May 7, 2021

City of Kitchener
Planning Division
200 King Street W, 6th Floor
Kitchener, ON
N2G 4G7

Attn: Ms. Janine Oosterveld
Manager of Site Development & Customer Service

Re: Crowne Plaza Hotel
105 King Street East, Kitchener
Sign Variance

Dear Ms. Oosterveld,

BACKGROUND

On behalf of Vista Hospitality Co. ("Vista Hospitality"), GSP Group is submitting a Sign Variance application for 105 King Street East in Kitchener (the “Subject Property”). Vista Hospitality, the owner and operator of the Crowne Plaza Hotel, is proposing a new fascia sign with automatic changing copy on a portion of the upper building elevation facing Benton Street, near the intersection with King Street East. The new fascia sign with automatic changing copy will replace an existing wall sign on the building elevation in the same general location.

A Minor Variance (Sign) application was submitted to the Committee of Adjustment in October 2019 for the proposed sign and variances. Further to discussion with Planning Staff at that time, the application was not advanced given the expectation of a broader study of the matter of signs within automatic changing copy within Downtown Kitchener being initiated. It is my understanding that the findings and recommendations of that study will be presented to the Planning and Strategic Initiatives Committee in June 2021. I would ask that the proposed Sign Variance be advanced to be considered at that same Committee meeting concurrently with the broader study.
SIGN DETAILS

The proposed sign is a “fascia sign” with automatic changing copy per Section 680 of the Kitchener Municipal Code. The hotel building lines the property line of both King Street East and Benton Street; the principal entrance to the hotel is along Benton Street. The Benton Street elevation of the building immediately around the intersection with King Street East has an area in the upper building elevation that currently features a fascia sign advertising the hotel restaurant. The intent is to replace this existing sign with a new fascia sign composed of automatic changing copy, including third party advertising.

Enclosed are the following materials for consideration of the Sign Variance:

1. A surveyed reference plan of the building, marked to show the general location of the proposed fascia sign (Attachment 1).
2. A set of graphics (October 2019) showing the existing sign conditions, the proposed sign conditions, and pedestrian vantage points to the proposed sign (Attachment 2).
3. A set of precedent images of signs with automatic changing copy in different countries and within Kitchener (Attachment 3).

In terms of sign details, the proposed sign is 20 feet wide by 10 feet tall. The proposed sign projection will not be greater than 0.4 metres (1.3 feet) and the intended sign positioning generally is approximately 1.2 metres (4 feet) at its closest from the King Street East building wall (zero lot line). The proposed sign will meet the illumination requirements in Section 680.3.31 and the rate of change in the copy content will be static for at least six seconds.

REQUESTED VARIANCES

The Sign Variance requests the following relief from Chapter 680:

a) Relief from Section 680.10.18 only allowing fascia signs with external downward illumination in D-1 through D-3 Zones, whereas the proposed electronic sign will be internally illuminated.

b) Relief from Section 680.3.10 prohibiting third party advertising, whereas the proposed sign contains a portion of the sign that will include third party advertising, particularly for businesses and functions within Downtown Kitchener.

c) Relief from Sections 680.3.29 and 680.10.17 requiring automatic changing copy on a sign to be no closer than 23 metres (75.45 feet) of a street intersection or traffic light, whereas the proposed sign is approximately 1.2 metres (4 feet) from the King Street East property line.

d) Relief from Section 680.10.5 prohibiting advertising on the ends of fascia signs, whereas the entirety of the proposed sign will be automatic changing copy.
NEIGHBOURHOOD CONTEXT

The Crowne Plaza anchors the corner of King Street East and Benton Street, one of the major intersections in Downtown Kitchener. There has been a hotel at this location for many years, and the surrounding properties are a mix of retail, office, restaurant, public space and parking garage activities. This location is a very urban part of Downtown Kitchener with buildings at the street line and a lot of pedestrian traffic. The ION route travels northbound along Benton and Frederick Streets with stations nearby. King Street has a two-lane cross section and wide sidewalks in this vicinity while Benton/Frederick Streets have a three-lane cross section. Traffic moves slowly through this area given the short blocks, traffic signals, parking, pedestrians and the ION system.

