# SIGN RESEARCH FOUNDATION
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# BEST PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING SIGN REGULATIONS



**SIGN RESEARCH FOUNDATION™**
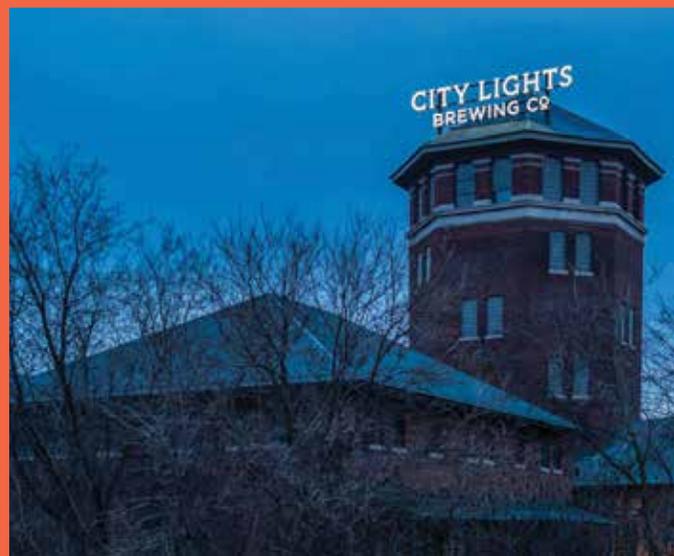
**S**ign codes do not exist in a vacuum – and neither should their development.

The involvement of many stakeholders can help protect and enhance economic viability, free speech and community character, in addition to ensuring government regulation works well.

## How can that best happen?

"Best Practices in Developing Sign Regulations," a 2017 report written by Dr. Dawn Jourdan, Dr. Eric Strauss and Madeline Hunter, uses literature review and a participant survey to identify a variety of gold standards for development and revisions.

Researchers identified 30 cities of varying sizes that had undertaken sign code revisions since 2000; 17 responded to the researchers' requests for interviews.

According to the report, it is imperative that a climate be created which allows sign codes to embrace new technologies and advertising needs.

"Cities can ensure that good signs are creative by inviting local experts into conversations relating to code revisions," the report states. "Better relationships between stakeholders, who are sometimes of differing opinions, will evolve out of planning processes that are inclusive and thoughtfully designed to create codes which embrace a well-designed urban landscape."

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 1

### BEST PRACTICES INVOLVE CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF THE WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE AND WHY OF SIGN CODE REVISIONS.

- Revise the sign code at the same time as zoning regulations, if possible, to ensure that community development and signage are compatible. Many believe these documents are unrelated, but signage is a vital part of all commercial uses, and should be considered as such when zoning decisions are made.

- Develop in-house expertise in sign regulation, which will help provide continuity of implementation.

- Look for indicators that necessitate revision, such as changes in law, changes in technology and/or an abundance of variance requests or use of appeals processes.

# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The "Best Practices in Developing Sign Regulations" report uses past literature to explore the role of citizen participation in the development of zoning regulations, noting that it has not been well documented.

There's been significant public discourse, and it's generally accepted that inviting a variety of stakeholders to share in decision-making produces the best result.

But barriers remain to effective and meaningful participation. Planners must carefully consider the degree to which stakeholder participation is important to the process, considering administration, objectives, targeting, techniques and other factors.

In addition, the impact of collaboration with citizens must be evaluated. "It is often assumed that all citizen participation is good," the report states, "but sometimes efforts to engage stakeholders can be counterproductive if not properly designed and managed."

## 2

### THE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC MEETING PROCESS IS A RELIC; OTHER OPPORTUNITIES MUST BE SOUGHT FOR VARIED AND RELEVANT INPUT.

- Recruit a diverse array of stakeholders from both private and public sectors.

- Create a multitude of opportunities for citizen participation, such as ad hoc committees and field trips.

- Use visual depictions of regulated attributes to help increase understanding.

## 3

### AMENDING AND ADOPTING SIGN CODES TAKES TIME; SUCCESS COMES FROM MAINTAINING FOCUS.

- Expedite processes as much as feasible; advance organization of the stakeholder process can help.

- Avoid being derailed by delays. Communities waiting for court decisions, for example, can spend the time doing other related work.

- Avoid widespread moratoria on sign types. Though moratoria are temporary in nature, they can result in significant delays for those looking for news ways to advertise their businesses.

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PARTICIPANT SURVEY

**How frequently has a city's sign code been modified in the last 25 years?**
Minor revisions are common, but most of those surveyed hadn't had a major sign code revision in the past 20 years.

**The reasons necessitating such modifications?**
External issues such as new forms of messaging, changes in legal framework and the like were the most common reason for changes.

**Did the effect involve the creation of a new code or the revision of an existing one?**
Existing codes were revised rather than new ones created.

**Was a task force assembled for review and redevelopment of the sign code? Who determined its membership? Was the sign industry represented?**
Task forces often were created by communities, and included elected officials, city staff, neighborhood groups, business owners and sign industry representatives.

**How did the planning commission and City Council respond to the proposed language?**
Planning commissions and governing bodies all responded favorably.

**Were the public meetings to adopt these ordinances widely attended? By whom? Were their comments incorporated into the final ordinance?**
There is generally low public participation.

**How long did the process last?**
Smaller amendments take four to six months, while major revisions may take up to two years.

**Were there any interruptions to the sign code development process? How were they overcome?**
There were no major interruptions in the revision process, but on some occasions local governments initiated brief delays to analyze legal issues.

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