

Portland mural changes on their way

By Margaret Haberman, The Oregonian
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Portland city commissioners indicated today that they'll pass changes in the city's method for approving public murals, bringing an end to an issue that has bedeviled the city since Vera Katz was mayor.

The changes would create a new regulatory system for murals. They could be no higher than 30 feet; must stay in place for five years; and could consist of tile and/or paint applied to a wall. They couldn't be painted on historic landmarks.

Until 1998, murals were exempt from city sign regulations. That year, billboard owner AK Media sued the city, claiming that by exempting murals from its sign regulations, the city was discriminating against advertising in favor of murals. That, AK Media said, was a violation of the free speech provisions of the Oregon and United States constitutions.

The city then changed its sign code to regulate signs and murals the same way. That limited murals to a maximum of 200 square feet. When artists, community groups and building owners complained, Katz created a new public art mural process in 2005. The city expanded its public art program to include murals and was administered by the Regional Arts and Culture Council.

But the council's approval method is time-consuming and can discourage amateur or community-based murals. So city officials searched for a new way to encourage murals without violating free speech provisions.

The changes, which commissioners are expected to approve at an upcoming meeting, create a simpler permitting process run through the city.

"In our modern urban environment we experience a shocking amount of visual clutter - billboards, screaming blinking neon signs and advertisements of all sizes and description," said Joanne Oleksiak, co-founder of the group Portland Mural Defense, which supports the new regulations. "We're correcting an imbalance."

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