The Crowne Plaza is part of the King Street commercial fabric and is, in planning terms, part of the City Centre District of Downtown. It is one of the anchors of this intersection and helps generate vibrancy for Downtown Kitchener. Additionally, the Speakers Corner public space is located on the west side of Benton Street, directly across the main elevation of the Crowne Plaza Hotel. In conjunction with nearby businesses, services and other anchors such as Market Square, the intersection of King and Benton is an important hub of activity and pedestrian traffic traveling between these destinations and ION stations.

POLICY CONTEXT

The City of Kitchener Official Plan does not deal specifically with signage to any great extent; however, the policies of the Official Plan do provide direction on Downtown activity and urban design. Policies 11.C.1.21, .32, and .33 mention the importance of promoting a high standard for urban design at prominent locations of Downtown, with special consideration to buildings located at major intersections. Additionally, Policy 11.C.33 emphasizes that minimization of adverse impacts onto adjacent properties and into the public realm will be encouraged. The definition of adverse impacts is as follows:

“Adverse Impacts - may include but will not be limited to: shadows over private amenity areas or on building façades for an unacceptable duration, issues of privacy, overlook conditions, negative microclimatic impacts, light pollution (such as light trespass or glare), odour, vibration, noise pollution urban heat island effects, visual clutter or obstruction of views and/or vistas.”

Policy 13.C.1.4 speaks to achieving pedestrian-friendly streets that are visually appealing, comfortable and safe through the implementation of a high standard of urban design for facades and signage that relates to the street.

The preamble and policies of section 15.D.2 for Downtown promote “lively street activity”, and “pedestrian friendly streets combined with a creative high quality urban design of buildings, storefronts and public spaces.” The overall thrust of this section and others in the Official Plan is to foster a vibrant, dynamic and healthy Downtown community. The objectives of this policy
section are to create and maintain a lively and livable Downtown and to encourage and support the location of unique and niche retail and commercial uses. The urban design policies for Downtown contained in section 15.D.2.27 state "a high quality of urban design will be expected of the buildings, building elevations, building massing, storefronts, store signs, patios, streetscapes and public spaces to enhance street life and create local pride and interest as well as tourism interest".

The Official Plan provides that Downtown-specific Urban Design Guidelines will be prepared to provide direction and standards for various building elements, including storefronts, public art and signage. The new Urban Design Manual addresses signage in several topic areas. In the City Wide guidelines of Part A of the Urban Design Manual, the following guidance is provided for signs:

- Design buildings to accommodate signs that respect building scale, cultural heritage resources, architectural expression and establish streetscape design objectives.
- Avoid visual clutter, but allow for variety and visual interest including different media, font, styles, colours and design inspirations.
- Design sign illustration to be task oriented and avoid glare/light spillover onto adjacent areas.
- Locate and design ground-mounted and wall-mounted signs to complement the character and scale of the area and promote an active, pedestrian friendly environment. Integrate all signage into the landscape design and architectural expression of the buildings.
- Allow for retailer identification where there are multiple buildings and uses on the site but avoid allowing individual corporate image, colour and signs to dominate either the site or public spaces.

In the Downtown guidelines of Part A of the Urban Design Manual, there is one point of direction for signage as follows: “All signage in DTK is to be high quality, seamlessly integrated into the building and site design and mindful of existing context, neighbourhood character and cultural heritage assets.”

