



**PLANNING COMMISSION HEARING DATE: FEBRUARY 27, 2025
AGENDA ITEM NO.:2**

SUMMARY

Case Number	PR-2025-001768 (Zoning Text Amendment)
Request	<p>PLANNING CASE PR-2025-001768 (AMD): Proposal by the City of Riverside to consider amendments to Title 19 (Zoning) of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC), including but not limited to Articles VIII (Site Planning and General Development Provisions), IX (Land Use Development Permit Requirements/Procedures), and X (Definitions). The proposed amendments implement policy direction from the City Council Land Use Committee related to general sign provisions and are intended to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Clarify and establish standards for window signage and transparency;2. Promote high-quality signs through enhanced standards for materials and construction;3. Reduce sign clutter and over concentration of wall signage;4. Establish development standards for blade signs;5. Establish a Creative Sign Permit process to allow for the flexible application of development standards for creative and high-quality designs; and6. Make other minor and/or non-substantive changes and technical corrections as required to provide clarity, improve usability, correct errors, or remove redundancies.
Applicant	City of Riverside Community and Economic Development Department
Project Location	Citywide
Ward	Citywide
Staff Planner	Paige Montojo, Senior Planner 951-826-5773 pmontojo@riversideca.gov

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Planning Commission:

1. **Recommend** that the City Council determine that Planning Case PR-2025-001768 is exempt from further California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) (General Rule), as it can be seen with certainty that approval of the project will not have an effect on the environment; and
2. **Recommend Approval** of the Planning Case PR-2025-001768 (Zoning Text Amendment) as outlined in the staff report and summarized in the Findings section of this report.

BACKGROUND

On August 25, 2015, the City Council adopted a comprehensive update to Chapter 19.620 – General Sign Provisions of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC). The amendments involved:

- Re-organization and consolidation of existing Code provisions;
- Creation of new sections to address design principles, prohibited signs, and exempt signs;
- New or modified development standards related to building mounted signs, freestanding signs, special use signs and temporary signs;
- New or modified procedures for reviewing temporary signs, sign permits, and sign programs;
- Creation of a procedure to allow applicants to request minor deviations from the sign requirements; and
- Revisions to the sign definitions (clarifying, adding, and removing).

The comprehensive update resulted in today's existing sign code. The requirements of the zoning code are meant to work in tandem with the Citywide Design and Sign Guidelines, adopted in 2007 as part of the General Plan 2025 (Exhibit 1). The purpose statement lists several goals, including:

- Promote a quality visual environment by allowing signs that are compatible with their surrounding and which effectively communicate their message;
- Promote economic vitality;
- Ensure that commercial signs are designed for the purpose of identifying a business in an attractive and functional manner, rather than to serve primarily as general advertising for a business; and
- Assist property owners and business owners in understanding City expectations.

It is important to note that a major limitation of guidelines of any kind is that compliance is not obligatory. The Citywide Sign Design Guidelines are meant to be applied with flexibility and within the context of the project, with the overall objective that the intent

and spirit of the Design Guidelines are captured and followed to the extent feasible – a threshold that is inherently subjective.

On September 9, 2024, staff conducted a workshop with the City Council Land Use Committee to examine the current sign code and any opportunities for streamlining, improvements, or general feedback (Exhibit 2). The Committee expressed interest in revisiting and refreshing the sign code and explore ways to incorporate some of the existing Sign Design Guidelines into codified requirements. Staff was directed to return to the Committee to discuss potential Code amendments.

On December 9, 2024, staff returned to the City Council Land Use Committee with a cross jurisdictional analysis of best practices for zoning code sign regulations (Exhibit 3). Specifically, staff presented options for window signs, blade signs, electronic message center signs, codified design requirements, processes for flexibility in development standards, and potential technical assistance options for the public. The Committee directed staff to prepare the following amendments for Planning Commission consideration: clarification of window sign standards and storefront transparency, including vacant storefronts; standards for blade signs; and codification of certain provisions of the Sign Design Guidelines.

PROPOSAL

Proposed amendments to Chapter 19.620 - General Sign Provisions capture the changes summarized in this staff report (Exhibit 4). Other chapters are proposed to be amended to ensure consistency within the proposed amendments (Exhibit 5). The following is a summary of each of the proposed changes.

AMENDMENT 1 – DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS FOR ALL SIGN TYPES

I. Goal

- Increase the clarity and useability of the code to support the application and enforcement of existing standards; and
- Promote high-quality sign construction and design.

II. Current Code

RMC Section 19.620.070 – General Provisions For All Sign Types includes 21 separate regulations that apply to all signs. Half of these provisions can be characterized as general rules for the sign process such as enforcement authority, property owner's consent, and legal nature of signage rights and duties. The other half can be characterized as development standards that specify objective physical requirements of signs including sign locations, prohibited materials, illumination requirements, and maintenance and safety.

This extensive list of regulations conflated under the same section has resulted in less useable Code and can create complications or delays when processing sign applications.

