



**PLANNING COMMISSION HEARING DATE: MAY 8, 2025
AGENDA ITEM NO.: 2**

SUMMARY

Case Number	PR-2025-001768 (Zoning Text Amendment)
Request	<p>PLANNING CASE PR-2025-001768 (AMD): Continued from February 27, 2025 - 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. Promote high-quality signs through enhanced standards for materials and construction;2. Reduce sign clutter and over concentration of wall signage;3. Establish development standards for blade signs;4. Establish a Creative Sign Permit process to allow for the flexible application of development standards for creative and high-quality designs;5. Clarify and establish standards for window signage and transparency;6. Make other minor and/or non-substantive changes and technical corrections as required to provide clarity, improve useability, correct errors, or remove redundancies.
Applicant	City of Riverside Community and Economic Development Department
Project Location	Citywide
Ward	Citywide

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** One, some, or none of the options for amortization and window transparency for City Council consideration and/or approval; and
3. **Recommend approval** of all other amendments under 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 February 27, 2025, at the direction of the City Council Land Use Committee, staff presented proposed amendments to Chapters 19.620 – General Sign Provisions, 19.590 – Performance Standards, and 19.650 – Approving and Appeal Authority to the Planning Commission for consideration (Exhibit 1). Most of the proposed amendments are clarifications of existing standards or codifications of existing Sign Design Guidelines and were generally supported by the Planning Commission. After discussion, the Planning Commission motioned for staff to return with additional information on amortization of nonconforming signs and further clarification of the proposed storefront transparency standards.

PROPOSAL

At the direction of the Planning Commission, staff has compiled a series of options for the for consideration and recommendation regarding storefront transparency and amortization. The Planning Commission may recommend one or more option for each category as is or modified, for the City Council's consideration.

NONCONFORMING SIGN AMORTIZATION OPTIONS

The proposed amendments include a provision prohibiting new cabinet signs (Exhibit 2). Should this provision be adopted, all existing cabinet signs would become "existing nonconforming" along with all other existing nonconforming signs such as existing pole signs and roof signs. The code currently has provisions that address nonconforming signs,

however there are options to address the amortization of these sign types in a more immediate way.

Option 1 – Maintain the nonconforming sign procedures under RMC Section 19.620.130

The RMC includes provisions for existing nonconforming signs (Exhibit 2). Nonconforming signs that were legally permitted when installed may continue indefinitely with reasonable and routine maintenance and repairs. Nonconforming signs are required to be replaced with signs conforming to today's standards under the following circumstances:

1. Alterations and additions: Nonconforming signs shall not be moved, altered or enlarged unless required by law. If a nonconforming sign is proposed to be relocated, expanded, or added to it must be brought to full conformity under the General Sign Provisions.
2. Abandonment: Whenever a sign or the use of the property has been discontinued for a continuous period of 90 days, the nonconforming sign shall be removed as provided for in State law and RMC Section 19.420.140- Enforcement. Any replacement signs shall conform with the requirements of the General Signs Provisions.
3. Damage or destruction: Whenever a nonconforming sign is destroyed or damaged, and repair would cost more than 50% of the sign value, the replacement sign must conform with the requirements of the General Sign Provisions.

Maintaining the nonconforming provisions would allow businesses to keep their nonconforming signs until they are ready to upgrade their signage voluntarily. It would also allow new businesses to maintain nonconforming signs on the property they are locating to. This option does not require any further amendments to the zoning code, as these provisions are already existing.

Option 2 – Adopt amortization procedures with change of use, occupancy, or tenant improvement

Exhibit 3 contains proposed amendments to the nonconforming provisions which would require nonconforming signs be replaced upon change of use or occupancy. With the proposed language, new businesses applying for tenant improvement building permits, façade improvements, or entitlements such as a Conditional Use Permit would be required to bring any nonconforming signs on their property or tenant space into compliance with the General Sign Provisions.

This option also includes exceptions for historically or culturally significant signs, allowing their continuation, maintenance, and repair even as use or occupancy of the property changes. While this provides flexibility and allows for preservation of historic signs, it does necessitate additional administrative procedure. For example, if there is a

nonconforming sign proposed to continue with a new tenant or business which may have historic significance but no formal designation as a cultural or historical resource, the applicant will be required to submit the sign and justification to the Historic Preservation Officer (HPO) to determine eligibility. If the sign is determined to be eligible for historic or cultural resource designation by the HPO, it may be exempt from the proposed amortization requirements. If the sign is determined to not be eligible for historic or cultural resource designation, then the sign shall be brought into compliance upon change of use or occupancy.

It should be noted that this is a reactive approach and would require new businesses to come to the City with requests for changes to their use or property. There are instances where turnover in tenants would not necessitate any building permits or entitlements. For example, an existing retail space with nonconforming signs may be leased by a new retail tenant. The new tenant may not need to make any improvements to the space that require building or planning approvals, and the continuation of their nonconforming sign would not be captured or noticed by the City.

