination within the district and in relation to neighboring properties. The avoidance of glare and light pollution.*

The proposed signs are internally illuminated and meet the requirements of the Denton Sign Code for setbacks from residential uses.

- f. *Integration. How the signs in the district are integrated into a unified development concept with the topography, building design, other signs, landscaping, traffic circulation and other development features on the district and nearby property.*

- i. *Is not being used merely to avoid or gain a variance of the sign regulations;*
The proposed special sign district is not intended to merely vary from the sign regulations; rather, the purpose is to comprehensively plan the ground signs to determine the appropriate number, optimal locations, adequate sizes, and the compatible design to clearly communicate necessary information while minimizing potential impacts. Additionally, given the TXDOT right-of-way acquisition and resulting physical impacts to the site, the proposed sign district allows for placement of the signs while working with the existing site constraints.

- ii. *Does not violate the spirit or intent of the sign regulations; and*
According to Section 33.1(c), the purpose of the sign regulations is to balance important and competing interests, including the constitutional right to free speech and the public interests in safety and aesthetics, including controlling visual clutter.

The proposed JWASSD would not violate this purpose; rather, it is intended to promote James Wood Autopark and direct vehicular traffic to various areas throughout the property. Additionally, the proposed special sign district limits potential visual clutter by placing ground signs in key locations to welcome visitors and direct drivers, potentially reducing the need for additional signs throughout the site.

- iii. *Complies with the requirements of this section.*

The proposal complies with the requirements of this section for the creation of a Special Sign District.

- g. *Under no circumstances may a special sign district be used to authorize construction of new billboards or any other new signs that are otherwise prohibited under section 33-4, or one (1) or more signs that will be used for general advertising for hire.*

The sign package in the JWASSD does not include signs that are otherwise prohibited under Section 33.4.