



*City of Arts & Innovation*

# Land Use Committee

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**TO: LAND USE COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

**DATE: AUGUST 12, 2024**

**FROM: COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
DEPARTMENT**

**WARDS: ALL**

**SUBJECT: WORKSHOP – EXISTING SIGN ORDINANCE AND POLICY (RIVERSIDE  
MUNICIPAL CODE CHAPTER 19.620)**

## **ISSUE:**

Review and provide feedback on the existing sign regulations within Chapter 19.620 of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

That the Land Use Committee:

1. Review and provide feedback on the existing sign regulations within Chapter 19.620 of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC); and
2. Provide staff direction to explore any potential changes to current sign policies or regulations.

## **BACKGROUND:**

In August of 2013, the City Council authorized an agreement with a consultant for the preparation of a comprehensive update to the sign code to create more business-friendly provisions and streamlined permitting processes. The recommendations were created under the guidance of a Council-appointed Sign Code Review Committee comprising of 39 members including Chambers of Commerce, sign contractors, business improvement districts, historic preservation representatives, the Riverside Neighborhood Partnership, and the Chairman of the Planning Commission at the time.

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 review of 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 (Attachment 1). Since then, minor updates have been made for clarification purposes.

## **DISCUSSION:**

Chapter 19.620 of the RMC provides objective development standards and permitting requirements for signs on private property and public property/right of way owned or controlled by the City of Riverside. In addition, the General Plan 2025 Citywide Design and Sign Guidelines provides additional guidance on encouraged and discouraged sign types, materials and design approaches. Below is a summary of the types of signs regulated by the RMC, Sign Design Guidelines in the General Plan, and the required sign permitting process.

### ***TYPES OF SIGNS PERMITTED UNDER RMC CHAPTER 19.620***

#### **Building Signs**

##### *Wall Signs*

Wall signs are typical tenant/occupant identification signs attached to the face of a building wall, mansard roof, or canopy fascia. Common illuminated wall signs include channel letters, or three-dimensional individual letters or figures typically with an acrylic or aluminum face; or cabinet signs (can signs), which are typically solid faced with a translucent panel displaying text or images. In general, each establishment is permitted at least one wall sign per building frontage oriented toward a parking lot or street.

The RMC regulates the size of wall signs to be in proportion to the building frontage of a tenant, allowing one square foot of sign area per lineal foot of building frontage for that tenant. Similarly, the number of wall signs permitted per tenant is determined by the length of building frontage of a tenant to minimize overly saturated building faces. Storefronts with less than 80 lineal feet of building frontage may have a maximum of one wall sign. Storefronts with 500 or more lineal feet of building frontage may have up to 5 wall signs.

##### *Other types of Building Signs:*

- Window Signs – In general, each establishment is permitted one window sign per public entrance and is limited in size to 25% of the window area;
- Under Canopy Signs – Intended for pedestrian oriented identification, each establishment is generally permitted one under canopy sign per building frontage, limited to 9 square feet; and
- Blade Signs (Projecting Signs) – Double sided, vertically oriented signs attached to a building face, typically seen on historic properties or encouraged within a sign program.

#### **Freestanding Signs**

##### *Monument Signs*

Monument signs are low-profile freestanding signs often seen in shopping centers identifying the establishment(s) within, typically located in a landscaping planter area near main entrances and access points (Figure 1). In general, each site is permitted at least one monument sign per street frontage. The RMC regulates the size and number of monument signs to be in proportion to the size of the site. Larger sites are permitted more and larger monument signs. The maximum allowed by the RMC is 5 monument signs, up to 10 feet in height with 50 square feet of display

area for sites 25 acres or larger. The typical monument sign for moderately sized commercial property can be up to 6 feet high with up to 30 feet of display area.

