Knoxville REALTORS® Shape Local Sign Ordinance Into One That Makes Sense for All – October 2014

Real estate signs in Knoxville, Tenn., had never been subject to a city ordinance before, but in the protracted municipal sign ordinance revision process that began about three years ago -- there they were. "That in itself wasn't a problem," explains Jennifer Roche, Governmental Affairs Director of the 3,400-member Knoxville Area Association of REALTORS® (KAAR). "It made sense for the updated ordinance to be as complete as possible. But we needed to make sure it was sensible and fair."

The draft revision had been pieced together from various sources, says Roche, and without the benefit of input from industry professionals. Local REALTORS®, especially commercial members and those on KAAR's Government Affairs Committee, had been following the process closely -- and with concern. The proposal, as far as it could be understood, was highly restrictive for both residential and commercial property owners, and would require REALTORS® to complete permit paperwork and pay fees prior to placing any signs on properties for sale or rent.

KAAR requested a Land Use Initiative review (LUI) from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, a REALTOR® Party program that provides valuable legal review and analysis to the state and local associations by the law firm of Robinson & Cole. "If you're not an attorney and you've ever tried to read these codes, you know how difficult it can be," says Roche, "and this was about 70 pages of it! It was extremely helpful for us to have a third party say, 'Yes, you're reading it correctly,'" she continues. "It got everyone off the ledge, and took the emotion out of the situation."

Next, KAAR conducted interviews with residential and commercial REALTORS® and auctioneers, to begin to codify industry standards where signs were concerned. "It was not as if our members had been littering the public right-of-ways with signs; they are very respectful professionals," notes Roche. "This was really a matter of identifying the existing industry standards that should become part of the ordinance."

When Roche approached the Knoxville Metropolitan Planning Commission, therefore, it was not a contentious situation. "I didn't slam the report on the desk, or anything!" she laughs. "But having the review in hand was a good basis for starting the conversation. We asked each other questions, and established that we were on the same page, goal-wise. And when I was able to provide them with our industry standards, already drafted, the Planning Commission was definitely grateful."

Knoxville's revised sign ordinance should be finalized in a few months, reflecting all of KAAR's requested stipulations: square footage and height standards for residential and commercial real estate signs; and codes governing open house signs and flags, and auction signs.

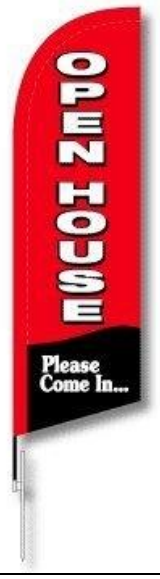
"The LUI analysis was the foundation on which KAAR built its winning strategy," says Roche. "If you have a code issue and if you don't have an attorney on staff, your first step should be to get that code to NAR for review. It's the only way to fight fair, and

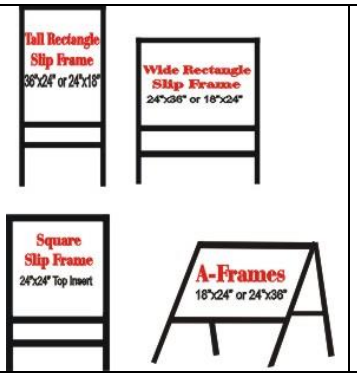
even be certain you're fighting for the right things. In our case, we didn't need to fight at all; we just took the initiative to provide the city with the standards we knew to be fair." She notes that other community groups who were bogged down by the confusing draft and did not have the advantage of LUI analysis did not fare as well.

Establishing a strong positive relationship with a decision maker within the local government, adds Roche, was an unforeseen benefit of that strategy, and will be a great asset, moving forward.

NAR's Land Use Initiative has come to the aid of 45 states since 2008, and requests are on the rise. To learn more about this resource, contact NAR State & Local Government Affairs Representative Adriann E. Murawski, at amurawski@realtors.org or 202.383.1068.

For more information about how the REALTORS® of the Knoxville area used the Land Use Initiative to make an impact on their local sign ordinance, contact Jennifer Roche, KAAR's Governmental Affairs Director, at jennifer@kaarmls.com or 865.584.8647.





Sign designs that KAAR showed the Planning Commission to help them understand the kinds of signs REALTORS® would like to continue using in Knoxville. The examples, along with the Land Use Initiative Review, helped the commission craft a sign ordinance that includes KAAR's input.