

City Planning Department



Memo

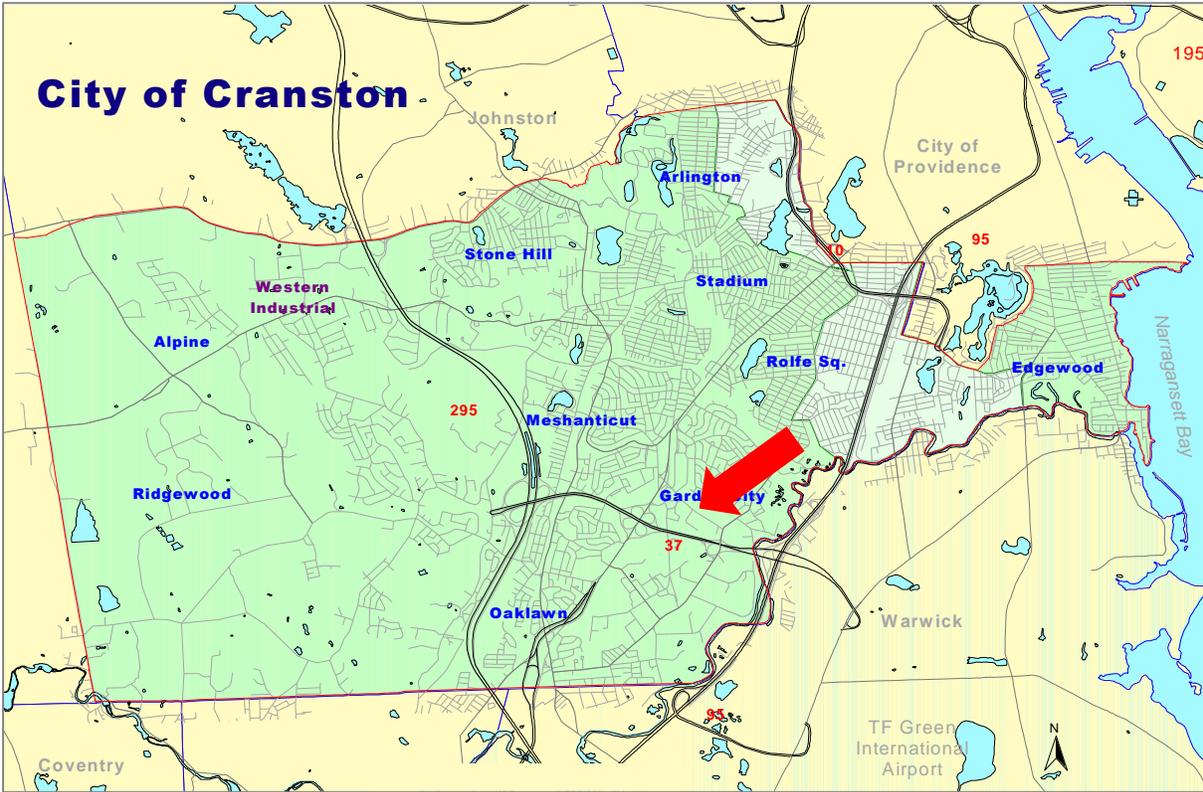
To: Cranston City Plan Commission
From: Joshua Berry, AICP, Senior Planner
Date: July 1, 2020
Re: Variance Application for 125 Sockanosset Crossroad (AP 10/4, Lot 1498)

Owner: Marcia B. Smith & Marvin M. Smith
Applicant: Wines & More of RI, Inc.
Location: 125 Sockanosset Crossroad
Zone: C-3 (General business)
FLU: Commercial/Highway Services

