Metro Council adopts new sign ordinance

By JIM McDONNELL
Advocate staff writer

The outdoor advertising ordinance endorsed in June by the city-parish Planning Commission became law last Tuesday night after the Metro Council approved it 8-4.

Mayor Pro Tem Mike Roubique and members Larry Bankston, Lank Corsentino, Gordon Curry, Pearl George, Kip Holden, Lynda Imes and Ben Peabody voted to approve the ordinance document exactly as it came to them from the Planning Commission.

Members Gary Bergeron, David Braud, Tom Ed McHugh and Doug Welborn opposed approval. Welborn proposed an amendment to "grandfather in" the 72-square-foot "junior billboards" that are already in place — admittedly in violation of the law that was in force at the time they were installed.

The old law set a 200-square-foot minimum for off-premise signs. The new law reduces that to 100 square feet. At no time since the existing zoning ordinance was approved in the 1970s have the 72-square-foot signs been legal in East Baton Rouge Parish, all present agreed — including the owners of the companies that put them up, Paul Toups of Toups Outdoor Advertising and Hank Henagan of Dixie Outdoor Advertising.

Roubique said that as those signs were going up in his district he tried to get the Department of Public Works and the parish attorney's office to do something about them and was informed that nothing could be done.

Steve Wilson, an assistant parish attorney present at the Tuesday night meeting, and Bankston, a practicing attorney, said that if such a legal opinion ever had been offered, it was incorrect.

The law on the books at the time was very clear and could have been enforced easily enough, they said.

Welborn said that even if the law had been broken, he could not see putting people out of business when the economy was in such bad shape.

Rip Wilkinson, president of the Federation of Greater Baton Rouge Civic Associations, said the same argument could be made regarding other types who were making money illegally, such as "certain people" in Corsentino's district.

Corsentino's district includes the Plank Road area, where merchants frequently complain about prostitutes.

Wilkinson, who served as a member of the Planning Commission subcommittee that spent nearly nine months drafting the new law, said he could not see talking about "grandfathering in" people who have been operating illegally all along.

Welborn attempted to get his amendment attached to the ordinance after the 8-4 vote. Corsentino and Roubique said it was a bit too late for that.

Welborn asked Council Administrator-Treasurer Don Nijoka to place it on the agenda of the next regular council meeting for introduction. If introduced Aug. 13 it could come to a vote Aug. 27.