III. Proposed Change

A new subsection 19.620.075 – Development Standards For All Signs is proposed to keep all provisions related to sign development under one section. The development standards under this section and any proposed changes are as follows:

- **Sign Locations:** No substantial changes to the current sign location standards are proposed. Language is updated to clarify the different sign types listed therein.
- **Prohibited Materials:** No substantial changes are proposed and plywood, pressed board, non-exterior grade wood products or materials will remain prohibited, in alignment with the Sign Design Guidelines. Formatting is updated to distinguish each provision for legibility purposes.
- **Illumination:** New illumination standards are proposed in addition to the existing requirements:
 - Required concealment of all electrical raceways, conduits, or similar devices: Although not stated in the Zoning Code, the Citywide Sign Design Guidelines encourage the concealment of raceways, conduits, and all other electrical equipment. The equipment shall be placed behind the fascia so as not to be within public view. Where physically impractical or potentially damaging to the integrity of the building, the electrical equipment shall be minimized by design and camouflaged with the surrounding materials.
 - Permitted use of neon lighting: Clarifies that neon tubing is permitted as a lighting and design technique, subject to the requirements of Section 19.620.050 (no flashing, moving or blinking allowed).
- **Maintenance and Safety:** No changes proposed for the existing provisions.

AMENDMENT 2 – WINDOW SIGN AND TRANSPARENCY STANDARDS

I. Goal

- Promote transparent and interactive retail storefronts; and
- Establish and clarify window sign standards and storefront transparency standards.,

II. Current Code

The RMC currently permits one window sign per public entrance and a maximum of 25% of each window area, however this provision is only found in exhibits or

footnotes throughout the chapter. Any sign or decal on a window is required to follow this provision.

III. Proposed Changes

Window sign provisions are added to Table 19.620.080.A where all other development standards for signs in non-residential and mixed-use zones are found. The provision is streamlined to be "25% of the window area", allowing for flexibility in window sign placement. The limitation that window signs are only permitted where there is a public entrance is deleted.

Intended to protect the transparency and interactive nature of commercial storefronts, transparency standards are added to Chapter 19.590 – Performance Standards, permitting window signs on storefronts up to 50% of the window area. The new standards prohibit storefronts where all windows are completely opaque or "blacked-out". Vacant storefronts with no occupant of the tenant space may temporarily apply window signs up to 100% of the window area, until the tenant space is occupied, and may display information about leasing or availability.

AMENDMENT 3 – BUSINESS IDENTIFICATION AND PRODUCT LISTINGS

I. Goal

Reduce sign clutter and over-concentration of building signs.

II. Current Code

The Citywide Sign Design Guidelines encourage brevity and succinct messaging whenever possible to increase sign legibility and attractiveness. Building mounted wall signs which list or generally advertise products or services beyond tenant or business identification may result in unnecessary sign clutter and can impact the architectural character of a building. Currently, the RMC regulates the maximum number and the maximum size (area) of wall signs but does not include any provisions to address potential sign clutter or over-concentration of signage that can occur within the provisions.

III. Proposed Changes

A new provision for wall signs is added to RMC Table 19.620.080.A that specifies the primary purpose for wall signs is tenant identification. Signs that list products or services apart from tenant identification shall be limited to 10% of the maximum allowable sign area.

AMENDMENT 4 – PROHIBITING CABINET SIGNS

I. Goal

Promote high-quality sign construction and design.

II. Current Code

The RMC defines cabinet signs as “an internally illuminated sign consisting of frame and face(s), with continuous translucent message panel; also referred to as a panel sign.” While these sign types are permitted by the Code and are often most cost-effective, they are discouraged by the Citywide Sign Design Guidelines due to their lack of design quality and visual appeal. Additionally, cabinet signs can present maintenance and longevity challenges depending on the construction and illumination methods.

III. Proposed Changes

Cabinet signs are proposed to be included under Section 19.620.050 – Prohibited Signs. While new cabinet signs are not permitted, existing cabinet signs are allowed to continue subject Section 19.620.130 – Nonconforming Signs. While existing cabinet sign panels may be updated or changed without a building permit, if the existing cabinet sign needs to be moved, enlarged, or structurally changed, the nonconforming sign shall be replaced with either channel letters, route-out push-through cabinet signs, or another sign type permitted by the code.

AMENDMENT 5 – BLADE SIGN STANDARDS

I. Goal

Establish development standards to permit blade signs as a commercial sign type.

II. Current Code

Blade signs are defined in the code as “a double-sided sign oriented perpendicular to the building wall on which it is mounted.” Blade signs are encouraged by the Citywide Plan Sign Design Guidelines as a commercial sign type but are only permitted by the Code in historic districts. Even then, the code lacks explicit development standards that regulate the number, size, and placement of blade signs.

III. Proposed Changes

Section 19.620.080 – Standards For All Sign Types By District And Use is proposed to include a new subsection for the following blade sign development standards:

- Applicability: Blade signs are permitted for businesses in Commercial or Mixed-use Zones with a minimum of 50 lineal feet of building frontage.
- Number: A business may display one blade sign per street or parking lot frontage.

