

# PROFILES OF SIGN REGULATIONS IN MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTS

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Overview of the attributes and trends that contribute to effective sign codes.

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## PROFILES BY COMMUNITY TYPE AND ENVIRONMENTS

Multiple communities and environments are profiled within this report based on their effective sign codes. The communities were selected based on divisions established in the *Framework for On-Premise Sign Regulations* by Alan Weinstein, Professor of Law at Cleveland State University. The unique types of signs were selected for having specialized codes controlled by local communities.

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# Attributes of Effective Sign Ordinances

Successful ordinances can ensure signs that are consistent, legible and reduce visual clutter. Sign ordinances fulfill legal and liability obligations by protecting the safety of the public through proper legibility and compliance with the UCC (Uniform Construction Code) and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). They are among the most important regulatory structures controlled by local communities and have a significant impact on the physical environment. Codes complement design and planning guidelines that reinforce community values—balancing the needs of local businesses, the vision for the physical environment, and respect for legal precedent. The following attributes contribute to effective sign codes:

## CREATE BUSINESS GROWTH AND INNOVATION

New technologies—like digital signage, large format printing, and signs integrated into architecture—reshape the way we define a “sign.” Effective regulations are flexible enough to accept new innovations, while focusing on core standards for sign quality and clarity. Nearly 40% of shoppers make quality assumptions of a retail store based on the signs, according to research presented by Dr. James Kellaris of the University of Cincinnati in the Sign Research Foundation’s *Consumer Perceptions of Retail Signage*. Codes that allow for high sign quality and innovation strengthen businesses and make communities more attractive.



Utilizing signs and identity graphics to support economic development is an idea pioneered in the 1980s in Times Square. This approach has been adopted by many cities since, like Beale Street in Memphis.

Existing streetscape with zoning code



- Zoned as an F-1 Parcel, for Commercial use.
- Zoning Regulations governing signs include
  - City of Lansing Zoning Ordinance- Part 14- Building & Housing Code- Title 4- Miscellaneous Building Regulations- Chapter 1442 Signs
  - City of Lansing Sign Permit Application
  - City of Lansing Department of Planning & Neighborhood Development Sign Permit Check List
  - City of Lansing Signs Frequently Asked Questions

## SUPPORT MORE EFFECTIVE SIGNS

Communities should be motivated to develop codes that encourage the production of more creative and engaging signs. Often cities rely on the perceptions of community stakeholders to develop sign codes that may not align with the needs of residents and visitors. Research has been collected on effective signage while maintaining community aesthetics. These resources can provide important objective support for design related decisions.

For example, a study conducted at Michigan State University, *Evaluating Stakeholder Perceptions of Form Based and On-Premise Traditional Signage Codes for Commercial Signage along Streetscapes*, surveyed people on what they felt were the most effective signs in the environment. Many people preferred dimensional and architectural signs including awnings, dimensional letters and projected signs.



Additional reports on effective signs available at [signresearch.org](http://signresearch.org) include:

- *Consumer Perceptions of On-Premise Signage*
- *Economic Value of On-Premise Signage*
- *Signs and the Downtown Experience*

## ABIDE WITH FEDERAL AND FIRST AMENDMENT REGULATIONS

The Supreme Court in *Reed vs. Town of Gilbert* asked municipalities to review their sign codes to ensure a focus on legibility, public safety, environment, and design related regulations and not regulations based on content. The ruling also upheld the lower courts that gave business and institutions the right to place signs on private property, while allowing the community to regulate signs.

More information on the impact of the *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* on sign codes can be found in the transcript of the Supreme Court from the October Term in 2014. A synopsis is available in the research by Wendy Moeller, AICP, *Best Practices in Regulating Temporary Signs*, and the *Analysis of Reed v. Town of Gilbert* conducted by Professor Alan Weinstein of Cleveland State University.



*Reed v. Town of Gilbert* is the primary case of a town being challenged for controlling content on signs. The courts have generally ruled that communities must allow businesses and institutions to identify and direct to their location without interference based on content. Effective and legally permissible codes must be focused on legibility and impact on the environment and not on the message.

Clearview 1-W

Clearview 1-B

Clearview 2-W

Clearview 2-B

Clearview 3-W

Clearview 3-B

Clearview 4-W

Clearview 4-B

Clearview 5-W

Clearview 5-B

Clearview 6-W

Clearview 6-B

The Pennsylvania State University Larsen Institute has developed research on sign legibility that determines how illumination, letter size, contrast and location serves as a foundation for effective sign codes. A 2014 report by Phillip Garvey, *On Premise Sign Research Review*, includes a collection of research in the field.

#### CONFORM WITH LEGIBILITY RESEARCH AND SIGN BEST PRACTICES

There is a body of research on sign legibility for type, iconography, illumination and contrast; both for public safety, compliance with the ADA, and for legibility effectiveness. While federal rulings allow communities to regulate signs by “Time, Place and Manner,” they can be challenged in court for being overly restrictive. In addition, there are a number of best practices and recommendations that have been established by the American Planning Association (APA), International Sign Association (ISA), and Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD) based on legibility research that should be considered in code development.

