



**Architectural Review Board**

**Staff Report**

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**Agenda Date:** December 19, 2013

**To:** Architectural Review Board

**From:** Jodie Gerhardt, Senior Planner                      **Department: Planning and  
Community Environment**

**Subject:** 4180 El Camino Real [13PLN-00422]: Request by David McVey, Tesla Motors on behalf of Peter Mullen for Architectural Review of a sign exception to allow one additional wall sign and one freestanding sign along the El Camino Real elevation of the new Tesla Motors Automobile Dealership in the CS(AD) zoning district.

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**RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Architectural Review Board (ARB) recommend the Director of Planning and Community Environment approve the proposed project, based upon the draft Architectural Review and Sign Exception findings (Attachment A) and subject to the conditions of approval (Attachment B).

**BACKGROUND**

Existing Site Conditions

The new Tesla Motors automobile dealership is located at the southern side of El Camino Real, between Maybell Avenue and Arastradero Road, on a site of approximately 1.41 acres. Another dealership, Carlsen Volvo, is located on the adjacent property to the south of the site, with Walgreens located to the north. Directly to the rear is an electrical substation, with single family residences in the Barron Park neighborhood beyond. Across the street are additional retail businesses and the Camino Place residential development. The site is currently developed for an automobile dealership with associated service areas, parking spaces, and landscaping.

The site has a Comprehensive Plan land use designation of Service Commercial. The Service Commercial land use designation allows facilities providing citywide and regional services and relying on customers arriving by car. Typical uses include auto services and dealerships, motels, lumberyards, appliance stores, and restaurants.

The subject property has a zoning designation of Service Commercial with an Auto Dealership overlay (CS(AD)), the zone allows for a wide variety of commercial uses including retail sales. The Automobile Dealership (AD) combining district is intended to create and maintain areas that will accommodate dealerships which generally require special parking, access, and outdoor display provisions for customer convenience, servicing of vehicles or equipment, loading or unloading, or parking of commercial service vehicles.

### Project Description

The Applicant's project description is provided as Attachment C. The project includes the location and construction of two new signs as follows:

1. Installation of (1) new Tesla Motors Wall Sign. This red aluminum wall sign would have a one (1) inch white push thru acrylic logo. The logo would be internally illuminated with energy-efficient white LEDs. The logo would be approximately 5 foot 8 inches by 5 foot 8 inches in size, while the red aluminum background would wrap around the wall and have a height of 15 feet 10 inches and a width of 7 foot 4 inches and be mounted to the existing building façade. The overall sign is 116 square feet.
2. Installation of (1) new Tesla Motors freestanding sign. The proposed sign would be built on an existing concrete slab location within the front setback of the property. The aluminum framed sign would be "neon red", 8 foot 6 inches in height and 4 foot wide with an overall area of 40.63 square feet. The sign would have both the "Tesla" lettering and logo constructed of one inch thick white acrylic and would be internally illuminated with energy-efficient LEDs. The sign itself would be 11 feet tall from grade and would have a total area of 70 square feet.

### Project Review

Applications for the location and construction of signs are typically classified as minor architectural review projects. Minor projects are usually reviewed at a staff level without a public hearing, although any member of the public may request a hearing once a tentative decision has been made and prior to the decision effective date (Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) 18.77.070(b)). However, requests for Sign Exceptions are required to be reviewed by the ARB, per PAMC Section 16.20.040.

The proposed project requires a sign exception because, according to Palo Alto Municipal Code (PAMC) 16.20.170; "In each place of business or occupancy there shall be permitted the following combinations of signs:

- a) Where there is a freestanding sign, any one of the following: a flat wall sign, a projecting wall sign, or an awning sign;
- b) Where there is no freestanding sign, any combination of two of the following: a flat wall sign, a projecting wall sign, an awning sign;
- c) On corner lots, each frontage shall be treated separately for the purposes of subsections (a) and (b) above;
- d) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, pursuant to architectural review, PAMC 18.76, one type of sign may be disapproved where a combination of two or more types is permitted."

## **DISCUSSION**

On October 3, 2013, approval was granted for the installation of two (2) exterior wall signs on the upper walls of the existing showroom building (App# 13PLN-00353) for the Tesla Motors automobile dealership. The two currently proposed signs could not be approved at that time as they would have exceeded the Sign Code limitation of two wall signs (Section 16.20.170). Staff advised the applicant to apply for this sign exception for consideration by the ARB.

### **Comprehensive Plan Consistency**

ARB finding #1 requires that the design be consistent and compatible with applicable elements of the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan designation for the property is Service Commercial (CS), which allows automobile dealership uses, as described above. The project design is in conformance with the Comprehensive Plan and is supported by Policy L-50, which encourages high quality signage that is attractive, appropriate for the location, and balances visibility needs with aesthetic needs.

