

# VILLAGE OF HOMEWOOD



## MEMORANDUM

DATE OF MEETING: August 1, 2024

**To:** Members of the Appearance Commission

**From:** Noah Schumerth, Assistant Director of Economic and Community Development

**Through:** Angela Mesaros, Director of Economic and Community Development

**Topic:** Case 24-20, Sign Variance – Abundant Grace UCC – 18200 Dixie Highway



## DOCUMENTS FOR REVIEW

Title	Pages	Prepared by	Date
Application	1	Mae Brandon, Abundant Grace UCC	07/19/2024
Standards of Variance	4	Mae Brandon, Abundant Grace UCC	07/19/2024
Sign Proof	1	Mae Brandon, Abundant Grace UCC	12/14/2023
Staff Exhibits	2	Asst. Director of Comm./Econ. Dev.	07/26/2024

## BACKGROUND

The applicant Abundant Grace UCC, located at 18200 Dixie Highway, proposes the replacement of an existing 5' x 8' monument sign with a new 5' x 8' monument sign. The proposed sign will include an electronic changing message (ECM) board providing church information. The property is located within the B-2 Downtown Transition zoning district. Currently, the Village of Homewood Code of Ordinances does not permit electronic message board signs within the B-2 zoning district. The applicant has requested a variance from Section 30-4 of the Village Code of Ordinances to allow the sign.

The applicant proposes the construction of a double-faced monument sign with two sign areas: an electronic changing message (ECM) board which will measure 3' x 8' (28 square feet), and a static cabinet sign which will measure 1.5' x 8' (12 square feet). The total surface area of the new double-faced monument sign will be 80 square feet, with a sign face measuring 40 square feet on each side. The total size of the new sign structure, including aluminum bevels bordering all sign areas, is 5' 1" x 8' 3". The sign will be on the steel and masonry foundation currently used to support the existing monument sign.

## DISCUSSION

### Sign Proposal

The applicant, Abundant Grace UCC, has requested a variance to construct a new monument sign to replace the existing static monument sign on the site, facing Dixie Highway. According to the applicant, the proposed sign would allow the parish to better present its messages to passing motorists and pedestrians. The applicant has cited that the signage is vital for communicating effectively to the broader community, and will update signage to reflect the new congregation using the existing church building.

The proposed sign is currently not allowed per standards found in Section 30-4 of the Village Code of Ordinances:

*“Prohibited signs include...*

*(8) Changeable copy/reader board signs in the B-1 downtown core zoning district and B-2 downtown transition zoning district.”*

The subject site is located in the B-2 Downtown Transition zoning district. The use is a legal non-conforming use. *Indoor non-commercial places of assembly* (including places of worship) are only permitted in Homewood’s four residential districts per Section 44-03-04 of the Homewood Zoning Ordinance.

The existing monument sign measures approximately 5’ x 8’ (40 square feet) comprised of a 2’ x 8’ identification cabinet sign displaying the former name of the church and a 3’ x 8’ changeable letter sign. The sign sits on a steel and masonry foundation with landscaping materials surrounding the primary sign structure. The existing sign was constructed in 2001.

The new sign structure is a 5’ x 8’ (40 square feet) monument sign comprised of a 3’ x 8’ “Watchfire”-brand electronic changeable message (ECM) board and a 1.5’ x 8’ identification cabinet sign displaying the name and logo of the new church. Each side of the sign structure includes sign elements that are approximately 1” wide. The sign also includes a 1.5” bevel on the top and sides of the sign structure and a 3” bevel on the bottom of the sign structure, creating a total sign area of 5’ 1” x 8’ 3”. The sign structure will be approximately 6” wide, including interior support structure and the attached signs. The sign will use new colors representing the branding of the congregation, including purple and white.

The new sign will be installed on the existing foundation of the original sign, utilizing existing steel and masonry structures already in place to support the sign. Additional steel will be added to reinforce the existing steel tube supports in the existing sign structure to support the additional weight of the new sign structure.

The proposed signage meets all other standards for civic/charitable institution signage set forth in Section 30-7 of the Village Code of Ordinances.

