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Sarasota Herald-Tribune

TELEPHONE 494-0522 SECTION-B Sun., July 20, 1980

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REPORT

Planners Vote To Back Change In Sign Law

By PAT BLANCHAT
Herald-Tribune Reporter

Highway billboards could begin multiplying if a proposed amendment to the county sign ordinance is finally adopted by the Sarasota County Commission.

Last week the County Planning Commission recommended by a 4-3 vote that billboards be allowed every quarter mile in commercial and industrial zones. The sign ordinance now requires 5,000 feet between billboards.

The Sarasota County Commission, which has the final vote in such matters, will hold a public hearing on the proposed amendment to the zoning code in approximately a month.

Several members of the Planning Commission said they felt the present sign ordinance is too restrictive.

"Very few zoning classifications allow (highway billboards) anyway; this, combined with the 5,000-foot restriction could put many people out of business," said Commissioner Mabry Carlton. "If that's our intention, let's say so and pay them off, but let's not regulate them out of business."

Commission Chairman John Pennington said he felt the current ordinance is hurting local tourist attractions.

Commission members Jim Pierce and John Davidson argued against relaxing the standards on aesthetic grounds.

"You'll be sorry you did this when you see all those signs along the highway," Pierce said.

Commission member Lois Jones countered that county roads would not become overrun with billboards because they can only be erected in commercial and industrial zones.

The quarter mile standard, which was proposed by Carlton, is still more restrictive than what local sign companies wanted. They had asked that billboards be allowed every 500 feet.

The commission also turned thumbs down to industry requests to increase the maximum size of billboards from 400 to 476 square feet, and to allow 600 square foot signs if they are set back an additional 50 feet from the roadway.

The commission did agree to change language in the ordinance that requires all oversize billboards to be taken down within five years. The commission feels the nonconforming billboards should be allowed to remain standing until they can no longer be used. Once they wear out or fall down, however, they could not be rebuilt.

In other action, the planning commission recommended that the zoning code be amended to allow "rehabilitative clinics" such as drug and alcohol abuse counseling services to be located in commercial, industrial and office districts. The amendment was proposed to accommodate **Straight Inc.**, a St. Petersburg-based, nonprofit drug counselling organization, which wants to open a clinic in Sarasota.

The Kampgrounds of America (KOA) travel trailer park be granted a special exception from the zoning code so it can expand its operations on an adjacent 30-acre tract. KOA, which is located off DeSoto Road, is requesting permission to add 282 travel trailer sites on property abutting the existing park. The park now has 153 sites.