

Mr. Martin presented the case in which the applicant is requesting certain variances from the Hahira Zoning Ordinance in order to replace a prior existing billboard sign that was severely damaged during Hurricane Helene 13 months ago. The subject property is a cleared and undeveloped tract of land (about 1.80 acres) located at 1024 GA Highway 122 West, which is in the immediate NE quadrant of the Exit 29 interchange of I-75. The property is currently zoned Highway Commercial (C-H) and is also located within the Hahira Gateway Corridor Overlay District. Specific sections of the Zoning Ordinance from which Variances are being requested, include Sections 4-5.11, 8-4, 8-5, 10-3 and 10-6. (specific language from these Sections is depicted on pages 2-3)

The subject sign, in some form, has existed on this property for many years and has been classified as legal nonconforming sign since at least 2009, when the Hahira Gateway Corridor regulations were adopted by the City. This sign is a large freestanding monopole structure measuring about 60' tall, with a sign face area of 1,200-sf (20'x60'). Under current Overlay regulations, a freestanding sign must be located on a site with a building, and is limited to being monument that is no more than 10' tall and 50-sf in sign area for a single-tenant development. Outside the Overlay District, freestanding signs are limited to no more than 400-sf in area. Therefore, the subject sign is very nonconforming in several regards.

Section 8-5 of the Hahira Zoning Ordinance states that "When a nonconforming structure or a structure containing a nonconforming use or nonconforming sign is razed or damaged by fire, flood, wind, or act of God, such structure or sign may be reconstructed as a nonconforming use only if the damage totals less than 50% of the value of the structure." Based on the total destruction of the sign above ground level, and the stated cost to reinstall a sign meeting the same specifications, it certainly appears to be beyond the 50% threshold. Based on the Ordinance language pertaining to the replacement of nonconforming signs and structures, variances to all the above-stated Sections will be required as well, for this particular situation.

In general, nonconformances are intended to be phased-out over time by attrition as the individual situations warrant, rather than be held in a grandfathered condition forever. There are currently several grandfathered billboards, as nonconforming signs by virtue of their size and location, in proximity to I-75 and Exit 29. In this particular case, the most egregious of the nonconformities stem from the Overlay District requirements. However, this particular sign is located in close proximity to the new I-75 northbound onramp and more than 300' from GA Hwy 122m, and not very visible from other areas outside the immediate interchange. The subject property is also currently vacant (with no building structure) and will be hard to develop on its owns – due to GDOT control of its very limited frontage along GA Hwy 122. Therefore, in this particular case, since the cause of the sign's destruction was involuntary on the part of the applicant (caused by the Hurricane), staff is OK with the complete reestablishment of the prior billboard sign – as it existed prior to the Hurricane.

Staff finds the request consistent with Variance review criteria, and recommends approval to the City Council, subject to the following conditions: