

City Planning Department



Memo

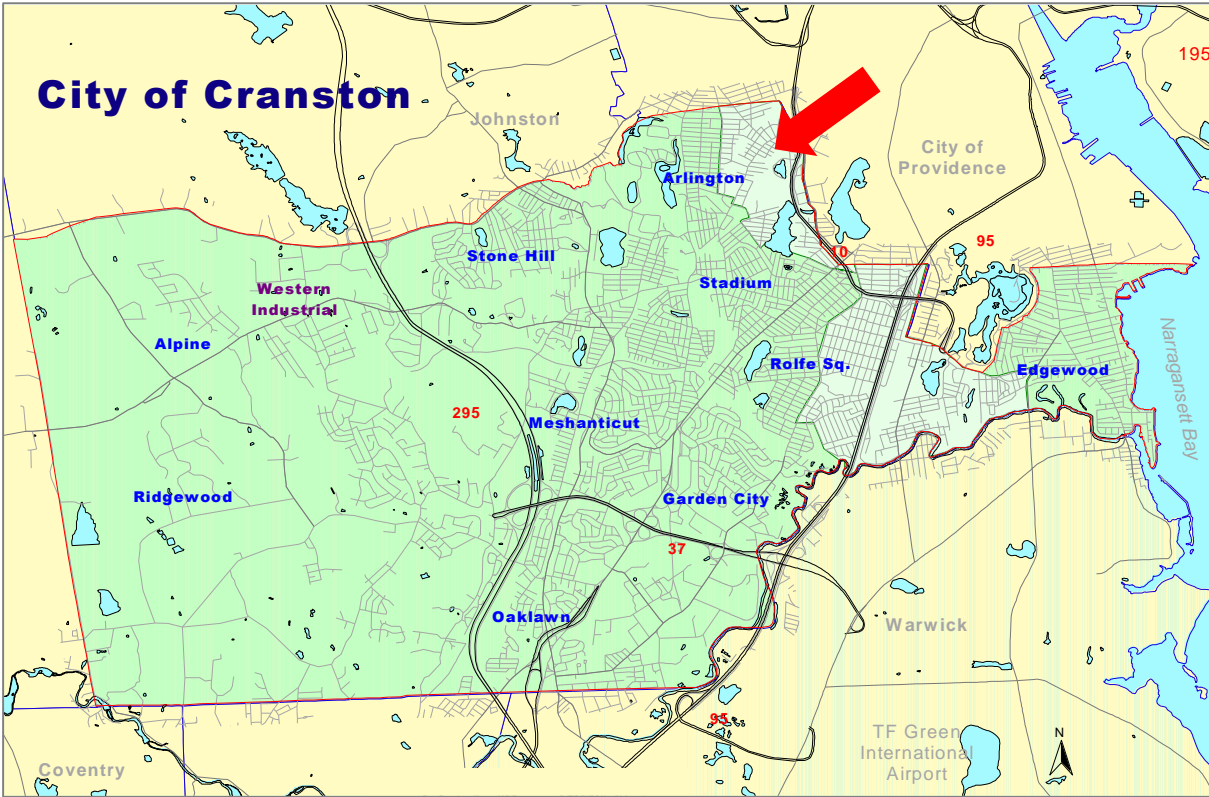
To: Cranston City Plan Commission
From: Joshua Berry, AICP, Senior Planner
Date: January 4, 2021
Re: Variance Application for 900 Cranston Street Crossroad (AP 7, Lot 295, 299 & 300)

Owner: ADJ Realty Co.
Applicant: F & C Donuts (DBA Dunkin' Donuts)
Location: 900 Cranston Street
Zone: C-5 (Heavy Business, Industry)
FLU: Highway Commercial/Services