- Height: Blade signs shall not project above the eaves of a sloped roof or the parapet height of a flat roof and must maintain a minimum of 8 feet of clearance from the pedestrian right of way.
- Placement: Blade signs must be mounted to a building, and cannot be mounted to a pole or other structure.
- Projection: Blade signs may project up to four feet from the building face. Blade signs above the third story may project up to six feet. Blade signs projecting over the public right of way require an encroachment permit with the Public Works Department. No blade signs may project over an alley.
- Design and development: Blade signs shall follow the same general development standards for sign area, materials, illumination, maintenance and safety.

AMENDMENT 6 – CREATIVE SIGN PERMIT

I. Goal

Allow for the flexible application of development standards and encourage creative signs with high-quality design.

II. Current Code

The RMC currently offers the following avenues for deviations from the development standards for signs:

- **Sign Programs:** Sign programs are required for multitenant buildings or sites to promote coordinated signage. With an approved sign program, there may be an increase in allowable sign area for individual sign(s) up to 15%. Sign programs also allow the transfer of sign area limits from underutilized locations to areas that are more practical, through use of a "sign budget."
- **Administrative Adjustment:** Any application that may require minor, administrative adjustments may request an administrative adjustment from the Community and Economic Development Director for an increase of up to 10% of the total sign area.

While both options allow for some degree of flexibility, neither call for superior sign design. Additionally, the sign development standards can inhibit creative, iconic, or innovative sign proposals that would otherwise meet the intent of the Citywide Sign Design Guidelines be desirable additions to a site.

III. Proposed Changes

A new procedure for Creative Sign Permits is proposed under RMC Section 19.620.100. The purpose of the Creative Sign Permit is to encourage signs of unique design that exhibit a high degree of imagination, inventiveness, creativity and thoughtfulness; and to provide a process for the flexible application of sign regulations that will allow for creatively designed signs.

A Creative Sign Permit may be approved only if it meets the proposed findings:

- Design quality: The proposed sign must constitute a substantial aesthetic improvement to the site, be of unique design, and provide strong graphic character.
- Contextual Criteria: The proposed sign must reflect and complement historic or contemporary character of the building or site on which it is located.
- Architectural Criteria: The proposed sign must utilize or enhance the architectural elements of building or site and be placed in a logical location in relation to the overall composition of the development.

The Creative Sign Permit would be reviewed and approved by the Community and Economic Development Director, whose decision would be appealable to the Planning Commission. Additionally, a Creative Sign Permit may be referred by the Director to the Planning Commission for consideration and approval.

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND COMMENT

Notice was published in the Press Enterprise on January 31, 2025. At the time of writing this report, Staff has not received public comments regarding this project. Exhibit 1 contains summaries of the various public outreach and stakeholder engagement efforts previously undertaken as part of this effort.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The proposed amendments are exempt from additional California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) of the CEQA guidelines, as it can be seen with certainty that the proposed text amendments will not have an effect on the environment.

FINDINGS

Zoning Code Amendment Findings pursuant to Chapter 19.810.040:

- 1) The proposed Zoning Code Text Amendments are generally consistent with the goals, policies, and objectives of the General Plan;
- 2) The proposed Zoning Code Text Amendments will not adversely affect surrounding properties; and
- 3) The proposed Zoning Code Text Amendments will promote public health, safety, and general welfare and serves the goals and purposes of the Zoning Code.

ENVISION RIVERSIDE 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT

The proposed amendments align with Strategic Priority No. 5 – High Performing Government by demonstrating adaptivity as an organization, and more specifically with

Goal 5.3 – Enhance communication and collaboration with community members to improve transparency, building public trust, and encourage shared decision making. In addition, the project aligns with the five Cross-Cutting Threads as follows:

1. **Community Trust** – The proposed amendments are a proactive measure to respond to the changing needs of the community through a transparent public process.
2. **Equity** – The proposed amendments promote reasonable and equitable regulation of signs throughout the City.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The proposed amendments do not incur costs to the City.
4. **Innovation** – The proposed amendments promote high quality, creative and innovative signs throughout the City
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The amendments as proposed reduce environmental, visual, and aesthetic impacts on surrounding communities.

APPEAL INFORMATION

Actions by the City Planning Commission, including any environmental findings, may be appealed to the City Council within ten calendar days after the decision. Appeal filing and processing information may be obtained from the Planning Department Public Information Section, 3rd Floor, City Hall.

EXHIBITS LIST

1. Citywide Design Guidelines
2. September 9, 2023 Land Use Committee Staff Report
3. December 9, 2023 Land Use Committee Staff Report and Cross Jurisdictional Matrix
4. Chapter 19.620 – General Sign Provision Proposed Amendments
5. Other Chapters – Proposed Amendments
 - a. Chapter 19.590 – Performance Standards
 - b. Chapter 19.650 – Approving and Appeal Authority
6. Presentation

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Reviewed by: Matthew Taylor, Principal Planner

Approved by: Maribeth Tinio, City Planner