



CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

A COAST GUARD CITY

Planning and Community Development Department

AGENDA ITEM

Case No: VAR 23-10
Proposal: Variance for illuminated, directional, and wall mounted signs
Applicants: Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC)
Owners: Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium
Location: 227 Tongass Drive
Legal: SEARHC Subdivision
Zone: P - Public Lands District
Size: 15.1 Acres
Parcel ID: 1-9401-000
Existing Use: Under development, health clinics, patient housing
Adjacent Use: Health Care, Education, US Coast Guard
Utilities: Existing
Access: Tongass Drive and Airport Road

KEY POINTS AND CONCERNS

- A variance from development standards regarding sign illumination and size is requested for the Mt. Edgecumbe Medical Center, approved under CUP 20-12
- The property is uniquely located in relation to major streets and surrounding developments
- As a hospital, and a regional health care center, there are unique needs for signage that warrant special consideration

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Aerial
Attachment B: Sign Package
Attachment C: Site Plan
Attachment D: Plat
Attachment E: Photos
Attachment F: Applicant Materials

BACKGROUND/PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As approved under CUP 20-12, SEARHC is actively constructing the new hospital facility on their Tongass Drive property. As a part of the design and construction, SEARHC has designed a sign package to assist the public and other emergency services with navigating the new facility and the rest of the campus. The applicant has provided the sign package which is included as an attachment and identifies the various signs, assigning each with a sign type designation E0 – E15 which will be referred to in this staff report. There are three provisions under the sign code (SGC 22.20.090) that the applicant is requesting variances from:

1. Direct Illumination: SGC 22.20.090.E.15 states that signs in this zoning district may only be indirectly illuminated (i.e. have an external light source that shines on to the sign rather than the sign having a direct light source within the sign). SEARHC requests twelve (12) signs have direct illumination:
 - All three (3) of the large identification signs (identified as sign types E1 and E2)
 - Two (2) of the smaller identification signs (identified as sign types E3 and E5)
 - Seven (7) of the directional signs (identified as sign types E7 and E8).
2. Identification Sign Sizes: SGC 22.20.090.E.3 states that signs identifying hospitals are allowed provided that they are not more than 20 square feet in area and are mounted flush to the wall or observe an appropriate setback. SEARHC requests to have:
 - Two (2) illuminated signs that are 82 square feet in area each, mounted flush to the north and south building walls. These signs are identified as sign type E1.
 - One (1) illuminated, freestanding sign that is 40 square feet in area that observes the required 5' setback from Tongass Drive. This sign is identified as sign type E2.
 - There are also smaller signs identifying entrances, ambulance entry, and emergency department entrances but none of these signs exceed 20 square feet in area.
3. Directional Sign Sizes: SGC 22.20.090.E.14 states that directional signs shall not exceed 6 square feet in area and are limited to one per entrance or exit to parking areas. As SEARHC has a large campus area to provide directional signage for, it is requested to approve:
 - Two (2) signs that are 28 square feet on each side and illuminated (sign type E7)
 - Five (5) signs that are 17 square feet on each side and illuminated (sign type E8)
 - Two (2) signs that are 9 square feet on each side and not illuminated (sign type E14)

A previous variance (VAR 21-15) was approved for the monument sign located near the intersection of Airport Road and Tongass Drive. This variance allowed the sign to exceed 20 square feet (a maximum of 55 square feet was approved), and for the sign to be directly illuminated.

ANALYSIS

The Sitka General Code has extensive guidance on allowable signage including regulation of sign types, sizes, placement, and illumination. Alaska Statute 29.40.040(b)(3) states that a variance may not be granted solely to relieve financial hardship or inconvenience; the applicant must demonstrate that the variance is warranted due to a unique need/circumstance surrounding the request.

Illumination

Direct illumination of signs is only allowed in the CBD, C-1, C-1, and I zones. Indirect illumination is allowed in other zones, and intended to be arranged such that “*no direct rays of light are projected from such source into residences or any street right-of-way.*” This provision speaks to the intent of the regulations around illumination – preventing light pollution or glare in residential areas or for motorists/pedestrians.

This development is unique in its location relative to major, arterial streets and its location relative to nearby properties/developments. Some publicly zoned properties are in close proximity to residential areas, or within natural/recreational areas where sign illumination could create undesirable light pollution which is why as a general rule, direct illumination is likely not allowed outright in this zone. This property is located among other public uses, and has considerable buffer distances between neighboring developments. As a hospital, it is critical that signage is clearly visible in all weather and seasonal lighting conditions, especially for motorists and pedestrians seeking emergency services/medical attention. Given the campus’ location and distance from major streets, glare is not expected to negatively impact vehicular safety or sightlines. The sign package provides excellent night view renderings to provide a sense of the illumination. The freestanding identification sign and illuminated directional signs have illumination limited to the borders of the sign and the lettering, significantly reducing the potential for hazardous glare – arguably better than indirect lighting.

Sign Size

As a critical and emergency service, hospitals require clear, visible signage in order to appropriately direct patients, visitors, and other emergency services. As a regional health care center, many patients and visitors to the campus may not share the same familiarity with the campus as Sitka residents, further necessitating extensive signage.

The size of the illuminated identification signs mounted to the building appear to have an appropriate scale for the structure. As best practices for hospital structures encourage more vertical rather than horizontal development, the height of the hospital building is an important factor in considering the appropriateness of the sign size.

With the layout of the campus being spread over a large area and two streets, the directional signs have to convey a substantial amount of information that would be difficult to read on 6 square foot signs. Reducing this information down to the smaller, code required size would introduce more of a traffic hazard as motorists would have to strain to read them, distracting them from driving.

In conclusion, the variance request appears to be warranted given the unique location and design of the campus, and the unique needs for signage associated with a hospital. Impacts for nuisance light

in residential areas or glare that would be hazardous to traffic appear unlikely and/or minimal.

Comprehensive Plan Guidance

The Economic Development chapter of the Comprehensive Plan notes that Sitka's positioning to become a regional healthcare hub is a key economic opportunity for the future. Approval of this variance would enable the applicant to install modern, appropriate, and necessary signage to support a regional healthcare facility.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends approval of the variance to allow for direct sign illumination, and increased size for identification and directional signage consistent with the application provided.

MOTIONS TO APPROVE THE ZONING VARIANCE

1. **"I move to approve the zoning variance for direct illumination and size of signs at 227 Tongass Drive in the P Public Lands district subject to the attached conditions of approval. The property is also known as SEARHC Subdivision. The request is filed by Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium. The owner of record is Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium."**

Conditions of Approval

- a. Two signs identified in the sign package as E1 are approved to be 82 square feet and directly illuminated.
- b. One sign identified in the sign package as E2 is approved to be 40 square feet per side and directly illuminated.
- c. One sign identified in the sign package as E3 is approved to be directly illuminated.
- d. One sign identified in the sign package as E5 is approved to be directly illuminated.
- e. Two signs identified in the sign package as E7 are approved to be 28 square feet per side and directly illuminated.
- f. Five signs identified in the sign package as E8 are approved to be 17 square feet per side and directly illuminated.
- g. Two signs identified in the sign package as E14 are approved to be 9 square feet per side.
- h. Sign plans shall remain consistent with the narrative and plans provided by the applicant for this request. Any substantive changes to the plan will require additional Planning Commission review.
- i. The Planning Commission, at its discretion, may schedule a public hearing at any time for the purpose of resolving issues with the request and mitigating adverse impacts on nearby properties upon receipt of meritorious complaint or evidence of violation of conditions of approval.
- j. Substantial construction progress must be made on the project within one year of the date of the variance approval or the approval becomes void. In the event it can be documented that other substantial progress has been made, a one-year extension may be granted by the Planning Director if a request is filed within eleven months of the initial approval.

2. “I move to adopt and approve the required findings for minor variances as listed in the report.”

Before any variance is granted, it shall be shown¹:

Required Findings for Minor Expansions, Small Structures, Fences, and Signs:

- a. The municipality finds that the necessary threshold for granting this variance should be lower than thresholds for variances involving major structures or major expansions *because signs are a minor improvement to a property, and the overall impact of the development was appropriately considered in the permitting process for the hospital project as a whole;*
- b. The granting of the variance is not injurious to nearby properties or improvements *due to the significant buffering between the subject property and neighboring properties, the design of the signs that prevent glare, and because it reduces traffic hazards in the area through appropriately visible signage;*
- c. The granting of the variance furthers an appropriate use of the property *because it provides necessary signage for a hospital/health care services that were approved through the conditional use permit process.*

¹ Section 22.30.160(D)(2)—Required Findings for Minor Variances