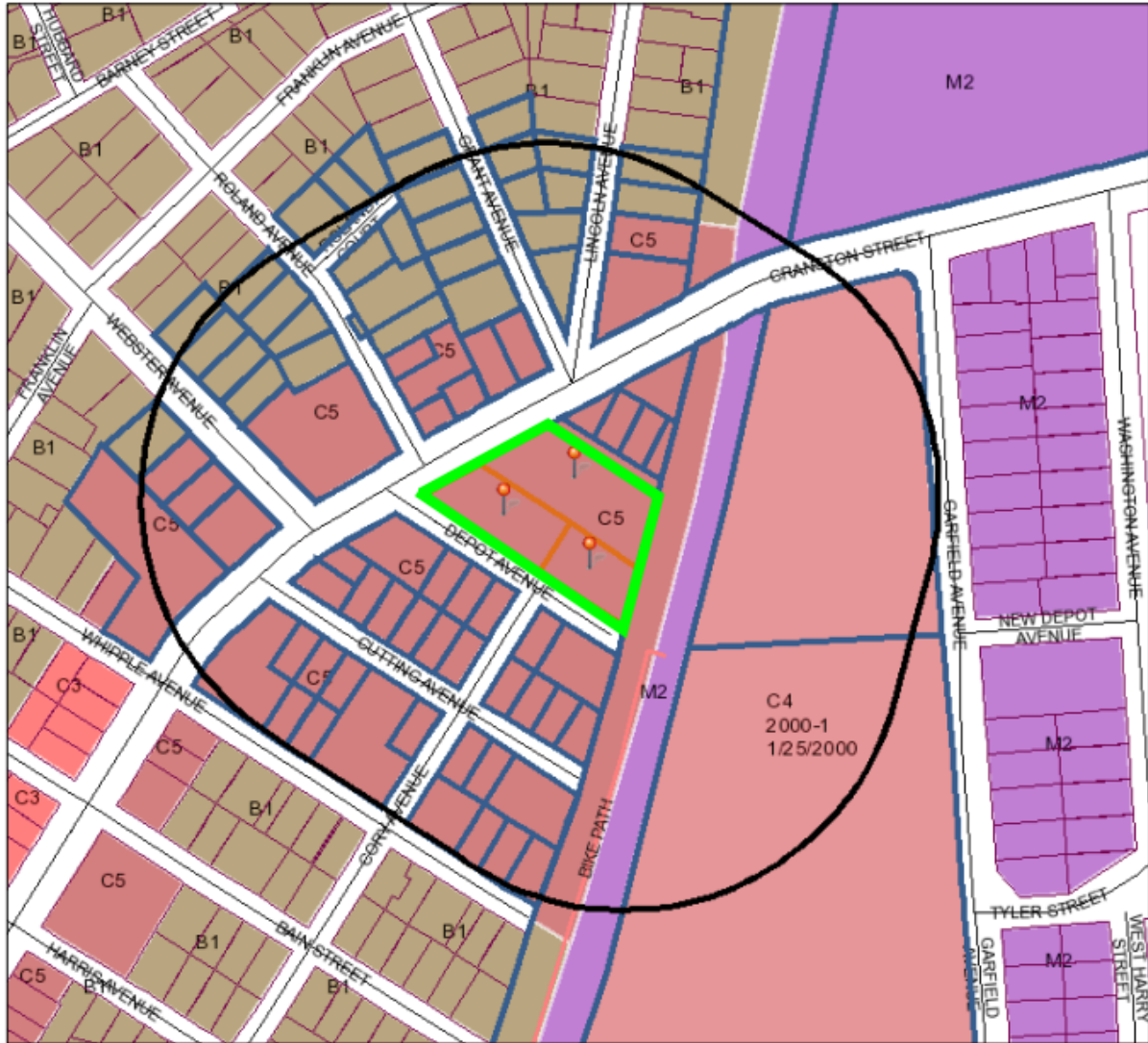
DIMENSIONAL VARIANCE REQUEST:

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

LOCATION MAP



ZONING MAP



Lines	Streets	Zoning	Other
Override 1	City	none	A8
UserSelectedParcels	Driveway	A80	A6
vParcels_Buffer	OutsideCity	A20	B1
ParcelsInBufferOutput	Paper	A12	B2
Parcels	Pastore Complex		C1
Streets Names	Private		C2
	Railroad		C3
			C4
			C5
			M1
			M2
			EI
			MPD
			S1
			Other
			Street Names



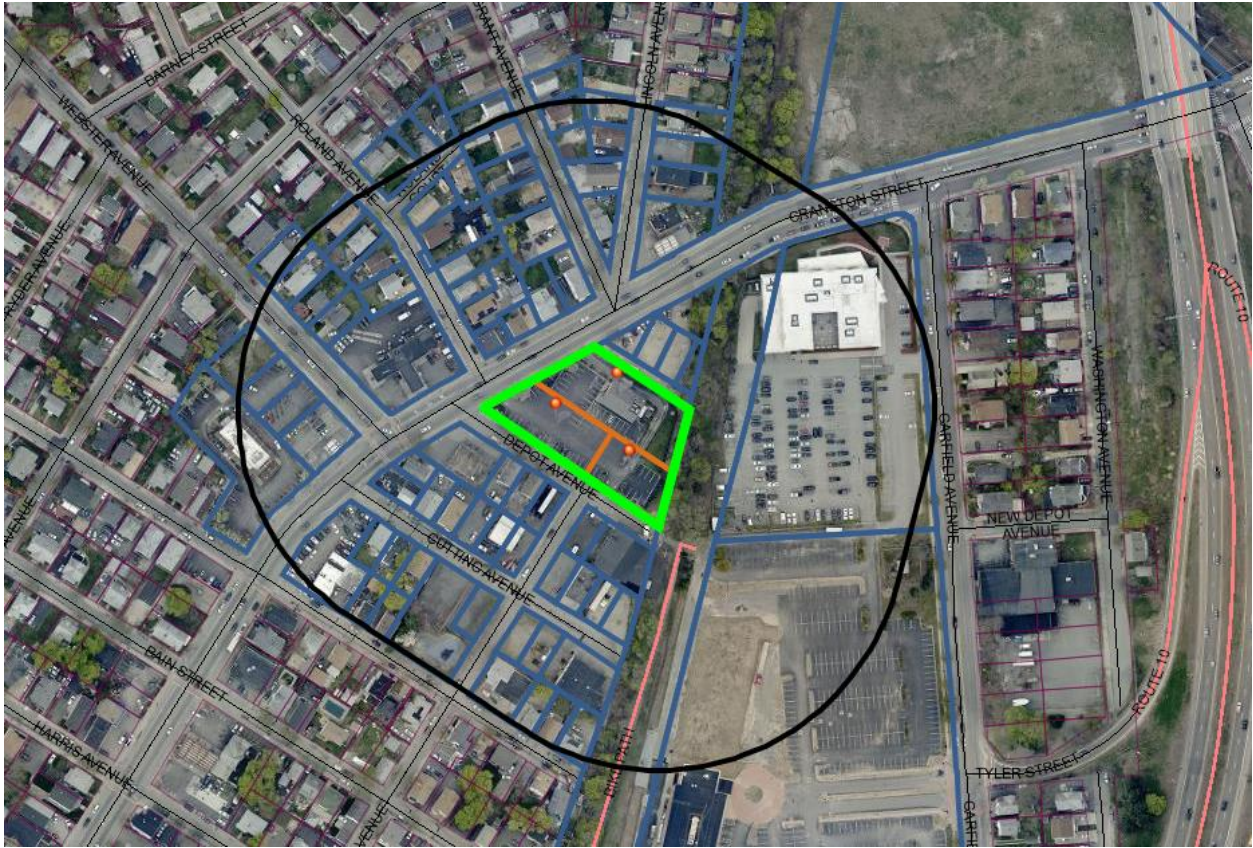
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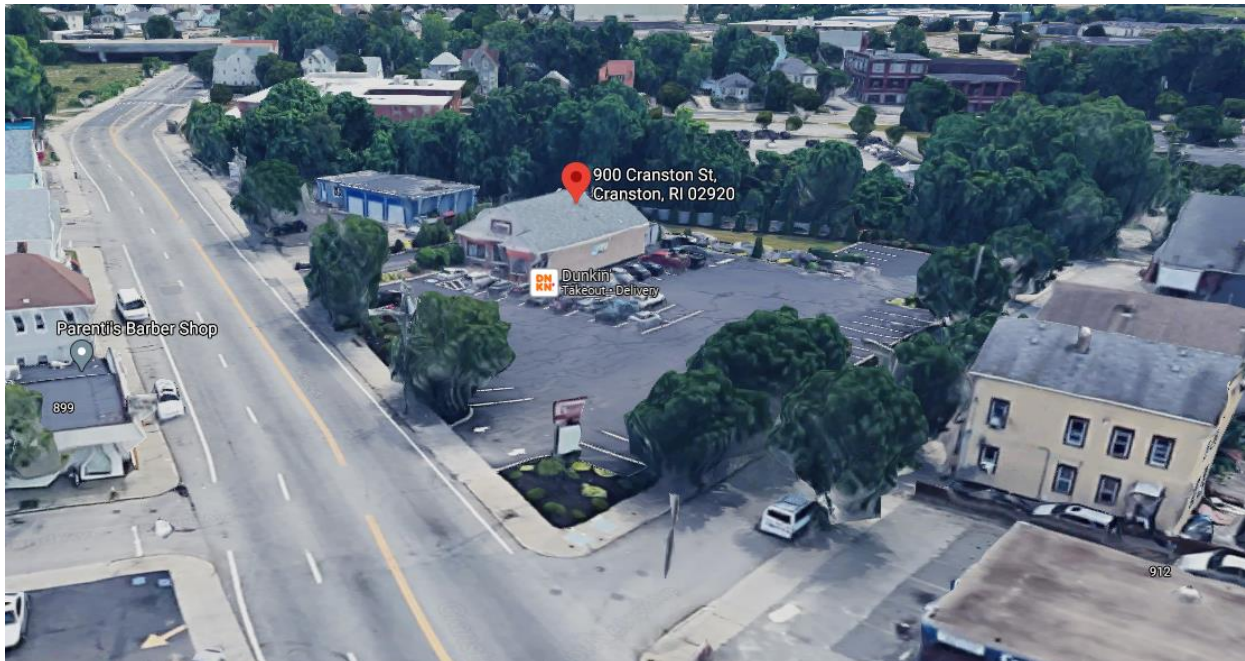
City of Cranston

NEIGHBORHOOD AERIAL

(subject parcel marked in green, 400 foot radius marked in black)



3-D AERIAL VIEW



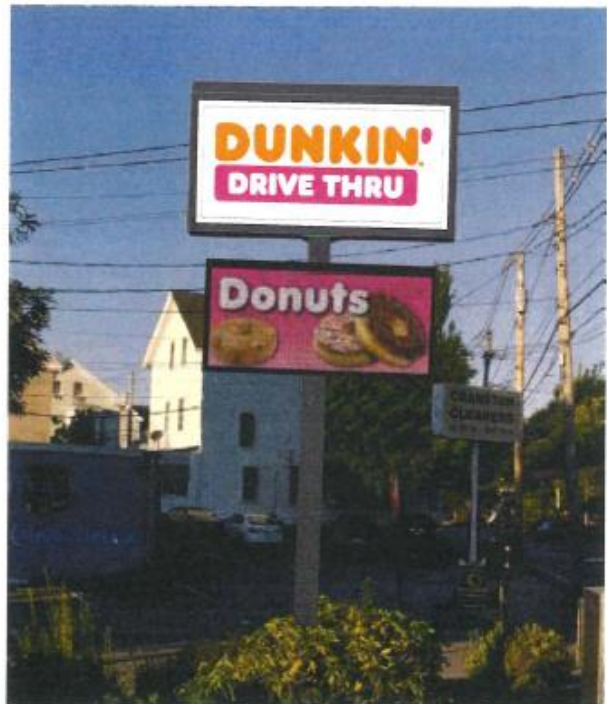
STREET VIEW



EXISTING VS PROPOSED

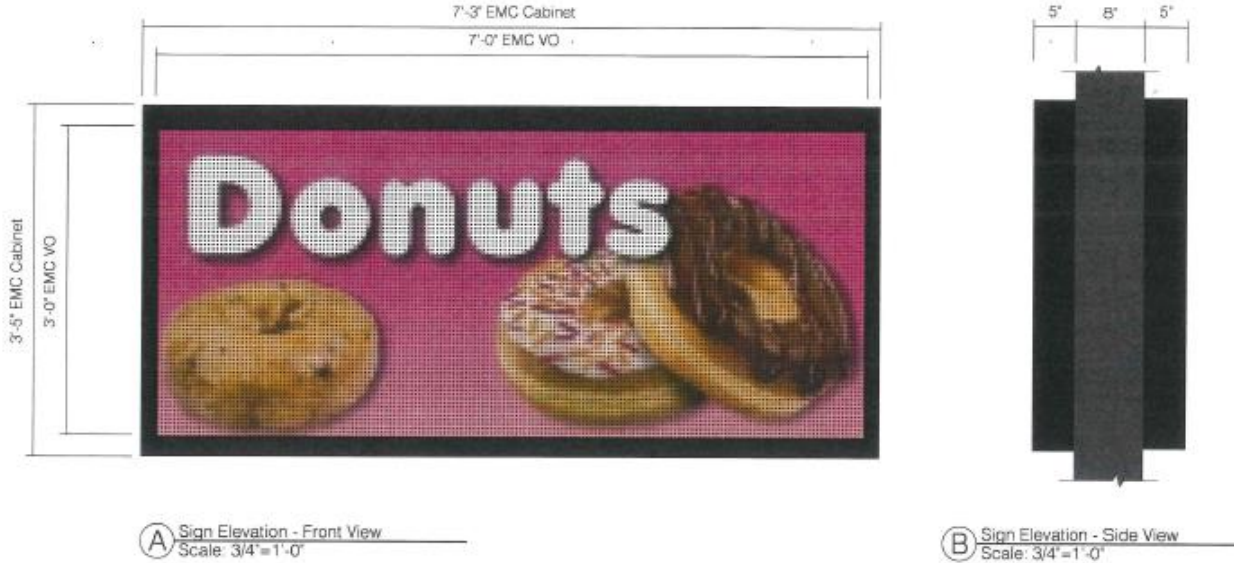


© Photo Comp - Existing
Not to Scale



Ⓓ Photo Comp - Proposed
Not to Scale

SIGN DETAILS



FINDINGS OF FACT:

1. The applicant, F & C Donuts (DBA Dunkin' Donuts) has requested a sign variance to replace an existing message board (6' x 6' or 36 ft² per side) with a digital LED message board (animated sign) of lesser area (7' x 3' or 21ft² per side). The sign would be located under the existing portion of the free standing sign for Dunkin' Donuts (4'- 8.5" x 8' - 4.5" or 25.5 ft² per side). The total area (93 ft²) exceeds the 50 ft² maximum per C-5 zoning. In addition, 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 Cranston Zoning Board granted relief to allow a 24' tall pylon/freestanding sign with 75.5ft² of signage per side in December of 2000. However, the relief was granted in anticipation of three other tenants on site, each with their own 2' x 6' tenant sign as shown on the variance application under the freestanding sign for Dunkin' Donuts. The other tenants never occupied the site, and it appears that the applicant instead combined the three (3) tenant signs into the existing 6' x 6' changeable copy sign.
3. The applicant has provided information regarding WatchFire signage capabilities including software which allows the signs to be programmed as to control brightness, restrict image hold time & transitions, and employ different daytime and nighttime settings. The applicant has included a letter which states their commitment to being "Zoning Friendly" and willingness to work cooperatively with the municipality to make signage that is "a positive image in the community placed."
4. The property's existing uses are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan which calls for

commercial/services, and are allowed by-right in C-5 (Heavy Business, Industry) zoning.