#### ADDRESS THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITY

There are significant differences in scale, architectural and landscape character in urban and suburban environments, often in the same jurisdiction. An effective sign code would address this context clearly and consistently. Large cities can contain many environments, from low-density suburban to high-density urban areas. Flexibility in addressing these differences is important to successful sign codes.



In 1974, San Diego created code overlays for different parts of the city. This code started the trend in form-based regulations that address the architectural context of a community instead of the main function of the area. More information on sign overlay districts can be found in a Michigan State University report: *Evaluating Stakeholder Perceptions of Form Based and On-Premise Traditional Signage Codes for Commercial Signage along Streetscapes* and in Dr. Alan Weinstein's *Framework for Urban Sign Regulations*.

### MEET SAFETY STANDARDS

Sign codes must balance a number of issues, including public and traffic safety. Approval/permitting by governing bodies often includes compliance with building codes for electrical supply as well as certification of the structural integrity of sign fabrications. Sign placement may require permitting by Departments of Transportation in addition to legibility standards like type size and color contrast.

### FUNDAMENTALLY FAIR

It is no surprise that large companies with trained staff and more experience have an advantage over small businesses when working with regulations. Local or custom sign manufacturers interviewed for this report noted that sign companies often run into challenges dealing with cities that have difficult processes for compliance. Reasonable codes make it easier for smaller organizations to succeed in getting signs approved by having clearly documented approval processes that are minimally influenced by political or public pressure.



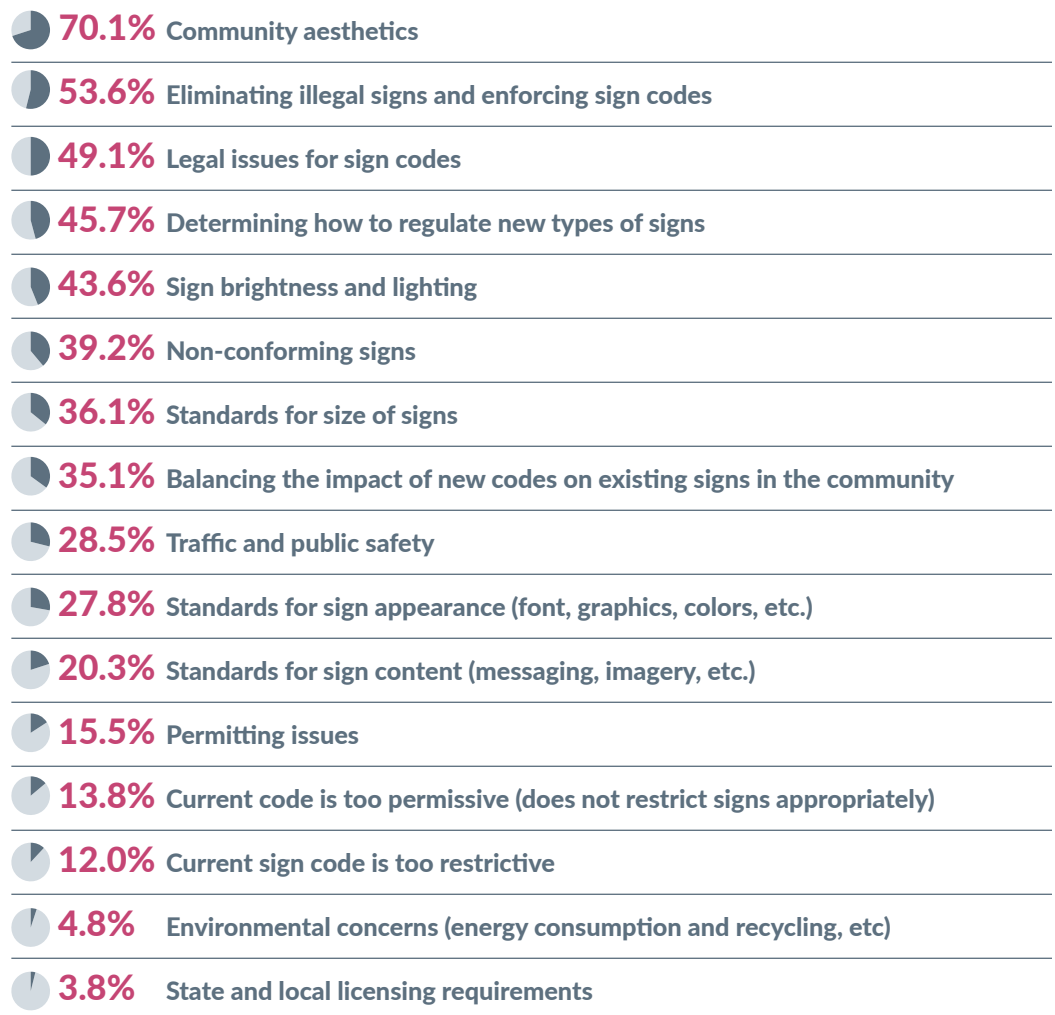
Many sign codes enforce standards that would make signs hard to read, increasing the chance of accidents. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in the *Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices* requires wayfinding signs in the same environment to have messages be a minimum text size and contrast for safety reasons. The standards found in the MUTCD and UDA Model Code also are effective for commercial signs.