### *Pylon Signs*

A pylon sign is a freestanding sign that is supported and in direct contact with the ground or one or more solid, monumental structures or pylons and typically has a sign face with a vertical dimension that is greater than its horizontal dimensions (Figure 2). Pylon signs are only permitted for large commercial centers. Shopping centers of 10 acres or more are permitted one pylon sign up to 25 feet in height and 110 square feet in size. Shopping centers of 25 acres with a minimum of 600 feet of frontage along a major street are permitted 2 pylon signs, up to 25 feet in height and 110 square feet in size.

### *Freeway Oriented Signs*

A freeway-oriented sign is a freestanding sign that orients primarily to the traveling public using a freeway or expressway and installed for the purpose of identifying major business locations within properties having frontage on that freeway (Figure 3). Freeway-oriented signs are only permitted for large commercial centers. Shopping centers of 9 acres or more are permitted one freeway-oriented sign up to 40 feet in height and 225 square feet in size. Shopping centers of 25 acres are permitted one-freeway oriented sign, up to 60 feet in height and 500 square feet in size. Freeway oriented signs require a public hearing and the following findings made by the Planning Commission:

- A freeway-oriented sign is necessary because signage that conforms to the area and height standards otherwise applicable to the site would not be visible to the travelling public for a distance on the freeway of one-third mile (1,760 feet) preceding the freeway exit providing access to said premises; or for a line-of-sight distance of two-thirds' mile (3,520 feet), whichever is less; and
- The freeway-oriented sign will not interfere with the driving public's view of a significant feature of the natural or built environment.

Additionally, freeway-oriented signs are subject to specific location and distance requirements and must be setback at least 150 feet away from any lot line adjoining a street or roadway.



### **Special Use Signs**

Table 19.620.080.C (Table) of the RMC regulates signage for land uses that typically require strategically placed signs essential to operations. On April 9, 2024, the Table was updated for the purposes of clarity and streamlining. (Attachment 2).

### **Vehicle Fuel Stations**

Vehicle fuel stations are permitted wall signs in the same manner as all other commercial uses and are also permitted wall signs for secondary uses (maximum of 10 square feet), monument price signs, gas canopy signs, and pump island signs. For vehicle fuel stations within 150 feet of frontage along a freeway right of way a freeway-oriented pylon sign is permitted, regardless of site size, at a maximum height of 45 feet and maximum display area of 100 square feet.

### **Drive Thru Restaurants**

In addition to the wall and monument signs permitted for commercial uses, drive-thru restaurants are permitted 2 free standing menu order signs per drive-thru lane for a maximum of 60 square feet of combined menu order signage, up to eight feet tall.

### **Other Special Use Signs**

- Parking lot and garage signs – when rates are charged, one sign per street or alley frontage is permitted (maximum 25 square feet, 6 feet in height);
- Hazard Signs – permitted as necessary to warn of hazards pertaining to the property, provided they are spaced at least 75 feet apart (maximum 1 square foot per sign, placed up to 6 feet high); and
- Historic Signs – signs for designated historic resources must be preserved to reflect the architectural and historic character of the property and comply with all requirements of Title 20 – Cultural Resources of the RMC.
- Electronic message center (EMC) signs – signs that use digital display to present to present variable message displays by projecting an electronically controlled pattern and which can be programmed to periodically change the message display, also known as digital signs.

### **Temporary Signs**

Establishments in non-residential and mixed-use districts are allowed temporary signs with a no-fee permit subject to the requirements of Section 19.620.090 of the RMC. Allowable temporary signs include:

- Banners – one banner per street frontage not exceeding 25% of the area of a building wall or window which it is displayed and does not extend higher than the building eave or parapet wall;
- Portable Signs (A Frame) – one portable sign no larger than six square feet and 36 inches tall may be displayed during hours when the establishment is open; and
- Balloons and balloon arches – balloon clusters and arches shall be tethered at a height that does not exceed the height of the building containing the subject establishment. Any balloon exceeding 24 inches in diameter shall be considered an inflatable structure and is prohibited.

Temporary signs may be displayed for a maximum of 30 consecutive days. Signs for promotional events shall be removed within seven days of the conclusion of the event and shall be limited to a maximum of 60 total days per year per establishment.