### **El Camino Real Design Guidelines**

The 2002 South El Camino Real Design Guidelines (Guidelines) recommended by the ARB designate this area as part of the Triangle Area Pedestrian-Oriented Node. The Guidelines call for the area to become a well-designed, compact, vital multi-neighborhood center with diverse uses and a mix of one-, two- and three-story buildings, and a network of pedestrian oriented streets and ways. New development and improvements to existing properties should support this vision. The Guidelines state that signage should be an integral part of the building, shall not extend beyond the top level of the building wall, and shall have individually formed letters.

The 1979 Council-adopted El Camino Real Design Guidelines provide direction for sign design. These guidelines encourage: the limitation of sign sizes along El Camino Real to ½ to 2/3 the maximum size permitted by the Sign Ordinance; limitation of height of freestanding signs to ten feet if placed at the property line; external illumination; and prohibition of flashing or moving signs. Conformance with these Guidelines is discussed in Sign Ordinance section below.

### **Compliance with Palo Alto's Sign Ordinance**

#### **Proposed Freestanding Sign**

The standards for a freestanding sign, as specified in Palo Alto Municipal Code Section 16.20.120, are listed below along with the proposed project's compliance.

(1) Area and Height. The maximum area and height of such signs is set forth in Table 2\*. The total site signage shall not exceed the total allowed for the site. *Complies; the proposed sign would be 40.63 square feet (60 percent of allowance) in conformance with the maximum allowed sign area of 67 square feet, and in conformance with the 66 percent guideline for freestanding signage along El Camino Real. The height of the sign would be 8 foot six inches in conformance with the allowed maximum of 25 feet and within the guideline of 10 feet.*

(2) Location. Every sign shall be wholly on the owner's property. In no case shall the sign size exceed fifty square feet. *Complies; the sign would be located within the front landscaped portion of the project site on an existing concrete slab and would be less than 50 square feet in size.*

(3) Number. Per Section 16.20.170, there may be one such sign for each frontage. The size of any additional sign shall be determined from Table 2\*. *Complies; one sign is freestanding proposed.*

(4) Construction. In addition to Section 16.20.190, every such sign shall be constructed wholly of metal, incombustible plastic or other approved fire-resistant material. *Complies; the sign would be constructed of aluminum and acrylic.*

### **Proposed Wall Sign**

The standards for a wall sign, as specified in Palo Alto Municipal Code Section 16.20.130, are listed below along with the proposed project's compliance.

**(a) Area.** The maximum wall sign area for each building face shall be as indicated on Table 3\*. *Does not comply; the proposed signs would be 116 square feet in size, which is over the allowed 100 square feet for the entire wall area. With inclusion of the previously approved wall sign the total sign area on this wall would be 141 square feet or 141 percent of the allowed sign area. However, given the unique building design the tenant is not proposing signage along the front façade facing El Camino Real which is allowed to have 80 square feet of signage.*

**(b) Height.** No part of any wall sign shall extend above the top level of the wall upon or in front of which it is situated. Any such sign which is suspended or projects over any public or private walkway or walk area shall have an overhead clearance of at least seven feet. *Complies; the height of the proposed sign would be 15 feet 10 inches, less than the top level of the wall which is 20 foot 8 inches. No portion of the sign would extend over a walkway.*

**(c) Thickness or Projection.** No such sign, including any light box or other structural part, shall exceed a thickness of ten inches. In any sign consisting of cutout or raised characters, said characters shall project no more than six inches from the mounting surface, except that when the average area of the individual characters exceeds six square feet, the projection may be increased by one-half inch for each additional square foot of average area over six feet, in no case to exceed fifteen inches. *Complies; the proposed sign would be three inches thick with an additional one inch for the push through logo.*

**(d) Number.** Subject to the provisions of Section 16.20.170, there may be any number of such signs for each building face, but in no case shall the total wall sign area for each face exceed that shown in Table 3\*. **No building shall be deemed to have more than four building faces.** *Does not comply; as described in (a) the two signs on this wall would exceed the allowed 100 square foot sign area as indicated in Table 3 of the Sign Code.*

### Sign Exception Findings

While the proposed signs meet many of the Sign Code requirements, as noted they are not in conformance with two regulations: 1) the allowed area for wall signs, and 2) the allowed combination of signs. The proposed project therefore requires approval of a sign exception. In order for the ARB to recommend approval of the sign exception the following findings must be made, per PAMC 16.20.040. The draft sign exception findings are further described in Attachment B.

- (1) There are exceptional or extraordinary circumstances or conditions applicable to the property involved that do not apply generally to property in the same district;
- (2) The granting of the application is necessary for the preservation and enjoyment of a substantial property right of the applicant and to prevent unreasonable property loss or unnecessary hardships; and
- (3) The granting of the application will not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity and will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, general welfare or convenience.