# Key Trends in Sign Code Development

Planners and city officials face a diverse set of challenges when developing their communities' sign codes. The impetus behind embarking on a rewrite of a sign ordinance can vary based on the community priorities.

In a survey conducted by McKinley Advisors for the International Sign Association, planners were asked about their leading considerations when developing codes.

## TOP PRIORITIES





Buffalo Wild Wings has been a leading company in the development of brand guidelines that use the entire building in order to minimize the official sign footprint found in most codes.



CVS and Walgreens have developed strategies of using interior signs to promote an exterior identity.

### CUSTOMIZED BRAND ENVIRONMENTS

Brand designers have learned to customize the building and sign design of franchised stores and restaurants around the code restrictions of specific municipalities. This means using color, building shape and illumination to turn the building itself into a sign. In addition, designers have learned to adapt to rules on interior and exterior codes by using glass walled buildings with large scale interior signs seen from the outside.



Miami Beach was known for its Art Deco architecture and signage, but now is looking to preserve its more current 1950s and 1960s Moderne buildings. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has encouraged the preservation of buildings from different eras in the same historic district.

### THE 21ST CENTURY HISTORIC DISTRICT

Historic codes used to be focused on 19th century urban conditions that were predominantly pedestrian oriented. These days, historic areas are far more mixed and include driver-oriented commercial strip centers as well as urban areas with warehouse and industrial spaces. Sign code development in these districts is more complex, with wider stakeholder opinions on what makes a valued historic property. Many planners support flexible codes that reflect the changing nature and diversity of these places, while others focus on architectural style and context related to one place and time.

Dark Skies debates have rekindled research on the most effective controls for sign illumination including adjustable internal illumination for signs and facades. Research by the Penn State Larsen Institute, *Internal vs. External On-Premise Sign Lighting: Visibility and Safety in the Real World* has shown that internal illumination is both safer for drivers and improves the control of light.



### SIGN ILLUMINATION CONTROLS

The International Dark-Sky Association, as well as community leaders in suburban areas have advocated for lighting controls on signs to minimize sky glow. A number of towns, particularly in the Southwest, have focused on regulating projected or external illumination lighting systems for signs or dimming light during the late evening hours. Business owners have begun to combat many of these rules based on business concerns showing that dim commercial signs have little impact on sky glow compared to bright street, residential and ballfield lighting.

Large planned communities like Celebration, Florida, have comprehensive aesthetic standards for signs that are available on their web site.



### AESTHETIC LIMITATIONS

Planned mixed use communities often seek extensive controls over commercial signs including typography, color and shape. This is often opposed by businesses that believe that the First Amendment allows them greater freedom over their public messaging, particularly brand icons that are crucial to their visibility. The federal Lanham Act precludes the alteration of a registered trademark as a condition of getting a permit, but the federal courts are split on how it applies to signs (9th Circuit vs 2nd Circuit). While there are no definitive court rulings that prevent aesthetic controls, too many restrictions can discourage business. Often with aesthetic controls come additional layers of approval which should be avoided and or minimized



Construction site commercial signs are among the many new temporary sign types that are the result of improved large format printing technology.

### TEMPORARY SIGN REGULATIONS

Until recently, most urban sign codes did not focus on temporary signs beyond short-term events. Trends and technology have created retail opportunities and challenges. Inexpensive large format printing has allowed for a range of temporary signs from A-frames on urban streets to suburban banners and even inflatable structures. Balancing the need to regulate temporary sign excesses with the freedom to augment permanent signs with temporary messages is an issue planners are wrestling with in code development.

ISA and the Illinois Sign Association in collaboration with Small Business Advocacy Council (SBAC) teamed up to support reforms of the Chicago sign permitting process. The Chicago City Council passed a law streamlining the permitting process and the SBAC estimated that it would reduce the amount of time spent waiting for a permit by 50-80 percent.



### IMPROVED PERMIT PROCESSING

Increased use of online technology has encouraged large and mid-size cities to focus on making it easier to move through the permitting process. This includes developing process tools and other supporting information to make it easier to face permitting review.

In Orange County, California, private establishments reserve some of their digital billboard time to post community messages. More information on digital signage and the sign code can be found in the International Sign Association's Exterior Digital Signage Article Series.



## DIGITAL SIGN CONFUSION

Digital signs are creating a revolution in the sign industry and major difficulties for code officials. Technological innovations are constantly evolving for digital signs and few standards exist. Communities are seeing greater opportunities in digital signs as an outreach vehicle for event and service information, and standards must evolve with technology.

## PERSPECTIVES

### JOHN YARGER, PRESIDENT NORTH AMERICAN SIGNS COMMUNITY TRENDS

National sign companies have a unique perspective on code trends since we are able to see how different parts of the country handle regulations, particularly the code cultures in large cities and regions. There are considerable differences, with some cities actively pursuing innovative approaches and others that need significant updates.