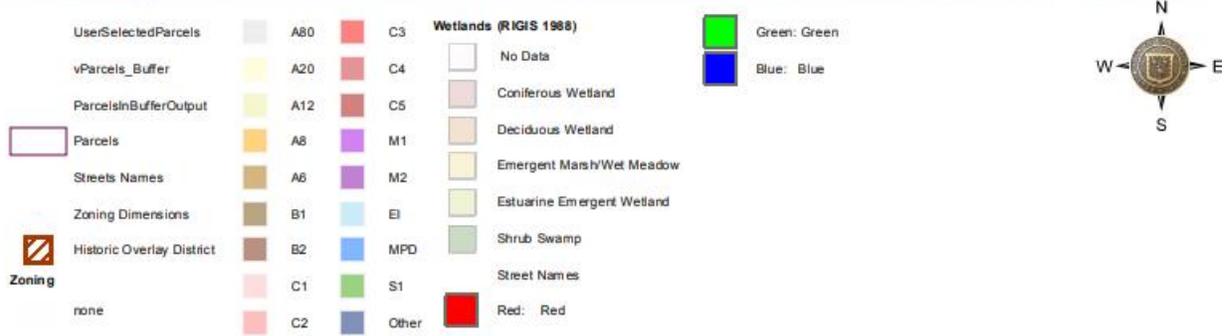
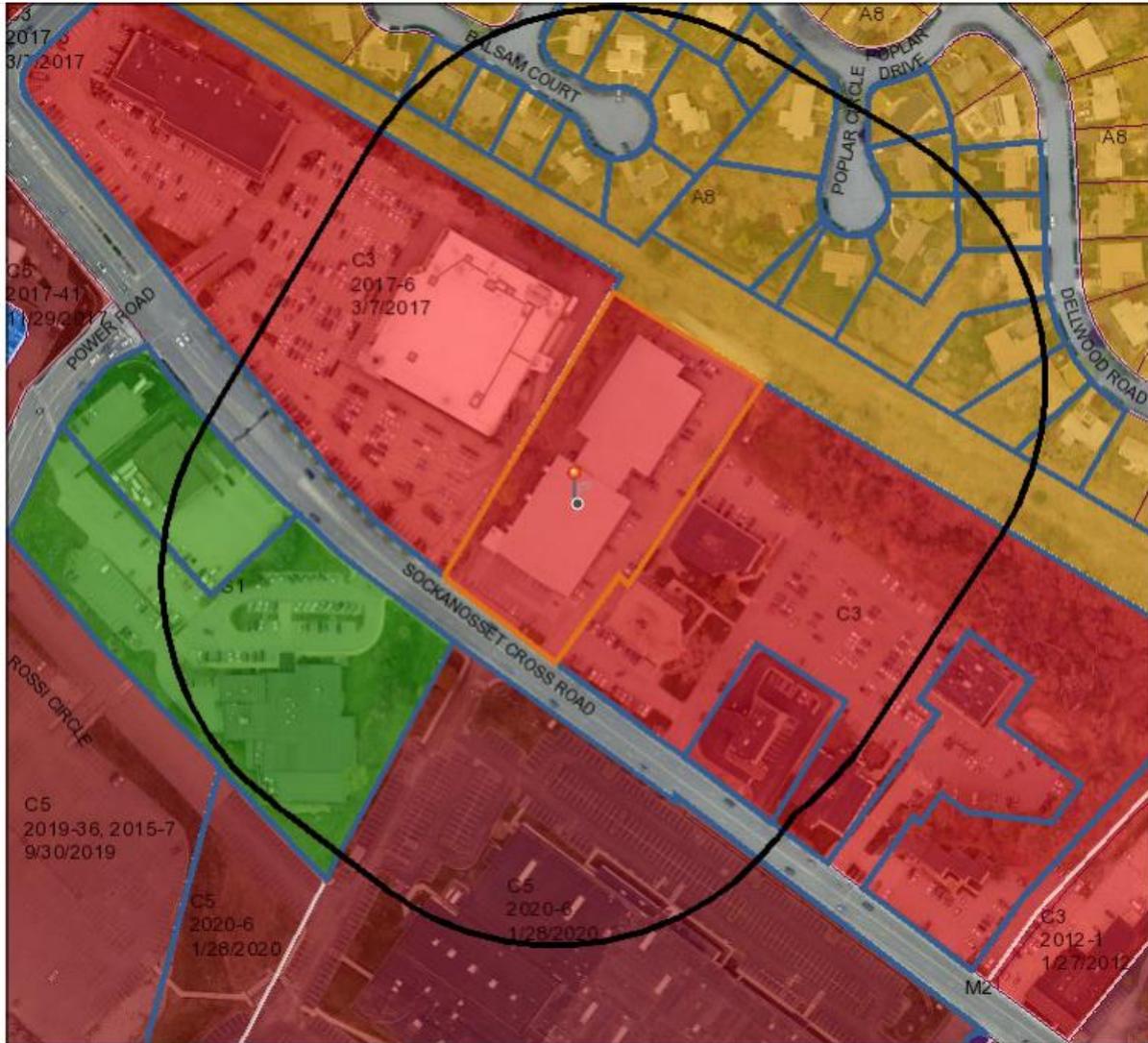
DIMENSIONAL VARIANCE REQUEST:

1. To allow an animated sign to replace the changeable copy portion of an existing free standing sign where LED/digital/animated signs are not allowed in any zone. [17.72.010 - Signs]

LOCATION MAP



ZONING MAP

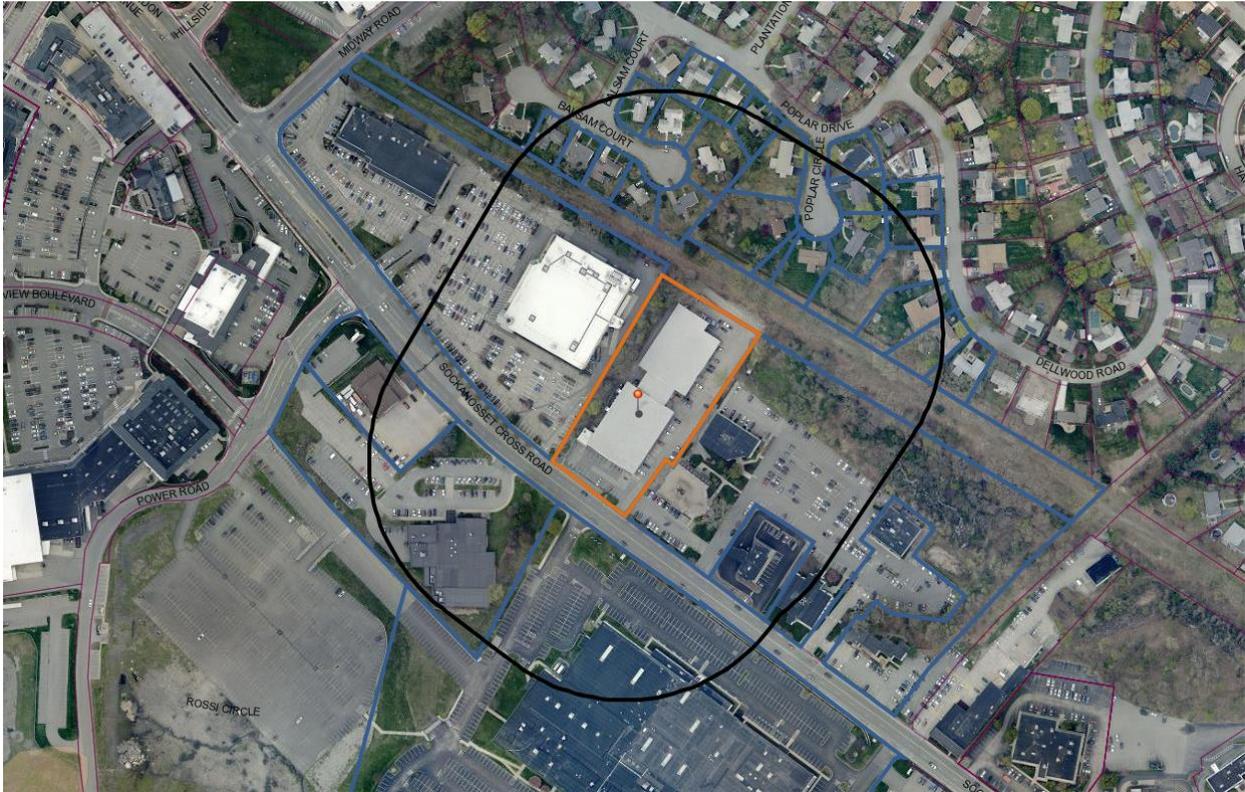