Other temporary signs regulated by Section 19.620.090 of the RMC include real estate signs, subdivision signs, construction site signs. Protected non-commercial political and free speech signs, such as signs for a political candidate, private party/celebration signs, lawn signs etc. are also included in this category.

### **Prohibited Signs**

Chapter 19.620 of the RMC list signs expressly prohibited in the City. These signs include but are not limited to:

- Billboards – permanent signs displaying off-premise general advertising for hire for a business, commodity, services, facility or other such matter not located, conducted, sold or offered upon the premises where the sign is located;
- Roof signs – any signs attached to or projecting through the roof of a building or structure, or projecting above the eave line or parapet wall;
- Feather banners – a type of vertical banner made of flexible materials, (e.g., cloth, paper, or plastic). The longer dimension of which is typically attached to a pole or rod that is driven into the ground or supported by an individual stand. Also called a “swooper” or “teardrop” banner, quill signs, or quill banners.
- Pole signs – a free standing sign that is supported by one or more exposed poles that are permanently attached directly into or upon the ground ;
- Advertising statuary and inflatable structures;
- Signs that produce emissions or noise – signs that produce smoke, vapor, particles, bubbles, odor, or noise that can be heard at the property line; and
- Signs on public property – Generally signs are prohibited on public property including the public right-of-way (streets and sidewalks) unless otherwise permitted under Chapter 19.625 of the RMC.

## **Signs in Specific Plans**

Several specific plans include sign criteria, guidelines, or master sign programs to promote cohesion within the Specific Plan area. These can include allowances for different types of signs, or different quantities of overall signage, than otherwise allowed under RMC Chapter 19.620 in order to fulfill a specific purpose that is unique to the Specific Plan area or the land uses within it. This includes, for example:

- Downtown Specific Plan – allows for pedestrian-scale permanent and movable signage including portable A-Frames for businesses with frontage on the Main Street Pedestrian Mall
- Canyon Springs Business Park Specific Plan – provides for up to nine large, freeway-oriented pylon signs to promote businesses within the multiple commercial complexes in the Specific Plan area that do not have direct freeway frontage while maintaining visual cohesion
- Riverside Auto Center Specific Plan – includes a comprehensive dealership signage strategy for a uniform, cohesive signage and vehicle display areas throughout the Auto Center.

## **DESIGN GUIDELINES**

In November 2007, the City Council adopted Citywide Design and Sign Guidelines (Guidelines) as part of the General Plan 2025 (Attachment 3). The sign regulations in RMC Chapter 19.620 and the Guidelines are meant to work in tandem to preserve and enhance the aesthetic, traffic safety, and the economic and environmental values of the City. The Guidelines provide examples of innovative and creative signage techniques to be used to meet the City's expectation for high quality business signage.

It is important to note that a major limitation of guidelines of any kind is that compliance is not obligatory. The City's 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. The Guidelines are

organized into two parts: Citywide Design Guidelines and Specific Guidelines. Below is a summary of both parts.

## Citywide Design Guidelines

### Design Compatibility

The Guidelines prioritize high quality signs that feature mixed materials, innovative design, and creative illumination; as opposed to one dimensional, single plane acrylic can signs (Figure 4). Signs should be proportionate to the size and scale of the building or site on which they are placed. Not only should signs be architecturally compatible with the surrounding site but thoughtfully integrated to minimize visual impacts through sensitive illumination and landscaping especially if adjacent to residential or other sensitive uses.



Figure 4 – Excerpt from Citywide Sign Design Guidelines

### Sign Location

Sign placement should be sensitive to and capitalize on the existing architectural features of the building such as cantilevered balconies, arched entryways, and uninterrupted fascia. Wall signs should be strategically placed to establish or continue a façade's rhythm, scale and proportion. Mounting building signs on windows, material accents (glass, tile, molding or casting), or noncontextually on building walls is discouraged.

### Sign Color

Color plays a significant role in sign impact, effectiveness, and attractiveness. Contrasting colors increase the legibility of signs, and applying light letters to dark backgrounds is encouraged. Scale and purpose should be considered when applying color, avoiding several small intricate color accents that may clutter or muddle the overall sign design. Sign colors should complement adjacent buildings and the project site when possible.

### Use of Material

Sign materials should be compatible with the design of the façade it is on or project it is located in. Commercial monument signs should feature a pedestal, base, or body that utilizes similar material found on buildings of the shopping center. Wall mounted signs should be made of durable, weather resistant materials that will not fade, peel, or warp. Figure 5 is an example of encouraged material for a cabinet sign, featuring an aluminum cabinet with routed-out and push-through acrylic letters to ensure durability and legibility. Conversely, Figure 6 is an example of a discouraged material,

using a single plane acrylic face with vinyl lettering overlayed on top, which may be subject to peeling, distortion, or require frequent maintenance.



Figure 6 – Discouraged material for a cabinet sign

### Sign Legibility

Letters and word spacing should be thoughtful of the legibility of the sign. Overcrowding of characters can render signs ineffective, while over-spacing can put signs out of proportion to the building façade. Pictographic images are highly effective in messaging and symbols or logos should be used when appropriate. Viewer orientation should be accounted for. Pedestrian oriented signs are typically read from a distance of 15-20 feet and should be smaller, whereas vehicle-oriented signs are typically viewed from a much greater distance and should be larger and more streamlined in design.

### *Sign Illumination*

How a sign is illuminated is crucial to the effectiveness and overall quality of the sign. The Guidelines provide four types of sign illumination:

- Externally illuminated – illumination by a projected light is highly encouraged to promote architectural integration, as it emphasizes the continuity of the structure's surface not typically achieved with internal illumination. Exterior lighting presents an opportunity to use complimentary accent fixtures such as gooseneck lights, pendant lights, sconces, etc. Monument or freestanding signs may utilize uplighting that is integrated and complementary to the surrounding landscaping. Care should be taken to properly shield external illumination to prevent glare or spillover;
- Internally illuminated – Most common for channel letters, internally illuminated signs include translucent character faces allowing for visible illumination. Internal illumination can be combined with other lighting techniques to create a more dynamic and creative sign;
- Back-lighted (halo, reverse channel) – Solid, opaque letters with backlit signs are encouraged and create a halo effect that contrasts with the background, promoting legibility in dark environments; and
- Neon – Neon signs are encouraged where consistent with the design and architectural theme of a development. Neon used with open-faced channel letters, as backlighting, or exposed tubing can uplift and complement an overall project aesthetic if appropriate.

Electrical conduits and raceways are required parts of an illuminated sign's mechanics; however, they should be concealed from public view. If a raceway cannot be mounted behind the finished exterior of the wall, the exposed raceway shall be finished to match the building.

### **Permitted Signs and Specific Guidelines**

Other than the general standards above, the Guidelines also include desired treatments for specific signs summarized below.

#### *Affixed Signs*

The Guidelines identify permitted signs to be affixed to a building to include building (wall) signs; window signs; awning and canopy signs; projecting or blade (perpendicular) signs; under-canopy or hanging signs; marquee signs; plaque signs; address numbers; and tenant directory signs. There are several general guidelines applicable to each of these affixed sign types, with a few highlighted below:

- Wall signs should be located on the upper portion of the storefront opening, placed on an architecturally continuous surface uninterrupted by openings;
- Wall signs should not exceed 15% of the building façade;
- Wall signs should not obscure windows, grillwork, piers, pilasters and ornamental features and should be mounted in locations that respect the design of the building;
- Window signs should not exceed 8 inches in height or 15% of the window area;
- Window graphics should attract attention but still allow pedestrians to view store interiors; and
- Mounting hardware for projecting signs shall be an attractive and integral part of the sign design.

#### *Freestanding Signs*

The Guidelines categorize monument signs, pylon signs, and directional and wayfinding signs as free-standing signs. There are several guidelines applicable to each of these free-standing sign types, with some highlighted below:

- The monument sign's materials, finishes, and colors shall be of the same or compatible to the materials, finishes and colors used on the primary structures that which the sign is identifying;
- Low-profile signs must be illuminated either by external fixtures design to complement the appearance of the sign or back-lit illumination; and
- Directional and wayfinding signs should match in color and design schemes to the materials used on building signs.

## **PERMITTING REQUIREMENTS**

Generally, all signs require an approved building permit prior to installation. A common exception to this is the refacing of a cabinet sign wherein the face panel of the sign is removed and replaced with an identical material with new graphics and no electrical components or structural attachments are otherwise affected. Separately, all signs except those expressly exempted by RMC Chapter 19.620 require Planning Division approval of an Administrative Sign Review Application (Sign Review). Sign Review can in most cases be approved over-the-counter at the One Stop Shop, provided that the submitted designs comply with the requirements RMC Chapter 19.620 and the Citywide Design Guidelines. The Community and Economic Development Director may approve a deviation from the sign area and height standards up to 10%. Freeway-oriented signs require the approval of the Minor Conditional Use Permit by the Planning Commission prior to the issuance of a building permit.

### **Sign Programs**

A sign program is required for multi-occupancy nonresidential or mixed-use developments with three or more separate lease spaces (commercial shopping centers, office parks, etc.). Sign programs establish consistency and coordination between all sign types amongst tenants resulting in a cohesive property. Applications for sign programs shall include plans, drawings and project-specific requirements for all sign types on a property, to be reviewed and approved by the Community and Economic Development Director or his/her designee. The following findings must be made for Sign Program approval:

- That the proposed signs are in harmony and visually related to:
  - Other signs included in the program;
  - The buildings they identify; and
  - The surrounding development.
- That the sign program provides adequate guidance to business owners and sign contractors to ensure conformance with the Design Principles in Section 19.60.060 and the RMC and the Citywide Design Guidelines.
- That the sign program ensures that future signs will comply with all provisions of Chapter 19.620.

As an incentive for preparing a cohesive, well-thought-out sign program, modifications to development standards may be granted through an approved sign program that can include:

- Allowing signage on building facades by establishments that do not have frontage on that building façade;
- Increase in allowable sign area up to 15%; and
- Allowable transfer of sign area limits from underutilized sign areas to areas that are more practical, using a “sign budget”.

### **Nonconforming Signs**

Any sign lawfully erected and maintained prior to the adoption of the existing sign code in 2016, but that does not conform to the provisions of RMC Chapter 19.620 is considered a nonconforming sign. Nonconforming signs may be continued, however they cannot be moved, altered, or enlarged. Any changes proposed for a nonconforming sign must conform with the current Code.

### **STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:**

This item contributes to **Strategic Priority 3 – Economic Opportunity** and **Goal 3.3 – Cultivate a business climate that welcomes innovation, entrepreneurship and investment,** and **Strategic Priority 5 – High Performing Government** and **Goal 5.3 - Enhance communication and collaboration with community members to improve transparency, build public trust, and encourage shared decision-making.**

This Project aligns with the following Cross-Cutting Threads:

1. **Community Trust** – The workshop is presented at an open public meeting and contains transparent information on City processes and regulations.
2. **Equity** – The workshop promotes discussion on business-friendly regulations and solutions to maintain aesthetic quality in a feasible and practical manner.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The workshop will not have any fiscal impact to the City.
4. **Innovation** – The workshop is to discuss and encourage innovative, creative, and high-quality signage within the City.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The workshop addresses existing sign regulations in place to reduce environmental, visual, and aesthetic impacts on surrounding communities.

### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no fiscal impact related to receiving this report.

Prepared by: Matthew Taylor, Principal Planner  
Approved by: Jennifer A. Lilley, Community & Economic Development Director  
Certified as to availability of funds: Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/Assistant Chief Financial Officer  
Approved by: Rafael Guzman, Assistant City Manager  
Approved as to form: Phaedra A. Norton, City Attorney

### Attachments:

1. Chapter 19.620 General Sign Provisions
2. Table 19.620.080.C Updated April 9, 2024
3. Citywide Sign Design Guidelines