### BEST AND MOST CHALLENGING CITIES FOR CODE DESIGN AND INTERPRETATION

Some large cities and regions have been getting easier to work with over the years. In particular, cities that have a large community of fabricators and planners who collaborate consistently. Los Angeles County is a good example where most of the towns throughout the region have knowledgeable planners and straightforward codes. Areas like this have developed overlays or special codes that meet unique community needs, and use simple language that can be easily interpreted.

The cities that pose a challenge for our company are places that have many areas with unique codes combined with opaque processes. Our company tends to rely on local expertise in these cases. Due to historical development patterns, San Francisco and Miami are examples of cities where we need to have local installer support to expedite the process. Often these cities respond better with face-to-face meetings to move the process forward. If you are not seen as a reputable company with strong code knowledge, it can be challenging to obtain a permit.

### WHAT A MANUFACTURER WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN THE CODES

Most of all, I want to see a code that is filled with diagrams and examples. In addition, the code should be clear about what the town likes to see and what they discourage. Fabricators want to strengthen communities and have it in their best interest to be on the same page as the spirit and the letter of the codes. Using practical language within the code also helps to provide clarity.

I like to see variances allowed with reasonable fees. A \$5,000 variance fee is just too extreme. Along with variances, there should be educational processes for zoning board members to interpret variances on objective grounds, rather than subjective aesthetic opinions.

Finally, planners can refer to research and information from organizations like the ISA and the Sign Research Foundation, particularly on areas like illumination. Lack of knowledge has a brutal impact on interpreting and applying sign codes, particularly for newer technologies, like digital screens.

# Suburban Communities

Suburban communities are oriented predominantly around vehicular transportation, even though they range from high-density commercial corridors in and near large cities to semi-rural areas at the outer edge of metropolitan regions. Suburban sign codes are mainly based in individual municipalities, though there are also county and regional sign codes that reinforce consistent standards across larger areas.

Digital and temporary signs are having a major impact on the suburban visual environment. These signs should be allowed under the code along with a clear enforcement mechanism that allows reasonable and responsible use of these kinds of visual communications.

## HAMPTON, VIRGINIA

Hampton, Virginia, while predominantly vehicular oriented, has a number of districts with different densities and zoning requirements. The code reflects the character and differences between these communities while providing detailed guidance.

### DETAIL STANDARD ORIENTED TO COMMUNITIES

The code is based on community experience, with standards oriented to a wide array of sign approaches including unique building typologies, special conditions like temporary signs and mixed use developments. All of these entities are explained clearly, with guidance integrated into the code itself.

### PERMITTING MANAGEMENT

Different permitting requirements are built into the code oriented around the specific sign types being installed which can be adjusted for both simple and complex signs.



Monroe, Washington, developed comprehensive guidelines that worked in tandem with sign codes. These guidelines articulate a vast array of best practices for signs in different contexts in an area that includes both dense and rural conditions. Strong guidelines like these provide a visual language for the code while establishing a foundation for potential variances. Of particular note in the guidelines is a focus on the integration of architecture and signs, which is becoming much more prevalent in suburban communities.

## GUIDELINES

- Most effective codes include extensive guidelines which articulate best practices for a wide range of signs integrated into architecture including pylon signs, awnings, facades and towers.
- Suburban areas often do not have clear boundaries between jurisdictions. Consistency between an adjacent municipality's sign codes can create more consistent signs on commercial corridors.
- Code standards should reflect the specific legibility standards based on driving conditions. Sometimes these require code overlays for different areas based on speed.
- Variances are common in suburban areas with a wide variety of buildings and developments. While the code should be able to accommodate most sign types, there should be consistent standards for potential variances.
- Suburban areas often do not have professional staff for code review. It is important to incorporate training and education into the code, particularly for areas of interpretation.
- Many businesses purchasing a new sign have little experience in the process. Suburban codes need to provide greater education and guidance to be effective.

## PERSPECTIVES

### TOM BECKWITH, FAICP, PRINCIPAL BECKWITH CONSULTING GROUP

Our firm has developed a number of guidelines including Monroe, Washington, and have found the guidelines are very effective in suburban areas. While the sign industry has been sophisticated when working with codes, our firm has discovered that many small companies employ small local shops and printers that have little knowledge of codes. Specific guidelines provide reassurance that they are on the right track and are meeting community expectations. At the same time, the guidelines can also be used to promote innovative signs that may fall outside of the traditional code structure and require a variance.

When our firm develops a guideline, we start with an analysis by a stakeholder group of planners, sign companies, community officials and the local Chamber of Commerce. We then inventory existing sign practices and survey the community, using visuals, to validate practices that are strongest. Most average people have little understanding of best practices until they see how effectively signs work.

One of the most significant issues that came out of the survey is the need for clutter reduction. This has been very difficult to manage with the large number of semi-permanent and digital signs as well as grandfathered existing signs. Provisional permits work well in these situations so the company can be monitored to see if it is complying with the code.