**Sign Details**

Sign Property	Description
Dimensions (Sign Area)	8' (L) x 5' (W) x 2" (D)
Dimensions (Sign Structure including bevels)	8' 3" (L) x 5' 1" (W) x 6" (D)
Type	Dual (digital bulletin board, double-sided cabinet identification sign)
Materials	Aluminum, polycarbonate, steel (existing support structure), masonry (existing foundation)
Other Properties	Powered from a dedicated 20amp circuit

**Variance Discussion**

Village ordinances are laws, not suggestions, and should not be considered negotiable outside of the circumstances noted below. A variance should only be approved where significant “hardship” or “practical difficulty” exists, or a specific regulation places an undue or unjust burden on a particular property owner. Variances must be based on objective rationale.

The staff has reviewed the materials submitted for this variance and found a unique hardship is placed on this location. The staff has identified the following findings for this case:

- The proposed electronic message board sign replaces an outdated existing monument. The dimensions are proposed to be modified in a minor fashion (<= 3” on any side), and the sign’s location would not change. The new sign is a modernization of existing signage similar to recent proposals from other places of worship in Homewood, such as Faith Lutheran Church (18645 Dixie Highway) and St. John Neumann Church (17951 Dixie Highway).
- Section 30-7 of the Village Code of Ordinances allows civic institutions and charitable organizations to install two types of signage: (1) identification signs; and (2) bulletin board signs that describe events or other information directly related to the use of the site. These regulations apply to places of worship, as they are classified as civic/charitable institutions in Section 30 of the Village Code of Ordinances.
- Abundant Grace UCC is located within a commercial district. Places of worship, classified as *indoor non-commercial places of assembly*, are not permitted within commercial districts per Section 44-03-04 of the Homewood Zoning Ordinance. This property has been utilized as a place of worship since the erection of the original building in 1870 (the congregation was established in 1865), which predates the current zoning designation.

- The restriction on electronic signs within the B-1 and B-2 zoning districts is established to manage the impacts of commercial electronic signage and the general visual quality within the Village's central business district, as non-commercial uses (including non-commercial places of assembly) are typically prohibited in Homewood's commercial zoning districts. Civic and charitable institutions in commercial districts are barred by zoning from sign allowances established by right in non-commercial zoning districts.
- Sign technology has evolved since the adoption of the Village's Sign Code; current digital sign board technology allows for greater control of brightness, image quality, and other properties of the sign. Staff is reviewing and updating the Sign Code and will recommend changes in 2024, including improved regulations for modern sign technology not currently captured by the existing sign ordinance when the ordinance was written in 1997.
- Abundant Grace UCC is located within four blocks of other civic/charitable uses along Dixie Highway, including the Homewood Village Hall and St. John Neumann Church which have constructed or received variance approval for electronic changeable message (ECM) signage.

A previous case, Case 23-30 for St. John Neumann Church at 17951 Dixie Highway, assessed a similar variance request for an electronic changeable copy sign as a bulletin board sign in the B-2 zoning district. The Appearance Commission voted to approve this variance and sign review on December 7, 2023.

### RECOMMENDED APPEARANCE COMMISSION ACTION

The staff has reviewed the proposed sign, and recommends limitations on size, brightness, duration of message display, message transition, and movement to reduce distractions and improve the visual quality of the proposed signage. These standards are consistent with the standards required for past electronic message signs allowed by variance for similar uses. The Appearance Committee may wish to consider the following motion:

**Recommend approval of the proposed signage variance and electronic message board signage as proposed by Abundant Grace UCC, located at 18200 Dixie Highway, subject to the following conditions:**

1. Images must remain static;
2. Message display duration – minimum 12 seconds;
3. Transition between messages must be instantaneous;
4. No change in intensity, or brightness, no video displays, single messages not divided between two screens, no flashing or blinking;
5. Exterior signs shall be illuminated only during business hours or between the hours of 6:00 am and 11:00 pm, whichever is later;
6. No off-premise commercial advertising permitted;
7. Brightness limited to 0.00-foot candles at the residential lot lines;
8. In the event of a malfunction, the electronic variable message sign would be turned to a dark screen until corrected; and
9. Compliance with standards set forth by the Illinois Department of Transportation.