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El Dorado County stops LED sign, but review due

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El Dorado County officials don't want the kind of bright LED signs found at Folsom Auto Mall and California State University migrating into the foothills, where residents prize night skies illuminated only by the moon and stars.

The county Planning Commission last week blocked a 5-by-12-foot LED reader board at the El Dorado Hills Community Services District headquarters along heavily traveled El Dorado Hills Boulevard.

Commissioners acknowledged, though, that the pressure to allow the signs is increasing and called for a workshop to consider technologies more in keeping with the county's aesthetic values.

Commissioners object to the high contrast of LED signs, which can look like a large television along the roadside.

Wayne Lowery, district general manager, acknowledged the county doesn't want signs "all over," but urged the commission to make an exception for El Dorado Hills.

"We are very much an urbanized community on the edge of a rural county," he said.

In a recent survey, he said, residents gave the district poor marks for communication, calling for an improved Web site and state-of-the-art signage.

"They want to know why the heck we're using banners on the corner instead of LED (messages)," Lowery told the commission. The district's sign would not include moving images and could be dimmed at night, he said.

Jim Campo, whose home is about 400 yards from the sign's proposed Community Park location, said, "That sign will degrade the neighborhood."

Campo, who opposes the sign, noted that nearby Oak Ridge High School, which is not subject to county sign regulations, has installed an LED reader board.

Artificial light has long stirred controversy in El Dorado Hills, though the target typically has been athletic-field lights. Neighboring residents protested after field lights were installed at Community Park in 1989, and the lights eventually were removed.

More recently, residents of the Promontory neighborhood, who opted to forgo street lights to avoid light pollution, fought unsuccessfully to prevent their installation at Promontory Park.

Some people suggest limiting reader boards to government facilities and public health and safety messages, but deputy County Counsel Paula Frantz said such restrictions could run afoul of the First Amendment.

"The first one will not be the last one," Frantz said, of such signs. "You will not be able to say 'no' to the next one very easily."

Jim O'Camb, a division chief with the El Dorado Hills Fire Department, said the department was awaiting the outcome of the community services district's request before seeking similar signs at three stations to publicize such things as child car-seat campaigns and CPR classes and to post emergency advisories.

"There are subtle ways to put a message out there, and there are obnoxious ways," O'Camb said.

Incorporating new technologies into the county's sign ordinance, he said, is long overdue.

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