The guidelines have been effective for new developments. Older existing developments are still a challenge and it could take years for change to occur. In addition, there are new issues like franchise-oriented promotional signs and digital signs that need to be addressed in updated guidelines. Nevertheless, we find the guideline approach allows for communities to produce a benchmark aesthetic while allowing the sign code to remain simple and easy to access.

# Urban Communities (Downtowns and Neighborhoods)

City downtowns and dense neighborhoods are complex environments marked by a mix of transportation options including auto traffic, pedestrian, transit and bicycle use. These areas receive focused attention from planners and community activists, and their view of successful sign systems evolves with their vision of a successful urban environment. The anti-sign era of the 1960s and 1970s has changed to a view that signs can have a significant positive impact on economic development and on promoting freedom of speech if handled properly. At the same time, there have been attempts by some local officials to control new and innovative sign technologies, including wraps and digital signs.

## MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Few cities have developed as proactive an approach to downtown sign success as Memphis. Memphis has utilized code innovations from around the country in creating their system. The most important aspect of the sign code is that it extends from a larger streetscape and urban visioning plan for the entire area. By linking signs to the fabric of the greater community, signs are seen as part of a holistic urban vision.



### OVERLAY DISTRICTS

Memphis has multiple overlay districts, reflecting the character of different neighborhoods. Combined with a planning vision for each distinct area, these overlays paint a more expansive picture of how signs meet not only the standard but also the spirit of the code. This is most visible with the Beale Street corridor where illuminated signs play a fundamental role in making the street an important tourist attraction.

### INNOVATION

Additional guidelines and code language promoting new urban innovations include street furniture, illumination, public art and outdoor dining. These important elements complement signs when creating a comprehensive identity for commercial businesses and institutions.

California has been a pioneer in the development of different sign districts reflecting the diversity of urban neighborhoods. San Diego has been innovative in its focus on developing standards for skyscrapers and industrial buildings.



## GUIDELINES

- Urban downtown areas have a wide variety of districts, each with their own unique character, history and density. Successful codes have multiple overlays that call out districts with a specific character.
- As downtowns tend to have higher pedestrian traffic, the importance of strong, visible signage is paramount to the economic vitality of the businesses who pay for that real estate, hoping to catch a customer's attention.
- Downtown codes require an extensive planner-led stakeholder process with wide participation.
- Clutter can be an issue in urban areas. Successful codes address the issue of temporary signs with clear guidelines and enforcement.
- Many urban areas have a more rigorous process for sign permitting. Education becomes crucial, necessitating clear processes for writing a permit and achieving approval.
- Best practices in downtown areas must encompass a wide range of architectural diversity and be updated based on new technologies and trends.
- External illumination plays a larger role in sign lighting than other areas. Codes should focus on building illumination in addition to general sign lighting coverage.
- Digital sign codes are crucial to new codes in downtown areas. They must address digital signs at both the vehicular and pedestrian level and be kept up to date based on changing technology.
- Wayfinding and streetscape guidelines should be clearly articulated in the sign code.
- Proactive cities encourage successful sign practices by promoting easements and financial support (often seen in historic districts grants like Automobile Alley in Oklahoma City featured on page 14) to encourage innovative sign approaches.

## PERSPECTIVES

**R. ERIC JARRELL, ASSISTANT SECTION CHIEF, COMMUNITY PLANNING  
MARLEY BICE AICP, SENIOR PLANNER  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION**

The Montgomery County Planning Commission in Pennsylvania offers planning assistance to the County's 62 municipalities. The Planning Commission has created a series of model ordinances to help municipal governments understand development trends and best practices. The Montgomery County Model Sign Ordinance was released in the spring of 2014 as a tool to support municipal efforts to incorporate sign control best practices into local ordinances. Through the model sign ordinance, MCPC has strived to balance the economic value of signage for businesses within our communities while also preserving and improving the visual quality of Montgomery County.

The model sign ordinance was the result of over a year of research and writing. As part of this process, dozens of sign ordinances from around the country were reviewed. In addition, extensive signage case law and planning and signage industry publications were evaluated during the course of writing the model ordinance. Lastly, the model sign ordinance standards were tested by reviewing them with municipal code officials from around the County and performing "field checks" to evaluate the proposed dimensional criteria compared to sign sizes in real life developments. The resulting guidelines have a deep bibliography and an evidence-based approach.

The model ordinance seeks to help municipalities address challenging sign issues such as temporary signs, digital signs, reducing billboard clutter, and creating standards for different types of sign illumination. Model standards were drafted for different character areas that are present throughout the County, such as Main Street areas, village mixed use areas, and rural areas. Having a range of model criteria for appropriate sign types, sizes, and illumination allows individual municipalities to select which character areas are most relevant to their communities. Overall, the Montgomery County model sign ordinance provides guidelines for how to control signs using regulations that fit the context of the parcel size and orientation, zoning district, and community character.

# Historic and Town Districts

Historic districts, usually an overlay on an existing city code, require greater design review. Historic districts are based on interpreting the current historic fabric that can range from a collection of buildings from one time period to an eclectic combination of buildings and uses spanning decades or centuries.