5. 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.
6. There are no other known “animated signs” in the nearby area. There are several nearby gas stations that do have signs with LED gas pricings but these are technically not “animated signs” as defined by City Code as a sign must change more than eight times per day to meet the definition. It is a subjective determination as to whether the sign would be out of character with the commercial area.
7. The proposal does not impair the intent or purpose of the Comprehensive Plan but may impair the intent of the Zoning Code due to the proposed total area for freestanding sign for the single tenant being nearly double what is permitted in C-5 zoning (93 ft² where 50 ft² is allowed).

PLANNING ANALYSIS:

The application seeks to replace the existing 6' x 6' changeable copy portion of the free standing sign with a new electronic LED message board (animated sign) at 900 Cranston St. The existing free standing sign was approved by the Cranston Zoning Board of Review (ZBR) in December of 2000, except that it appears that other tenants were anticipated to occupy the site, which never matriculated. The other tenants were each allotted a 2' x 6' sign under the anchor tenants free standing sign. Instead, these signs were combined and the existing changeable copy sign was permitted for the single tenant, Dunkin' Donuts. The applicant's proposed animated sign would be 15 ft² smaller per side than the changeable copy sign, proposing 21 ft² per side.

Staff generally believes that the City should consider allowing businesses with existing changeable copy signs to allow them to be animated (with restrictions), but it is unclear in this instance as to whether that should be taken into account given the question of whether the existing changeable copy sign was permitted consistent with the relief granted by the ZBR. Staff calls into question whether the changeable copy sign was permitted consistent with the ZBR relief granted. Staff has spoken to the current Zoning Secretary on this matter who confirmed that staff's concern was legitimate, but could provide no real clarity to the situation as the sign permit was issued prior to his employment with the City. It is questionable whether the ZBR would have granted this signage if it knew there would be only one tenant and staff is not compelled that there is a hardship to support the relief requested.

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 this section of Cranston Street as a *potentially* appropriate location for animated signs (with restrictions) due to the commercial nature and existing land uses in the area (several gas stations, an auto sale business, a cleaning service and travel office are all in close proximity, among others). Staff does not

believe the sign would be injurious to the area, but stops short of making the finding that it is consistent with or appropriate in the area as there are no other similar signs in the vicinity.

It is important that animated signs are regulated if/when they are approved. Staff recommends that they are not fully animated but are restricted to be static images that can change no more than once every 20 seconds so that they do not cause a consistent or flashing distraction. Additionally, staff would like to see animated signs be restricted in terms of their brightness, particularly at nighttime. Should the Plan Commission choose to forward a positive recommendation on this application, staff recommends conditions regarding the sign's illumination/brightness during different times of the day and a 20 second restriction on changing imagery.

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 generally more consistent than inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

Staff is conflicted in its analysis and recommendation of this application. On one hand, approval would introduce animated signs to this area where none currently exist and the tenant already has sufficient signage currently in excess of that allowed under zoning. On the other hand, there is an existing, over-sized changeable copy sign that the City has the opportunity to have replaced with a smaller and arguable more aesthetic sign that is not anticipated to have an injurious impact on the surrounding area. The application is considered consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, but appears to conflict with the purpose of limiting sign area in the City Code.

RECOMMENDATION:

Due to the conflicting findings that the proposal is generally consistent with the Comprehensive Plan but could be considered inconsistent with zoning due to the sign type and total sign area, the Planning Department provides **no specific recommendation** on this application to the Plan Commission.