ASSESSMENT

a) Internally Illuminated Sign on a property zoned D-1 Zone

Chapter 680 does not directly prohibit automatic changing copy in Downtown Kitchener; instead it indirectly prohibits it through restrictions on sign illumination other than external and downward illumination. We appreciate the intent for such a regulation for storefront signs in traditional main street settings and, additionally, potential concerns regarding the proliferation of digital signs with automatic changing copy within such a setting. However, in our opinion it precludes the inclusion of digital “wall signs” in certain strategic locations that can contribute to overall place-making opportunities within Downtown Kitchener in keeping with the vibrancy
and vitality policy direction of the Kitchener Official Plan. The proposed sign and property situation is one such appropriate example.

Various other cities in the world, including those in North America and in Europe, have successfully implemented digital signs in different downtown contexts and on buildings that range from contemporary to centuries old. The images in Attachment 3 demonstrate that digital signage can positively contribute to the public realm when executed properly. Digital signs have the potential to add vibrancy and sense of place, particularly when they are placed in strategic facades that do not overwhelm the public realm.

The Urban Design Manual guidelines call for signage to be of a high quality and integrated with the building design and be appropriate for its context. It is our view that the proposed sign meets that objective and will add to the visual interest in Downtown while supporting the Crowne Plaza Hotel business. The proposed sign is of an appropriate scale, not visually overwhelming, replaces a larger existing sign on a blank façade and provides for a contemporary media format. Having the appropriate illumination level on the sign will be important to its success and Crowne Plaza is prepared to work with the City to ensure that the sign does not provide undue glare or intensity of lighting in the area.

b) Third Party Advertising

A new fascia sign with automatic changing copy on the Benton Street elevation of the Crowne Plaza Hotel as depicted in the attached graphic materials is an important element to inform the broader community of the many aspects and activities taking place in the hotel. This helps to support the business of the hotel which provides an important service to the community and also supports the City’s tourism sector. This communication ability is important and has led nearby Cameron Heights Collegiate as well as the City’s Memorial Auditorium complex to also employ digital changing message signs to advertise events that are taking place or important civic notices to the public. The proposed sign will also enliven a blank façade on this building, therefore adding visual interest and vibrancy to this corner.

Additionally, the sign is dynamic and may not necessarily display only hotel-related messaging. For example, the sign could also display useful things to the public such as the time and weather, notices for events happening in the vicinity (including BIA functions), charity’s or community organization’s activities, or selected photographs or digital public art; together with opportunities for advertising for other businesses within Downtown Kitchener. The ability to have a dynamic digital sign at this prominent intersection of Downtown provides an opportunity to create new visual connections between the building façade and the existing Speakers Corner public space. The sense of place and identity of this public space can be increase by adding non-static visual interest. Vista Hospitality is willing to work with the City on determining options for limiting the nature, extent or proportions of any third party advertising as part of the automatic changing copy.
c) **Setback to Street Intersection**

We appreciate the intent of setbacks in Sections 680.3.29 and 680.10.17 for safety and traffic reasons. We do not believe there will be issues with traffic operations and note that traffic on the adjacent streets moves at a low rate of speed given street width, urban characteristics, and pedestrian and LRT movements through the area. We also note that the situation of the sign higher on the building elevation is influential given it places the automatic changing copy further out of a driver's norming viewing angle.

d) **Advertising on Ends of Fascia Signs**

In our opinion, the relief from Section 680.10.5 is largely a technicality in nature. The proposed sign is more aptly described as a “wall sign” rather than a fascia sign, the latter that appears to be more targeted to traditional signage above storefronts in sign bands. Nonetheless, the proposed sign is classified as a fascia by by-law definition. The entirety of the proposed sign will be automatic changing copy with advertising, except for those areas displaying weather and time details.

We look forward to meeting to discuss this proposal. Please call should you have any questions or wish to setup a meeting.

Yours truly,

GSP Group

[Signature]

Kevin Muir, MCIP, RPP
Senior Planner

cc. Amin Visram, Vista Hospitality Co.
    Samer Ghazi, Vista Hospitality Co.
    Andrew Pinnell, City of Kitchener