The nature of what is considered historic changes over time. In Philadelphia, preservation of the 18th Century colonial fabric resulted in the destruction of later 19th century industrial buildings. Now the architecture of both eras is treasured. Today modern buildings from the 1960s are finding favor again.



In historic districts, visual examples of best practices are crucial to success. In addition, the district should have a narrative on what it considers to be the historic nature of the place. There should also be room for experimentation, particularly with elements that can be changed easily like displays, awnings and window graphics.

## DENVER, COLORADO

Denver, Colorado, is one of the largest historic cities in the American West with large intact neighborhoods and commercial districts from the 19th and early 20th century. Its sign code focuses on maintaining the historic ambiance of these neighborhoods while accepting that signs can be a strong link between the historic past and current commercial development.

### GUIDELINES AND EDUCATION

Denver has an educational program and guidelines linked to their historic sign code. This includes a clear review of the permitting process and a checklist for completing an application. The guidelines provide an overview on urban commercial signs before delving into specific details.

### FLEXIBILITY

The guidelines contain best practice examples that encourage creativity and experimentation in the development of signs by focusing on scale, materiality, and context as much as prescribing a specific aesthetic.

### MAINTENANCE

The code focuses on ongoing sign maintenance as well as new installations to ensure that signs are being maintained with the same level of attention.



## GUIDELINES

(Excerpt from the Salt Lake City Design Guidelines for Signs in Historic Districts)

- To ensure that all signs within the various local historic districts or on landmark sites are compatible with the special character of the districts.
- To help convey the sense of excitement and vitality envisioned for the historic districts.
- Encourage signs which, by their appropriate design, are integrated with and harmonious to the buildings and sites which they occupy.
- Preserve and improve the appearance of the City as a historic community in which to live and work.
- Ensure that the installation of a sign does not damage the historic fabric, nor detract from the historic character of a historic district or landmark site.



In the last decade, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma has tried to bring back the character of its Automobile Alley National Historic District by providing subsidies for companies that develop new neon signs for the area.



Salt Lake City, Utah, like many cities with early 20th century historic districts, has a historic code that focuses on illuminated signs and overall building illumination as a key component for design review.

# Campuses

Campuses are large-scale developments often managed by a single institution or entity. Examples include office and industrial parks, healthcare campuses, mixed use developments, and universities. Through the planning and design process, campus developers must collaborate with local jurisdictional authorities to establish sign standards that address the greater community needs while enabling their own unique or special visual communications objectives to be met. Signage master plans stipulating any number of criteria like sign type, quantity, size, location, etc., are useful instruments that can establish the level of control by the owner/developer and streamline the design and approval process.

## UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY INNOVATION CAMPUS

Utah State University developed a comprehensive set of guidelines for its Innovation Campus. While signage is a small part of this overall plan, its role is clearly delineated among a series of important steps needed to develop a property and building on the campus.

The Martin Luther King Medical Campus in Los Angeles developed by Gensler has a vision plan showing their expectation for new buildings including signs and graphics. These vision reports are general but play a strong role in creating a visual language that guides future projects.



### ASPIRATIONAL OPENING

The guidelines begin with the aspirations for the program and the quality expectations for any property developed on site. This includes a visual vocabulary of buildings, landscape and sign elements to support these goals.

### PROCESS FOR BUILDING DEVELOPMENT

The guidelines include a complete process for property and building development of which signs play an important part. This culminates in a checklist for complete development and approval.

### INTEGRATION OF SIGN, BUILDING AND PROPERTY

The guidelines combine property and sign design making a clear case that any development should look at the entire property as a whole and not as separate line items.

## GUIDELINES

- In addition to tight guidelines, campuses also contain a vision plan that articulate how the planners would like to see the campus expand over time.
- Codes are comprehensive and contain streetscape, landscaping, gateway, temporary and wayfinding elements, in addition to property sign standards.
- A support design team is often on call to assist with property development.
- Sign standards usually are integrated into complete design standards that include property landscaping and building design.
- Campus design guidelines contain a combination of strict design elements to follow in some areas and allow variations in other areas. These have to be carefully separated.
- Maintenance of signs is important to include in the code to maintain high standards once installed.

## PERSPECTIVES

### BARRY ATWOOD, MANAGER, GRAPHIC DESIGN PROGRAM EMORY UNIVERSITY

Like any major institution, campus codes are completely oriented around reinforcing the brand. My school has a long history reflected in its architecture and landscaping. Developing a strong sign code needs to be an extension of that larger palette. At the same time, campuses must always be forward looking. It is very easy to fall in a design rut where only a limited number of materials and colors are used, even while the campus is changing. We look to best practices from other colleges and consult closely with the architects when we develop an identity for new buildings. Our guidelines can adjust with each new project reflecting the evolution of the school and the refreshing of the brand.

### KELLY HARRIS, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT PENN STATE

Exterior signage here at Penn State includes types conceived for campus identification, vehicular and pedestrian wayfinding, building identification, educational interpretation, athletics, and donor recognition. Our system integrates consistent color, typography, and visual identity to signal arrival, direct, and inform with the goal of creating a safe, cohesive, and beautiful place. The decisions we make about signage today are legacy ones that will impact the character and aesthetic quality of campus for years to come. For this reason, design and implementation guidelines are important. However, questions about rigid standardization abound. How is technology changing the way people navigate, communicate, and interact? How is social media impacting the efficacy of some sign types? How do we accommodate creativity and innovation without compromising the character of a landscape that may have taken generations to establish? Important questions that should engage researchers and academics.

# Digital Signs

Digital signs have been in the environment for at least 30 years. In the last decade, inexpensive software and hardware systems have put electronic message centers (EMC) within reach of even small companies. Easier access to digital signs has encouraged their rapid expansion in cities and towns, and codes have often not caught up to the technology. From a regulatory viewpoint, this has resulted in cities with few codes around digital signage, or the opposite - extensive restrictions that limit almost all digital elements without an easement.

Columbus, Ohio, now regulates the brightness of EMCs based on extensive research on businesses nighttime illumination at different distances.

## ATLANTA, GEORGIA



Atlanta has moved farther than most municipalities in the creation of a code that covers a few key legibility areas comprehensively. Attributes include:

### CLEAR STANDARDS FOR THE LEGIBILITY OF DIGITAL SIGNS

The code includes clear standards for transition time and brightness. Digital sign square footage standards are similar to static signs.

### DEFINITIONS

Definitions are clearly articulated for different types of digital signs and content change methods.

### BASED ON SAFETY AND LEGIBILITY RESEARCH

The code is founded on legibility research studying luminance and duration of messaging.

### REFERENCE TO MORE CREATIVE DISPLAYS

Special signs, like large screen digital displays with animation, are referred to in the code as part of a more specific easement process.



The best digital sign codes are simple and focused on a small number of issues that have the most impact on the community such as size, brightness and changeability. These codes should also be based on reputable safety and legibility studies.

While many EMCs and digital billboards can be regulated under sign codes, there will always be special cases such as the use of a sign as a public art piece or integration into the building's architecture. While easements should be permitted in these cases, it should not be a reason to use the easement process for all digital signs. In downtown areas, where digital signs are encouraged, a special group within the zoning board can be established to work with businesses and institutions.

## GUIDELINES

(Developed by Deacon Wardlow of Spectacular Media for the International Sign Association)

- Brightness of signs should be measured relative to the ambient light in the area.
- Message changing time should reflect the speed limit and the density of the area. Downtown districts can support more message changeability than residential areas.
- Transition methods regulation should include definitions.
- Message transition should be short (under one second) except in special cases where animation is important. (This can be handled through an easement if the municipality is unclear on animation in their code.)
- The sign area of the EMC should be regulated in a similar way to static signs with the size based on the density or zoning of the urban area.

## PERSPECTIVES

### DEACON WARDLOW, SPECIAL OPERATIONS DIRECTOR SPECTACULAR MEDIA

When it comes to community's view of digital signs, the environment is not positive or negative but more of reactivity and confusion. Most municipalities do not take a stance on the issue of digital signage until they have to and then they scramble to find the right information they need. The *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* ruling has created one major impetus for a new code push, but there are also other instigators like digital billboards and new development. The most positive scenario that forces digital sign codes to the forefront is when a town, school, firehouse or other municipal function wants a digital sign. This is happening more and more as costs come down and the ROI of digital branding becomes more evident.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot out there. Usually a town looks for a model code of which not much exists as a best practice. They also look to organizations like ISA which has done a good job focusing on digital sign issues. I am on the EMC subcommittee at ISA and we have worked hard to tackle digital sign legibility issues in codes. What is really missing, though, are codes that can be adapted to specific town character. A small pedestrian main street does not want to adopt a big city code and large suburban and exurban areas have their own needs.

### MAJOR ISSUES

There are a few key issues that planners should consider when developing municipal sign codes. The first is to develop realistic and measurable goals. For example, some codes use a system of measurement for brightness like candelas per square inch (or nits) which is much more difficult to measure than a more widely understood measure like footcandles.

Another major issue to consider is adjusting the quality of signs based on the specific environment. Some communities limit the size of the displays or require they be integrated into a larger sign. This approach can also allow for variances. My company has pushed using on-premise signs for community purposes like Federal Emergency Management alerts or events. This can be part of the variance process and can be used as a tool to gather community support for digital signs.

Communities should remember to design codes using language that will not be obsolete. Common terms like electronic message centers or even LED signs do not account for technological possibilities including projection and holographic systems. All technologies require visual hardware and software from lighting to LCD screens, so that may be a good start when writing a code.

Finally, seek more than one expert. Trade associations and research organizations are a great starting point but, in addition, planners, fabricators, and officials from other cities can provide different points of view. The digital sign industry is still maturing, therefore, municipalities need to do their homework when developing a code.

