

City of Folsom Historic District Commission

50 Natoma Street

Folsom, CA 95630

via email to: ksanabria@folsom.ca.us; pjohns@folsom.ca.us; nstroud@folsom.ca.us

SUBJECT: Comments to HDC for March 12, 2025, Meeting Agenda Item 3 - Zoning Code Amendment to Allow Internally Illuminated Open Signs in the Sutter Street Subarea

Dear Historic District Commissioners:

As I expressed in my June 4, 2024, email to the Historic District Commission (HDC) omitted from your current staff report, **I am writing to express my support for business signage in the Historic District that complies with existing Folsom Municipal Code (FMC) provisions that prohibit, among other sign types, neon and internally illuminated signage, and to express my support for enforcement of the existing prohibitions consistently for all Historic District businesses.** Staff's recommendation to allow red and orange lighted "open" signs will degrade the Sutter Street subarea's historic character and create a downward spiral where additional businesses may also feel the need to use such signage.

If a change is to be made to the FMC regarding internally lit signage, then I request that the change be consistent with that recommended by the Folsom Historic District Association (FHDA) in July 2024 that only solid white internal illumination be allowed and that blinking lights or colorful illumination be prohibited.

It is unclear to me why the Community Development Department (CDD) has invested any staff resources into modifying the existing signage regulation instead of simply enforcing the existing regulations. It seems that a few businesses who do not want to comply with the existing ordinance have influenced CDD to spend staff time and resources on modifying the existing sign regulations in a manner that will degrade the character of the Historic District.

Neon, neon-like, or other internally lit "open" signs on Sutter Street conflict with the purpose and intent of Folsom's Historic District zoning and in particular with FMC 17.52.010(B)(1) purpose "[t]o preserve and enhance the historic, small-town atmosphere of the historic district as it developed between the years 1850 and 1950." Although the first neon signs were used in the U.S. in 1923, the use of neon "open" signs was not common until the mid-1980s (see attached Slate article). Red and orange lighted "open" signs in no way reflect the atmosphere of Folsom's historic district as it developed between 1850 and 1950.

Allowing businesses on Sutter Street to use red and orange internally lit signs as proposed by staff will influence even more business to have such signs as a necessity to show they are also open (see attached Slate article, "*because my competitor on the next block has a neon OPEN sign....they think I'm closed.*") Instead, by creating a level playing field where no businesses are allowed to use such signs, business owners will have incentive to be creative with designing unique, period-appropriate signage. Several businesses along Sutter Street already do this and have unique, visually appealing "open" signs or other clear indications that their businesses are open.

Sutter Street is not a strip mall and it is not a thoroughfare along which a bright red "open" sign is needed to attract the attention of passing motorists. Instead, Sutter Street is a walkable area where pedestrians can easily assess whether or not a business is open without having a blaring red or orange "open" sign drawing attention away from the unique visual setting and historic character of Sutter Street buildings and businesses.

On Monday evening (3/10/25), I photographed few of the existing lighted signs in the Sutter Street subarea. Presumably, these are some of the businesses that are also seeking a change to the sign regulations. However, all of the lighted signs I observed would also be in conflict with staff's proposed modified regulations. Some examples, including the Eagles Lodge with a lighted sign visible from Scott Street, are below.

Eagles Lodge – A window-mounted lighted sign reading “open” with multiple blue bulbs creating individual letters, surrounded by multiple red bulbs creating a border, and an animated streaming line of text created by multiple red bulbs announcing hours and cornhole. This sign violates the existing regulation and would also violate the proposed modified regulation. Moreover, Eagle’s Lodge is a private club and has multiple alternative ways to communicate its hours to members without a lighted sign in the window.



The Vine – A window-mounted lighted sign reading “open” with multiple red bulbs creating individual letters that blink on and off, surrounded by multiple blue bulbs creating a border. This sign violates the existing regulation and would also violate the proposed modified regulation. The Vine also has a custom, attractive sandwich board sign on the street which provides a clear indication that The Vine is open, with no need for a lighted open sign in the window.



Pizzeria Classico – A window-mounted lighted sign with orange letters reading “open” encircled by a blue light, with seven red-lighted rows listing hours for each day of the week. This sign violates the existing regulation and would also violate the proposed modified regulation.



Sutter Street Taqueria - A window-mounted lighted sign reading “open” with multiple red bulbs creating individual letters, surrounded by multiple blue bulbs creating an oval border (not lit in photo). This sign violates the existing regulation and would also violate the proposed modified regulation.



Terra Cottage Boutique – A window-mounted white neon sign reading “open”. This sign violates the existing regulation and would also violate the proposed modified regulation. However, with its white light it is the least visual intrusive of the internally lighted signs noted here and would be consistent with the FHDA recommendation for white-only neon signs.



Contrasting the business signs above is a great example at **Full Sol Market** with an attractive sandwich sign on the sidewalk and a classic ribbon-hung chalkboard “open” sign in the window. Passersby have no trouble determining that this business is OPEN. Many other businesses along Sutter Street have similarly attractive signage or other indications that the businesses are open without resorting to internally lit signs.



March 11, 2025

I encourage the HDC to reject staff's recommendation and encourage CDD staff to enforce the existing signage regulations on all business to create a level playing field that promotes and protects the unique character of the Sutter Street subarea.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Bob Delp', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Bob Delp
Historic District Resident
Folsom, CA 95630
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Attachment: Sign o' the Times - The origins of the neon OPEN sign. - By Michael Dolan - Slate Magazine - March 05, 1998

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Neon alters language, its gaseous glow elevating dull verbs (EAT), bland nouns (HOTEL), and vapid antonyms (VACANCY/NO VACANCY). In red and blue neon, even a flat announcement like OPEN acquires a cold yet undeniable fire.

