

ARTICLE XIV
Signs

[Amended 11-6-1978 OTM by Art. 12, approved 2-6-1979; 10-17-1991 OTM by Art. 21, approved 2-4-1992; 4-4-1994 ATM by Art. 18, approved 7-26-1994; 10-3-1994 OTM by Art. 22, approved 1-18-1995]

§ 200-76. Purpose.

The sign regulation section is designed to provide standards for the installation of signs so as to further the objectives of the Master Plan; promote the general welfare of the community; protect public health, safety and welfare; reduce traffic hazards; protect property values; and promote economic development. This is accomplished by encouraging the creation of an aesthetic appearance throughout the Town, through the use of attractive and appropriate signing.

§ 200-77. Definitions.

Unless otherwise specifically provided, or unless clearly required by the context, the words and phrases defined in this section shall have the meaning indicated when used in this article.

ADDRESS SIGN -- A sign consisting of numerals and letters identifying a property address.

ADVERTISING COPY -- Copy that includes, but is not limited to phone numbers, prices, announcements of sales, business hours, meeting times, individual or specific products or merchandise, and directional information. A business name and street address are not considered advertising copy.

ADVERTISING SIGN -- A sign which includes advertising copy and/or graphics relating to any service, product, person, business, place, activity or organization in addition to simple identification.

AWNING/CANOPY SIGN -- A sign which is printed, painted, or affixed to an awning or canopy.

BANNER SIGN -- A sign which is painted or displayed upon cloth or other flexible material.

BILLBOARD -- An off-premises sign owned by a person, corporation, or other entity that engages in the business of selling the advertising space on that sign and that is subject to the provisions of Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 93, Sections 29-33 or Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 93D.

FASCIA SIGN -- A sign which is permanently affixed to the horizontal piece covering the joint between the top of a wall and the projecting eaves of the roof.

FLAG-MOUNTED SIGN -- A sign which projects from the roof or wall of a building perpendicular to a wall surface.

FREESTANDING SIGN -- A sign that is attached to, erected on, or supported by some structure (such as a pole, mast, frame, or other structure) that is not itself an integral part of or attached to a building or other structure whose principal function is something other than the support of a sign. A sign that stands without supporting elements, such as "sandwich sign," is also a freestanding sign. If the message is removed from a structure that was originally designed and used as a freestanding sign, this structure shall still be considered a sign.

IDENTIFICATION SIGN -- A sign that includes as copy only the name of the business, place, organization, building, or person it identifies.

ILLUMINATED EXTERNALLY SIGN -- Sign where the source of the illumination is outside the sign and light is reflected off the surface of the sign.

ILLUMINATED INTERNALLY SIGN -- Signs where the source of the illumination is inside the sign and light emanates through the message of the sign, rather than being reflected off the surface of the sign from an external source. Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, signs that consist of or contain tubes that:

- A. Are filled with neon or some other gas that glows when an electric current passes through it; and
- B. Are intended to form or constitute all or part of the message of the sign, rather than merely providing illumination to other parts of the sign that contain the message, shall also be considered internally illuminated signs.

ILLUMINATED SIGN -- A sign whose surface is lighted, internally or externally, and which identifies, advertises or attracts attention to a use or activity on the premises.

MASTER SIGNAGE PLAN -- A detailed description, including, but not limited to number, type, size, color, and location of all signage.

MULTI-TENANT SIGN -- A sign that includes as copy, only the names of two (2) or more businesses, places, organizations, buildings or persons it identifies.

NONCONFORMING SIGN -- A sign lawfully erected prior to July 28, 1994 which does not conform to all of the requirements of this bylaw.

OFF-PREMISES SIGN -- A sign that is not located on the premises that it advertises or identifies.

ON-PREMISES SIGN -- A sign that draws attention to or communicates information about a business, service, commodity, accommodation, attraction, or other enterprise or activity that exists or is conducted, sold, offered, maintained, or provided on the premises where the sign is located.

POLITICAL SIGN -- Election campaign signs.

READER BOARD SIGN -- A permanent sign where the lettering is designed to be changed.

ROOF-MOUNTED SIGN -- A sign which projects above the highest point of the roofline, parapet or fascia of a building.

SIGN:

- A. Any permanent or temporary structure or device providing identification, advertising or directional information, or which is designed to attract the eye by intermittent repeated motion or illumination, for a specific business, service, product, person, organization, place or building.
- B. Included in this definition of signs are graphic devices such as logos, attention attracting media such as logo sculpture and obtrusive colored fascia or architectural elements, banners, balloons, streamers, search lights, strobe lights, flags, inflatable structures, merchandise displays, accessory lights and other attention attracting media and devices.

SOFFITT SIGN -- A sign which is suspended from the underside of a lintel, arch or other overhead spanning member and is hung perpendicular to a vertical wall surface.

TEMPORARY SIGN -- Any outdoor sign, banner, pennant, valance or advertising display constructed of paper, cloth, canvas, fabric, cardboard, wallboard or other light material with or without frames not permanently affixed to any structure on a site or permanently ground mounted.

WALL MOUNTED SIGN -- A sign which is permanently affixed to any vertical portion of a building for which the sign is intended to identify or advertise.

WINDOW SIGN -- A sign or signage placed in windows so as to attract the attention of persons outside of the building where such sign or signage is placed.

§ 200-78. Sign height and area.