While the proposed wall sign is well over the allowed sign area at 141 percent, much of the square footage is a simple red aluminum structure which provides architectural interest to the building and provides a background for the 32 square foot Tesla logo. The subject site is also not taking advantage of a front wall sign where 80 square feet of sign area would be allowed.

The proposed combination of signs includes two approval wall signs located on the upper wall of the building. Given the height of these signs, they would be best seen by automobile occupants, whereas the additional proposed wall sign and freestanding sign are lower to the ground and would be better seen by pedestrians and bicycle travelers. For the above reasons, staff would ask the ARB to recommend approval of the proposed sign exception.

### ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The project is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) per Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures) of the CEQA Guidelines.

### ATTACHMENTS

- A. Draft ARB Findings
- B. Sign Exception Findings
- C. Draft ARB Conditions of Approval
- D. Applicant's Project Description
- E. Development Plans (Board Members Only)

### COURTESY COPIES

David McVey, Tesla Motors, [dmcvey@teslamotors.com](mailto:dmcvey@teslamotors.com)

**Prepared By:** Jodie Gerhardt, Senior Planner



**Manager Review:** Amy French, Chief Planning Official



**DRAFT**  
**FINDINGS FOR APPROVAL**  
**ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD STANDARDS FOR REVIEW**  
4180 El Camino Real [13PLN-00422]

The design and architecture of the proposed project, as conditioned, complies with the Findings for Architectural Review as required in PAMC Chapter 18.76.

- (1) *The design is consistent and compatible with applicable elements of the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project incorporates quality design that conforms to Comprehensive Plan policies that encourage high quality signage that is attractive, appropriate for the location and balances visibility needs with aesthetic needs.
- (2) *The design is compatible with the immediate environment of the site.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the proposed sign designs are appropriate for the automobile dealership setting near a busy intersection on a major thoroughfare. The project is generally consistent with the 1979 El Camino Real Design Guidelines and the 2002 South El Camino Real Design Guidelines, which address development of sites on el Camino Real.
- (3) *The design is appropriate to the function of the project.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the signs are not excessive for the intended use.
- (4) *In areas considered by the board as having a unified design character or historical character, the design is compatible with such character.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (5) *The design promotes harmonious transitions in scale and character in areas between different designated land uses.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (6) *The design is compatible with approved improvements both on and off the site.* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project, with its scale and design, is compatible with the existing building and the built environment on surrounding commercial sites.
- (7) *The planning and siting of the various functions and buildings on the site create an internal sense of order and provide a desirable environment for occupants, visitors and the general community.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (8) *The amount and arrangement of open space are appropriate to the design and the function of the structures.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (9) *Sufficient ancillary functions are provided to support the main functions of the project and the same are compatible with the project's design concept.* This finding is not applicable to this project.

## ATTACHMENT A

- (10) *Access to the property and circulation thereon are safe and convenient for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles.* The proposed signage will ensure visibility of the business which will service to provide safe and convenient circulation for employees and customers.
- (11) *Natural features are appropriately preserved and integrated with the project.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (12) *The materials, textures, colors and details of construction and plant material are appropriate expression to the design and function.* This finding can be made in the affirmative, see Findings 2, 3, and 4 above.
- (13) *The landscape design concept for the site, as shown by the relationship of plant masses, open space, scale, plant forms and foliage textures and colors create a desirable and functional environment.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (14) *Plant material is suitable and adaptable to the site, capable of being properly maintained on the site, and is of a variety which would tend to be drought-resistant to reduce consumption of water in its installation and maintenance.* This finding is not applicable to this project.
- (15) *The project exhibits green building and sustainable design that is energy efficient, water conserving, durable and nontoxic, with high-quality spaces and high recycled content materials.* This finding is not applicable to this project. The scope of the project is small and there is limited opportunity to incorporate green building design into the sign installations.
- (16) *The design is consistent and compatible with the purpose of architectural review as set forth in subsection 18.76.020(a).* This finding can be made in the affirmative in that the project design promotes visual environments that are of high aesthetic quality and variety.

**DRAFT**  
**FINDINGS FOR APPROVAL**  
**SIGN CODE EXCEPTION**  
4180 El Camino Real [13PLN-00422]

The following findings have been made to support the sign exception request for one additional wall sign and one freestanding sign for the new Tesla Motors Automobile Dealership, as modified by the ARB approval conditions. The specific exceptions that have been requested are for the following standards:

Wall Sign:

- Allow sign area in excess of allowed 100 square feet
- Allow the combination of three wall signs and one freestanding sign

(1) *There are exceptional or extraordinary circumstances or conditions applicable to the property involved that do not apply generally to property in the same district* in that the building is located directly adjacent to the public sidewalk along a busy roadway. The proposed signage will provide additional appropriately scaled and designed signage for a large site and allow customers to easily identify the entry along this busy roadway.