But neon's cool heat alone did not make the OPEN sign the visual loudspeaker of American small business. First, neon had to evolve from handicraft to commodity, from carefully considered decision to impulse purchase, from custom manufacture to mass production. Only then could OPEN join the pay phone and public toilet as invisible icons that don't appear until you look for them.

The sign's ubiquity was a long time coming. Until a decade ago, a simple neon OPEN sign retailed for as much as \$400. That's not cheap, but it's far less expensive than the first neon sign sold in the United States, which blinked on in 1923 when a Los Angeles car dealer had a "Packard" sign made for \$1,200 (by comparison, the cheapest new Packard on the lot sold for \$3,600).

Invented by a Frenchman, the neon sign quickly became an Americanism. "Neon in America meant progress, vitality, urban excitement. It symbolized American energy," writes Rudi Stern in his 1988 book, *The New Let There Be Neon*. A neon sign in the window also advertised the fact that a merchant was flush enough to have spent some coin. But even after the neon patents expired in the '30s and the form boomed, signs stayed expensive. And thanks to their fragility and artisan nature, they also remained locally produced. In the medium's heyday, the 1940s, the United States boasted more than 2,000 neon shops. Today, there are a mere several hundred.

What changed the neon-sign business was the beer business. In the course of a few postwar decades, outfits like Fallon Luminous Products and Everbrite learned how to manufacture durable, transportable neon signs for Coors, Miller, and the various Anheuser-Busch brands. Protective plastic housings, sturdier mounts, lighter transformers, and shock-resistant shipping boxes gave the signs greater mobility. Mass production cut costs.

But aside from beer logos and a few other popular corporate insignias, neon was a tough mass-market sell, despite competitors' efforts to break new markets. **It wasn't until the mid-1980s** that Fallon and Everbrite devised blue and red OPEN signs (it's a matter of dispute who made the first one), but the way they sold them—door-to-door, mostly—kept prices high. A generic OPEN cost about what a local shop would charge for one made to order, and the market responded accordingly. In a good year, Everbrite sold only about 500 signs.

Today Everbrite moves 15,000 OPENs a year, and Fallon is just as busy. **The market blossomed in the late 1980s**, with the rise of wholesale buyer's clubs like Costco and SAM'S Club. "Their customers were mainly small businesses," says Tim Fallon. "We showed a classic size sign to SAM'S. They tested it, and it hit." Everbrite President Jeff Jacobs pitched Costco, which also saw OPEN signs fly out of the aisles. Now SAM'S Club sells Fallon's signs for about \$115; at Costco, Everbrite's sell for \$119.99.

Experienced production-line workers fashion an OPEN in about 10 minutes. Despite their name, many signs contain gases other than neon. A few puffs of argon fill the blue border of an OPEN; neon itself powers the red portion of the message. In the new generation of OPEN signs, the red is redder and the blue bluer because the glass tubing is coated with colored ink. If reheated, as they would have to be in the course of repair, the inks melt into brown goop, making the signs such a pain to fix that it's easier to buy another than to take a broken model into the shop.

The classic OPEN sign is a 35-inch by 15-inch rectangle, with a dozen feet of 12-millimeter tube in the word OPEN and another 8 feet in the border. One reason the sign has achieved world domination is because the letters' height-to-width ratio approximates the Golden Section—1-to-1.618—so beloved of artists, architects, and the ordinary human eye. Another is that the size fits most transoms, windows, and walls. Still another: The shipping box stacks easily on a standard pallet.

Mavens can discern between makers at a glance. Fallon sets its OPEN in a molded plastic case, while Everbrite's mounts on a metal armature. Everbrite markets the classic rectangle only, while Fallon offers a vertical OPEN, as well as an Art Deco bullet shape.

The OPEN sign's popularity tracks that of the strip mall. Immigrant shopkeepers and boomer entrepreneurs needed to let passers-by know they were ready for business. Fifty years ago they'd have scrawled OPEN on a shirt cardboard and perched it to catch the eye of a passing pedestrian. **But who window shops anymore, except at 35 mph, through a window set in the frame of a vehicle?**

The lingua franca of commercial America has done what Esperanto could not: achieve universality. In Vienna, a few neon signs do growl GEOFFNET. But more often the word is OPEN—evidence, says one neon connoisseur there, of continental affection for Americana, along with a changing European culture. "In Austria, there used to be customs about when businesses could operate," says Dusty Sprengnagel, who owns a shop called Neon Line and whose book on neon will reach store shelves later this year. "Most shops closed at 6 p.m. weekdays and on Saturday were not open or were open only until noon. We all knew the rules, so no one needed an OPEN sign. But things have changed. Shops may be open later, they may be open all of Saturday. The OPEN sign is not pretty, but it provides the information you need."

With OPEN going platinum, why not a neon CLOSED sign? Everbrite tried one, but it tanked. An OPEN sign is a binary beast, it seemed—if a store owner turned it off, the message was implicit. You couldn't say the same of a CLOSED sign—if it was off, would that mean proprietors lurking in the back waiting to make a sale?

An unlit OPEN has a fearsome power of its own. "We get calls from people whose signs aren't working. They're desperate," Everbrite's Jacobs says. "A guy told me, 'I run a video store. I broke my sign washing my window. I've got to have another one right away, because my competitor on the next block has a neon OPEN sign. People can see that he's open, but with my sign broken they think I'm closed.'" "