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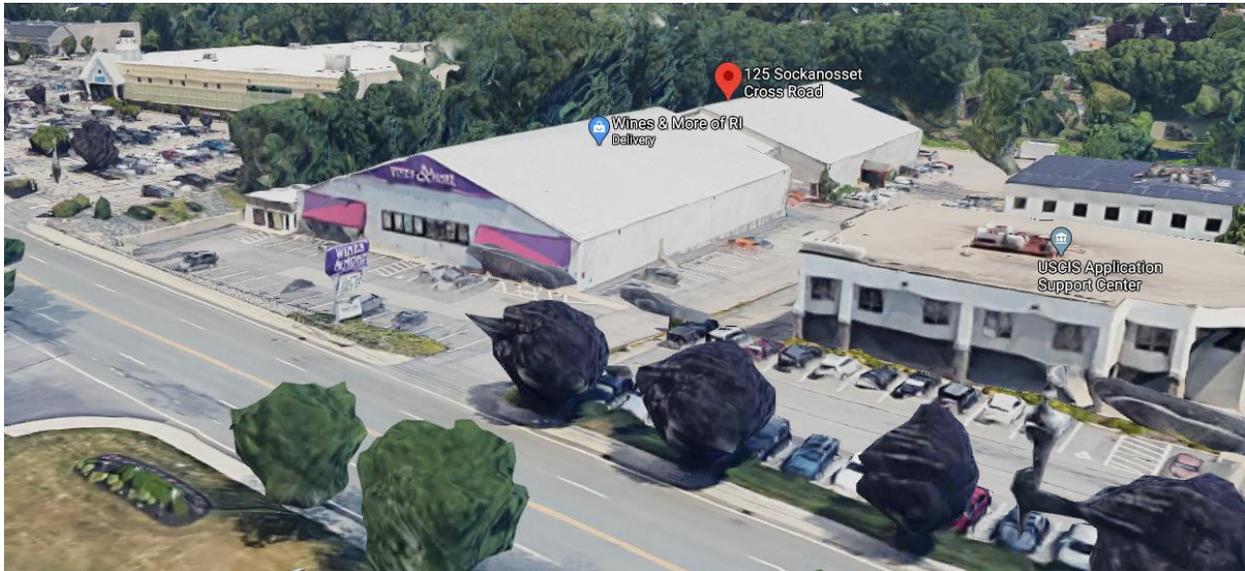


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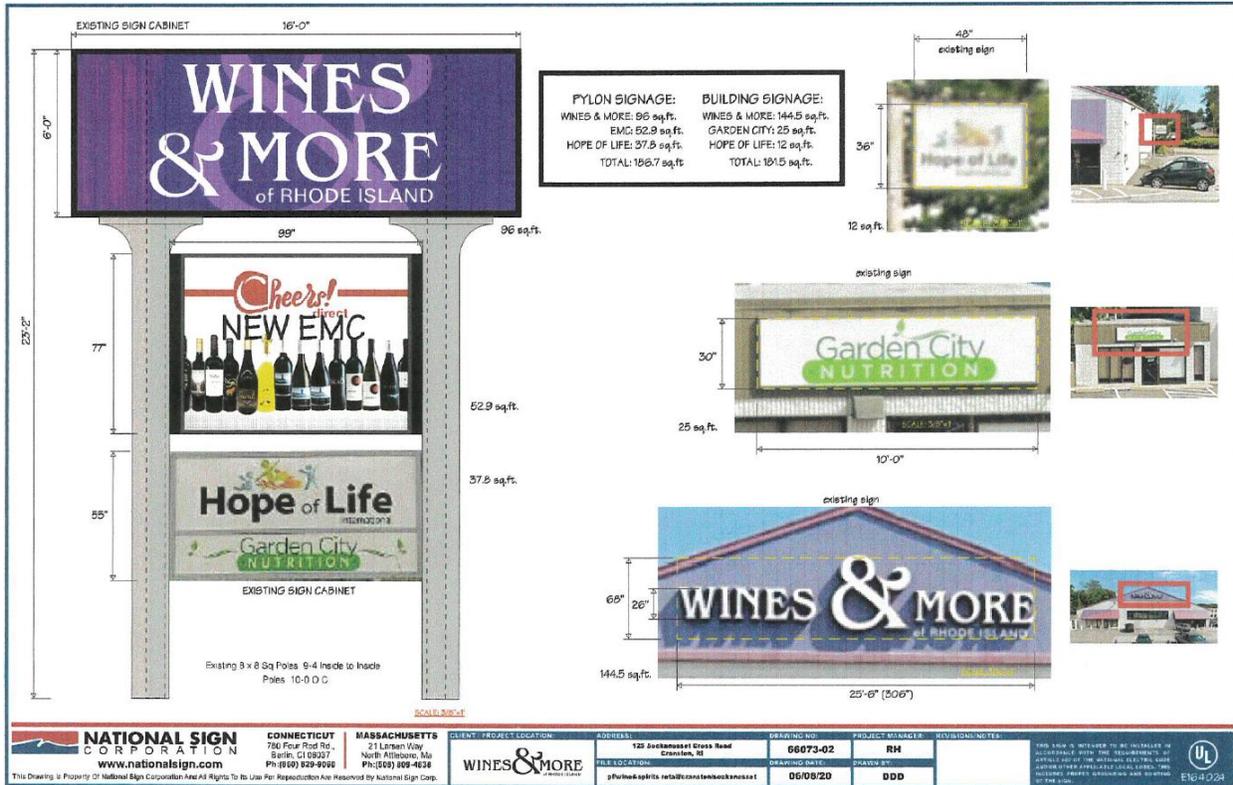
NEIGHBORHOOD AERIAL
(subject parcel marked in orange, 400 foot radius marked in black)