# Temporary Signs

Temporary signs cover a diversity of content and approach including political campaigns, construction sites, civic events and commercial promotions. Municipalities struggle with managing these diverse uses in their code and may not always consider new sign methodologies and printing technologies. Effective sign codes recognize that temporary signs have their own nomenclature that requires its own regulatory approach. At the same time, the codes also recognize that temporary signs are central to messaging that is important to the welfare of the community and minimize regulations that can stifle freedom of expression.

One of the leading issues established in the recent Supreme Court case *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* is that municipalities cannot determine the content of speech on signs although other elements, such as “Time, Place and Manner” can be reasonably regulated. This change has resulted in a review of most sign codes across the country to ensure that they are constitutionally-compliant.

## BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON



Bellevue established its temporary sign code to minimize the regulation of small on-premise temporary signs, while carefully regulating signs for special events in areas where there is less property owner control.

### ON-PREMISE SIGNS

Except for a specific square footage requirement, on-premise temporary sign regulations are left open ended, allowing for banners, A-frames, and other systems commonly used for business.

### EVENTS OF A SPECIFIC DURATION

The code focuses its regulatory approach around events of a specific duration including commercial enterprises like real estate sales, construction sites, political campaigns and special events. The regulations allow for larger signs and more variety but structures the timing and material quality. In some cases signs are also given more specific permitting requirements.

### DOWNTOWN OVERLAY

The code recognizes the need to differentiate between downtown signs and signs outside the downtown area where greater square footage is needed.

## GUIDELINES

(From *Best Practices in Regulating Temporary Signs*)

- Make a clear distinction between a temporary sign and a temporary message.
- Evaluate the regulation of temporary signs as part of an overall review of sign regulations.
- Be practical in sign area calculations.
- Consider allowing temporary signs as an interim sign solution.
- Avoid treating all temporary signs the same.
- Consider allowing off-premise temporary signs.
- Visibility issues that apply to permanent signs also apply to temporary signs.



Small resort towns like Seaside Heights, New Jersey, and Traverse City, Michigan, have established elaborate approaches for managing signs for large-scale events and festivals.

## PERSPECTIVES

### DAWN JOURDAN, PROFESSOR AND EXECUTIVE ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR THE COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

Cities continue to consider the best ways to bring their sign codes in compliance with the Reed decision. Rather than focuses on the content of the speech contained, cities are redrafting their codes on defensible regulations which categorize signs as permanent or temporary or by sign type (e.g. monument, marque, blade signs). Inherent in these new classifications is an understanding of the importance of signs in creating a vibrant economic market place in downtowns and main street areas. This rethinking of signs is resulting in the creation of sign codes that better reflect the character of the areas regulated.

The sign industry is creative. It has embraced technological innovations which are directly impacting the products on the market, from temporary digital signs to projected images on buildings as well as inflatable structures are now. Sometimes, local governments react with blanket bans to this sign types. However, economic vitality dictates that communities don't overreact to these inventions.

It is the planner's job to stay abreast of the newest forms of communication to which businesses will be attracted. Rather than rejecting these sign types in totality, local governments must work with the business community to anticipate these needs and to craft fair regulations that embrace new technologies that will enhance local commercial enterprises.





## GUIDELINES

(Excerpt from the *Urban Wayfinding Planning & Implementation Manual*)

- The Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) has a chapter devoted to sign districts that regulates type, color, information on directional vehicular wayfinding signs in cities and towns. This guidance is enforced by state departments of transportation and does not apply to pedestrian or identification signs.
- Local municipalities can create their own design standards and hierarchy of destinations inside the code guidelines.
- States regulate tourist-oriented destination sign programs (TOD's) which allow for private destinations to have wayfinding signs based on guidelines in the Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices.
- Temporary wayfinding signs can be regulated by local codes. Temporary wayfinding signs cannot be regulated based on content.

Pedestrian Example  
(multiple messages /  
non-reflective)



Vehicular Examples  
(3 messages /  
retro-reflective).



## PERSPECTIVES

### JOHN BOSIO, PARTNER MERJE

Municipal wayfinding programs have been on the upswing in the last decade as sign regulations have become more consistent. In particular, more states are developing their own guidelines to provide to their cities and towns. They vary quite a bit between states with some, like North Carolina, Florida and Arizona, taking a leadership role in developing guidelines for the state.

At the municipal level, wayfinding programs initiated by planners have the best opportunity to be integrated into long term codes as opposed to special service districts. The planner-oriented programs are usually integrated into larger streetscape, regulatory sign and banner initiatives that have a stronger chance of being enforced as part of the municipal code.

Lately, our firm has been seeing a trend in suburban and rural areas of multiple towns working together to create regional tourist-oriented sign programs. This is very popular with state DOTs and government officials since they are easier to regulate and fund. They also provide rationality to larger suburban areas. New Jersey, North Carolina and Washington have taken a leadership role here. A project we are currently working on is a redevelopment of the first major regional project in the Brandywine Valley that crosses two states.

## RESOURCES

American Planning Association (APA)

International Sign Association (ISA)

Sign Research Foundation (SRF)

International Downtown Association (IDA)

National League of Cities (NLC)

United States Sign Council (USSC)

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