This provision would bring more nonconforming signs into compliance at a faster rate than our existing provisions but would not capture every single nonconforming sign that exists today. Because this option meets direction to address nonconforming signs beyond what the RMC currently requires, while remaining business friendly and allowing for notice and partnership to address nonconforming signs, staff recommends Option 2.

Option 3 – Adopt a formal amortization program

The Commission may recommend a more proactive amortization process to capture and address all existing nonconforming signs and set a date for compliance or termination of the nonconforming signs. This option would require input and coordination from the Planning Division, Building & Safety Division, Code Enforcement Division, and the City Attorney's Office. A proactive amortization program for nonconforming signs requires significant administration including but not limited to:

- An inventory of all nonconforming signs within the City (including building signs and freestanding stands).
- Public outreach and noticing to property owners with existing nonconforming signs on their properties.
- Consensus on an appropriate amortization period for compliance or termination.
- Administrative procedures and penalties for noncompliance with the amortization program.
- An amortization ordinance formally adopted by the City Council.

As the more aggressive amortization option, this type of program may financially impact Riverside's business community the most and may result in community opposition. An effort such as this requires significant outreach and engagement and should take place

before an amortization ordinance is adopted. Considering the requirements for a lawful amortization program, this option would take the longest to implement and could incur costs and demands on staff resources. Should the Commission wish to adopt such a program, staff recommends moving forward all other sign code amendments under PR-2025-001768 and initiate this option as a separate item.

STOREFRONT TRANSPARENCY CLARIFICATION

In tandem with the window sign provisions, transparency standards for retail storefronts are proposed with the intent to enhance retail storefront design and encourage safe, attractive and dynamic commercial areas.

The RMC currently does not include any transparency standards at all. Without transparency standards, window areas can be covered and completely opaque, negatively impacting the aesthetic character of our street frontages and creating public safety concerns. This gap in the standards has also created space for using window areas for commercial messaging beyond what is permitted by the sign code, leading to difficulties with code interpretation and enforcement.

At the request of the Planning Commission, staff has provided further clarification of the proposed amendments (Exhibit 4). The proposed transparency standards require at least 75% of the window surface area to be transparent. Semi-transparent treatments such as glass frosting, etching, staining, reflective glazing, or tinting are commonly applied to window storefronts for various reasons such as temperature regulation, establishing a sense of privacy (particularly for client-oriented uses such as gyms, salons, or medical uses), or aesthetic enhancement. These window treatments may be considered a part of the 75% minimum so long as some level of transparency is maintained. The remaining 25% of the window area may be covered with material at any level of opacity including fully opaque window signs, window graphics or wraps. Opaque coverings or wraps beyond 25% of the window area would be prohibited.

The proposed amendment has been clarified with an exception for areas of the interior used for storage or occupied by mechanical, kitchen or utility equipment. This clarification allows for businesses that have more than one street frontage or have windows in areas that are considered “back of house” to cover as necessary. While this specific circumstance is exempt from transparency requirements, limitations on window signs still apply to these areas. Apart from flexibility, the clarification minimizes visual impacts along the street frontage and promotes safety by concealing these operational areas.

Other Considerations for Storefront Transparency

The Commission may consider alternative approaches to storefront transparency including, but not limited to:

- *Increasing allowable opaque material to 50% of the window area:* As the provision

is proposed today, opaque material (e.g. advertising signs, window graphics, window wraps) is permitted up to 25% of the window surface area. The Commission may consider increasing the maximum allowable size to 50%. While this option increases flexibility for business owners and provides an objective standard to enforce, it may result in sign clutter, reduced visibility, and negative impacts to aesthetic quality and public safety. In staff's research for the proposed amendments, six out of 10 jurisdictions surveyed allow window signage up to 25% of the window area. Two of the 10 jurisdictions have more restrictive standards, while just one allowed signage up to 50% of the window area.

- *Prohibition of specific materials:* The Commission may consider prohibiting specific kinds of window treatments or coverings found to have an impact to aesthetics or public safety, in addition to the transparency standards as proposed.

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND COMMENT

Notice was published in the Press Enterprise on April 11, 2025. Staff conducted Temporary Sign Public Information Sessions at the Main Library on March 20, 2025 and at the Riverside Downtown Partnership Land Use Committee Meeting on April 17, 2025, where feedback was received regarding storefront transparency and window signs. Feedback received included greater allowance for window sign coverage, differentiation on primary versus secondary storefronts, clarification on existing sign provisions, and the need for a sign handbook to assist businesses. Additional sessions are scheduled to take place at other locations within the City to reach specific groups within the business community. At the time of writing this report, Staff has not received public comments regarding this project.

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. February 27, 2025, Planning Commission Staff Report
2. Proposed Amendments to Chapter 19.620 – General Sign Provisions
3. Amortization Option 2: Proposed Amendments to Section 19.620.130 – Nonconforming Signs.
4. Proposed Amendments to Chapters 19.590 – Performance Standards and 19.650 – Approving and Appeal Authority.

Prepared by:	Paige Montojo, Senior Planner
Reviewed by:	Matthew Taylor, Principal Planner
Approved by:	Maribeth Tinio, City Planner