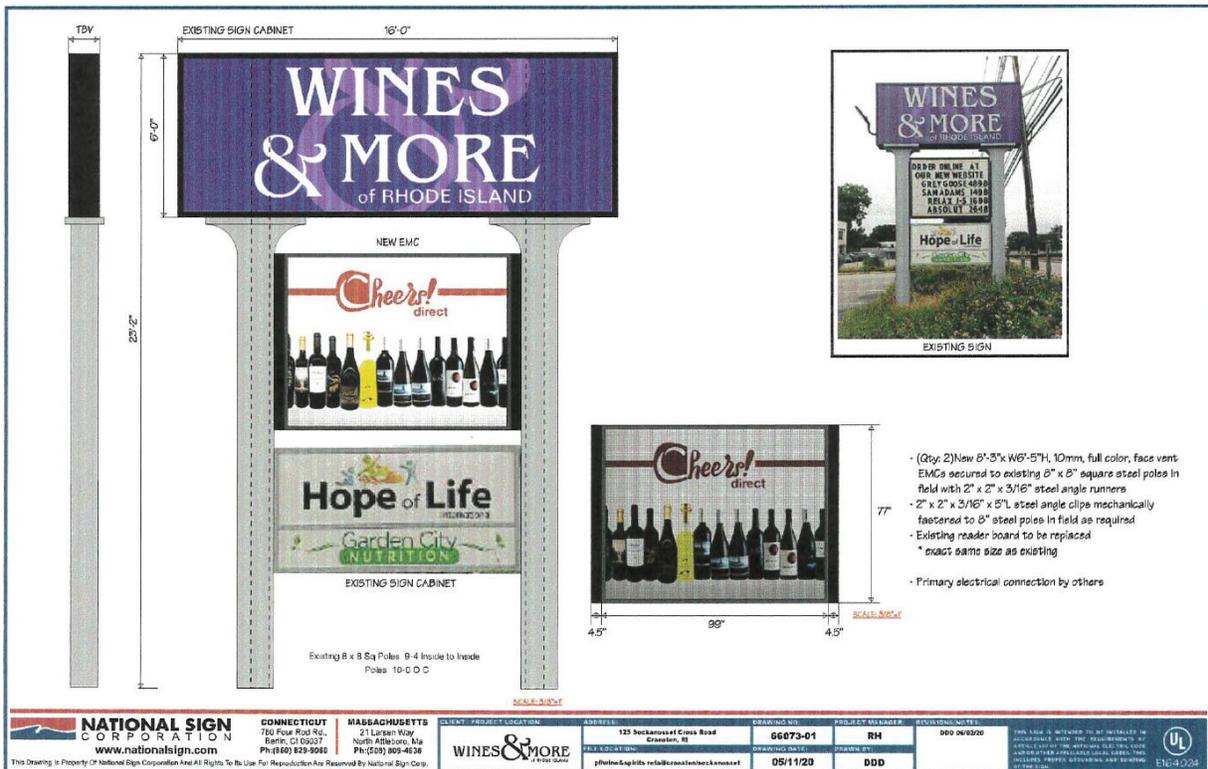
3-D AERIAL VIEW



SIGNAGE DETAILS



EXISTING VS PROPOSED



STREET VIEWS (from Sockanosset Cross Rd)



FINDINGS OF FACT:

1. Electronic LED message board signs are considered “animated signs” and are not permitted in the zoning code in any zone. Per Zoning Sect 17.72.010.G. [Signs Prohibited Under This Section]: *“All signs not expressly permitted under this section or exempt from regulation hereunder in accordance with the previous section are prohibited in the city.”*
2. The applicant, Wines & More of RI, requests a sign variance to replace an existing 77” by 99” message board with a digital LED message board (animated sign) with the exact same placement and dimensions on the existing free standing changeable copy sign. Re-facing legally existing signs is allowed by right in the City, but not converting them to animated signs, for which the relief is requested.
3. The Cranston Zoning Board granted relief to allow the pylon/freestanding sign on September 9, 2009. The City Code allows for a maximum area of 35 ft² and a maximum height of 15’ in height for pylon/freestanding signs in C-3 zones. Relief was granted to

allow the existing pylon/free standing sign which consists of a 96 ft² Wines & More of Rhode Island on top with a 52.9 ft² message board (to be replaced) and a 37.8 ft² Hope of Life/Garden city Nutrition sign on the bottom.