(2) *The granting of the application is necessary for the preservation and enjoyment of a substantial property right of the applicant and to prevent unreasonable property loss or unnecessary hardships* in that the visibility of signage is important for a retail business to be easily identifiable and to attract customers. Because the building is located directly adjacent to the public sidewalk, along a very busy roadway, there is limited visibility for typical signs. The proposed signs have been carefully designed for compatibility with the buildings and were reviewed and found consistent with the Architectural Review findings as required by the Municipal Code.

(3) *The granting of the application will not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity and will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, general welfare or convenience* in that the placement and appearance of the proposed signs do not pose safety hazards nor do they detract from the subject building or surrounding properties. The signs will not be detrimental to public health, safety, general welfare or convenience. They will be securely placed in a location that will not result in conflicts with pedestrians, drivers, occupants, visitors or employees.



**DRAFT**  
**CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**  
4180 El Camino Real [13PLN-00422]

**PLANNING & COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT**

On December 19, 2013 the Architectural Review Board (ARB) recommended *approval* of the application referenced above, and the Director of Planning and Community Environment (Director) approved the project on *date*.

Project Planner: Jodie Gerhardt, AICP

**Planning Division**

1. The project shall be in substantial conformance with the approved plans and related documents received October 10, 2013, except as modified to incorporate these conditions of approval.
2. The Conditions of Approval document shall be printed on all plans submitted for building permits related to this project.
3. The wall sign shall have a maximum height of 15 feet 10 inches and a width of 7 foot 4 inches, be mounted to the existing building façade, and have a maximum overall sign area of 116 square feet.
4. The freestanding sign shall be a maximum of 8 foot 6 inches in height and 4 foot wide with an overall square footage of 40.63 square feet.
5. Both signs shall be internally illuminated with energy-efficient LEDs.
6. For any future changes to the sign content, an Architectural Review application must be filed for review and approval.
7. The project approval shall be valid for a period of one year from the original date of approval. In the event a building permit(s), if applicable, is not secured for the project within the time limit specified above, the ARB approval shall expire and be of no further force or effect. Application for extension of this entitlement may be made prior to the one year expiration.



October 10, 2013

City of Palo Alto  
Department of Planning & Community Environment  
250 Hamilton Avenue  
Palo Alto, CA 94301

Re: Application for Sign Exception

Tesla Motors is requesting a Sign Exception for its electric automobile dealership located at 4180 El Camino Real. On October 3, 2013, approval was granted for the installation of (2) exterior wall signs on the existing upper wall of the building (Sign Application 13PLN-00353). Per Section 16.20.170 of the City of Palo Alto Sign Code, this is the maximum number of exterior signs allowed for a combination of (2) wall signs. This request is for the addition of (1) wall sign and (1) freestanding sign, and for this wall sign being larger than allowed per Table 3 of the Sign Code.

In support of the granting of the Sign Exception, the findings listed in Section 16.20.040 are met:

(1) There are exceptional or extraordinary circumstances or conditions applicable to the property involved that do not apply generally to property in the same district

The building presents a unique shape - four facades are visible from El Camino Real. The (2) approved wall signs on the upper wall will be on opposite sides of the building, each separately visible from El Camino Real in opposite directions. The additional wall sign will compliment the approved upper wall sign on the south side of the building while the freestanding sign will compliment the approved upper wall sign on the north side of the building.

(2) The granting of the application is necessary for the preservation and enjoyment of a substantial property right of the applicant and to prevent unreasonable property loss or unnecessary hardships

As an electric automobile dealership, the presence of each of these (4) signs is a key element for the business in order to promote the brand. The shape of the building allows only certain signs to be visible in certain directions without bringing an overwhelming view from any given approach. Two unique views are possible - from the south, only (2) wall signs are visible while from the north, only the freestanding sign and the other (1) wall sign are visible.

(3) The granting of the application will not be detrimental or injurious to property or improvements in the vicinity and will not be detrimental to the public health, safety, general welfare or convenience

The addition of these two signs will help beautify the property and surrounding area as well as bring a more enjoyable customer experience while positively influencing the public health, safety, general welfare, and convenience.

The granting of this Sign Exception to allow for a combination of (3) exterior wall signs and (1) freestanding sign with (1) wall sign being larger than allowed per code will allow Tesla to bring a positive presence to the community. This exposure will encourage the use of electric vehicles that are not only fun to drive, but also environmentally responsible.

Thank you  
Angela Wisco / Tesla Motors / Retail Development