

A win for the skyline

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by Joanne Aitken

THE UNANIMOUS ruling by the Zoning Board of Adjustment to reject the proposal for a Unisys sign midway up Liberty Place is welcome news. It shows that Mayor Nutter means it when he says that design is critical to the quality of life in our city and that we already have the mechanisms in place that can make that happen - if we let them do their job.

Critics of the Unisys sign were dismissed by some people for being "small-minded" and needlessly discouraging business with the kind of "old-fashioned thinking" that harms our city.

Just the opposite was true.

Allowing the sign would have been the old way of doing business. With respect to planning, design and construction, the old way has meant, sometimes with good intentions but often not, that rules were ignored, special deals struck and self-interested decisions determined the look of our city.

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia, which submitted a letter to the zoning board in opposition to the sign, believes that a great city should look great, and, in the long run, great planning and great design will attract more commerce and investment than the opportunity to hang a sign. That's a progressive idea.

This wasn't a minor issue. A big sign attached to the middle of a building significantly violates the zoning code, and that code is not an example of the city's provincialism. Large cities typically have strict sign controls, and many (New York, for one) are like Philadelphia in promoting a skyline distinguished by excellent architecture rather than a proliferation of signs.

Much of the coverage of the Unisys sign played down the problems connected to its mid-building location. Not all signs are bad. Having lots of small signs at ground level, which is allowed and regulated by current zoning rules, enlivens the experience of pedestrians. An occasional rooftop sign, marking an entire building, can make a positive contribution to the skyline - especially if, like the PSFS sign, it's designed by the architects as an integral part of the building.

However, we need the protection provided by our zoning code to keep the many tenants of office buildings from mounting signs midway up their sides. Approving a variance to allow the Unisys sign would have set a terrible precedent, opening the door to myriad signs on every building and visual clutter across the skyline.

Few have embraced Philadelphia's need for comprehensive planning and high-quality design as strongly as Mayor Nutter. He empowered the Planning Commission to focus on the big picture for the entire city and called for the establishment of a design-review board to evaluate the aesthetics, form and community context of major new projects. He recently appointed architect Alan Greenberger, a co-founder of DAG and an eloquent and effective leader of the city's design community, to be executive director of the Planning Commission.

WHEN MAYOR Nutter spoke to the new Planning Commission in June, he repeated his welcome message that the local culture of "business as usual" will no longer be tolerated. He recalled an earlier time when, he said, "City leaders well understood the linkage between planning and prosperity," and he promised "to return the commission to its rightful position . . . as the arbiter of planning expertise."

He's been as good as his word, and his government has started to exhibit the smart, fair and new way of doing things in our great and great-looking city.

DAG is delighted that Unisys, a company with deep roots in Philadelphia, has chosen to locate its world headquarters in Center City. We met with Unisys representatives to discuss their proposal, and although



we disagreed with them about the desirability of the sign, we applaud the company for openness regarding its plans and for seeking approval through the proper channel of the city's reviewing agencies.

Now is the time for us all to work together to identify more appropriate ways for them to announce - and for us to celebrate - their arrival in Center City. *

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