4. There is 181.5 ft² of existing building/wall signage which is **not** to be altered as part of this request.
5. The applicant specifies that they seek relief to allow the digital animated sign to “*change every twenty (20) seconds to delineate products and items for sale at the establishment.*”
6. In a letter to the Planning Department dated June 29, 2020 from the applicant’s attorney, Louis A DeSimone, states, “*Should the zoning board (or your department) require any further programming conditions for the sign in question, I have been assured by the company that any such requirements can be accomplished in the digital interface.*”
7. The property’s existing uses are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan which calls for commercial/services.
8. The Comprehensive Plan Land Use Element states “The City should adopt design and signage guidelines along commercial corridors, such as Reservoir Avenue, Park Avenue, Elmwood Avenue, Atwood Avenue, and Oaklawn Avenue to improve the attractiveness and quality of the businesses” (p. 34). Although “attractiveness” is subjective, the message board has more aesthetic capacity than black lettering on a changeable copy board and will appear more modern.
9. The sign would not be out of character with the commercial area as there are other animated signs on Sockanosset Crossroads, for example, at Ruggieri Carpet One Floor & Home, Garden City Center, and Chapel View.
10. The proposal does not impair the intent or purpose of zoning or the Comprehensive Plan.

PLANNING ANALYSIS:

The application seeks to replace the changeable copy portion of an existing free standing sign with a new electronic LED message board (animated sign) at 125 Sockanosset Crossroad. The existing free standing sign was approved by the Cranston Zoning Board in 2009. The applicant is in compliance with all of the conditions of approval, and the request, if granted, would also be in compliance with the conditions. Importantly, the applicant is not requesting more signage on the site, so this request would be the least relief necessary to modernize the portion of the sign.

The City’s sign code, written in the 1960’s, has been problematic for it does not address modern trends and technologies. Staff understands the role that signage plays in regards to the character and aesthetic of the City and seeks to maintain a reasonable standard for assessing requests for animated signs. In this case, staff finds Sockanosset Crossroads as an appropriate location for animated signs (with restrictions) due to the commercial nature and existing signage in the area. Furthermore, staff believes that, should the City want to continue to allow changeable copy signs, that it generally allow them to be animated (with restrictions). It is not reasonable to expect business employees to manually change letters in perpetuity. The animated signs will be easier to read, arguably more aesthetically pleasing, more efficient for the businesses, and would allow Cranston businesses to have similar signage allowances as they would in other cities.

However, although staff supports a reasonable allowance for animated signs, it is important that they are regulated in terms of their impacts. For example, staff recommends that they are not fully animated like a television screen, but are restricted to be static images that can change no more than once every 20 seconds. The rationale behind this recommendation is that staff finds it reasonable for drivers to see the sign change, but not so often as to cause a consistent or flashing distraction. Another issue staff would like to see regulated is how bright the sign will appear, particularly at nighttime. Staff recommends the applicant address how the sign can be programmed/designed to reduce its illumination/brightness to an appropriate level when daylight subsides. Staff corresponded this request to the applicant on 7/1/2020.

Staff has reviewed this application in relation to the Comprehensive Plan and finds no significant inconsistencies. The Comprehensive Plan calls for guidelines for signage and streetscape improvements, but does not provide detail or clear direction on what the guidelines would regulate or prohibit. Staff could not find any language within the Cranston Comprehensive Plan that provides for reason to oppose the application. Therefore, this application is believed to be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

Due to the findings that the proposal is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and the character of the commercial area, and due to the assertion that businesses should be allowed to have animated signs instead of changeable copy signs (with restrictions), the Planning Department recommends that the Plan Commission forward a **positive recommendation** on this application to the Zoning Board of review, with restrictions to the sign's luminescence, animation, and frame change timing.