- A. Sign height.
 - (1) Freestanding sign. Height shall be measured as the distance from the top of the sign structure to the top of curb, or crown of road if no curb exists. The height of any structure erected to support or ornament the sign shall be measured as part of the sign height.
 - (2) Wall or fascia mounted sign. Height shall be measured as the distance from the top of the sign structure to the top of the curb, or crown of road if no curb exists.
- B. Sign area.
 - (1) For a sign, either freestanding or attached, the area shall be considered to include all lettering, wording, and accompanying designs and symbols, together with the background, whether open or closed, on which they are displayed, but not including any supporting framework and bracing which are incidental to the display itself.
 - (2) For a sign consisting of individual letters, designs and symbols attached to or painted on a surface, building, wall or window, the area shall be considered to be that of the smallest quadrangle or circle which encompasses all of the letters, design and symbols.

- (3) For a sign painted on or applied to a building, the area shall be considered to include all lettering, wording and accompanying designs or symbols, together with any backing different in color or material from the finish material of the building face.
- (4) Where there are a number of sign faces on a sign:
 - (a) One (1): Area of the single face only.
 - (b) Two (2): If the interior angle between the two (2) faces is forty-five (45) degrees or less, the area will be the area of one (1) face only; if the angle between the two (2) sign faces is greater than forty-five (45) degrees, the sign area will be the sum of the areas of the two (2) faces.
 - (c) Three (3) or more sides: The sign area will be the sum of the areas of each of the faces.
- (5) Spherical, free-form, sculptural, other non-planar signs. Sign area will be the sum of the areas using only the four (4) vertical sides of the smallest cube that will encompass the sign.

§ 200-79. Permit requirements.

- A. Sign permit required. Except as provided in Subsection B, no sign shall be erected unless a sign permit has been issued by the Building Inspector. No sign permit shall be issued unless the Building Inspector has first determined that the applicant has obtained all applicable special permits and/or site plan approvals for the development and use of the property for which the sign is intended.
- B. Signs not requiring a permit. The following types of signs shall be authorized by right without the necessity of a permit:
 - (1) Signs bearing the name of the occupant of a dwelling, not to exceed two (2) square feet in area;
 - (2) Real estate signs, located on-site, not to exceed six (6) square feet in area in a residential district or twenty (20) square feet in a business or industrial district. Such signs shall be removed forthwith upon sale or rental of the premises advertised;
 - (3) Signs accessory to the use of the premises by a religious, non-profit or educational institution, or by a governmental authority, not to exceed sixteen (16) square feet in area;
 - (4) Street name signs and signs erected by the Town, County or Commonwealth for the direction and control of traffic;
 - (5) Signs on or adjacent to the entry of a multiple occupancy building listing the occupants thereof, provided that the size of such sign shall not exceed one (1) square foot for each occupant or a total of twenty (20) square feet, whichever is smaller and provided further that there shall be only one (1) such sign per building;

- (6) Signs designating historical places or points of interest, erected by governmental authority or by a duly chartered historical association, or the like, not to exceed (6) square feet in area;
- (7) Signs indicating "Entrance," "Exit," "Parking" or the like, erected on a premises for the direction of persons or vehicles not to exceed two (2) square feet in area. Such signs shall not carry the name of the business or any product;
- (8) One (1) contractor's sign not exceeding twelve (12) square feet in area maintained on the premises while construction is in progress and containing information relative to the project. Such signs shall be set back at least (15) feet from the street lot line and shall be removed promptly after the completion of construction;
- (9) One (1) identification sign not exceeding twelve (12) square feet at any public entrance to a subdivision or multi-family development;
- (10) Political signs not exceeding sixteen (16) square feet provided that such signs are placed on private property and do not create a safety hazard. Such signs shall be removed not later than seven (7) days after the election;
- (11) One (1) sign not to exceed six (6) square feet in area designating an official motor vehicle inspection station and located at the Building Inspector's discretion so as not to create a safety hazard.
- (12) Temporary yard sale signs and real estate "open house" signs for a period of time not to exceed forty-eight (48) hours.
- (13) Temporary "grand opening" signs not to exceed forty (40) square feet and for a period of time not to exceed fourteen (14) days.

§ 200-80. Prohibited signs.

Except as provided in § 200-81, signs that are not specifically authorized are expressly prohibited. These prohibited signs include, but are not limited to the following:

- A. Moving or flashing signs; signs illuminated by or including any flashing or oscillating light; electronic billboards and reader boards; strings of pennants or so-called "whirlygigs" and the like. A sign which is designed, for structural reasons, to align itself with the direction of the wind shall not be considered a moving sign. Flashing or animated signs of any color shall not be permitted;
- B. All portable signs, except as otherwise provided. Portable signs shall include, but are not limited to, signs which are mounted, attached, or painted on trailers, boats or vehicles when used as additional signage on or near the business premises. Business vehicles displaying signage or advertising shall be parked in an assigned parking space which is not immediately adjacent to a street frontage;
- C. Temporary signs except as provided in § 200-79B;
- D. More than two (2) exterior permanent signs for any one (1) business or industrial establishment or residential premises;

- E. More than one (1) freestanding sign;
- F. All signs mounted on, or applied to trees, utility poles, rocks, or town owned property, except as otherwise provided;
- G. All banners, pennants, streamers, balloons, flags, search lights, strobe lights, beacons, inflatable signs, except as otherwise provided;
- H. Service or bay door mounted sign banners or advertising;
- I. Any sign imitating or obscuring an official traffic control sign or signal;
- J. Any sign placed on private property without the property owner's written approval;
- K. Any non-public signs in a public right-of-way or on public property, except approved banner signs installed pursuant to the North Reading Banner Program Guidelines. Further, the Town may install signs on its own property to identify public buildings and uses, and to provide necessary traffic control. Any non-public sign installed or placed on public property, except in conformance with the requirements of this section, shall be forfeited to the public and subject to confiscation.
- L. Billboards or other off-premises signs;
- M. Roof signs;
- N. **[Amended 4-7-2008 ATM by Art. 25, approved 6-27-2008]** Neon signs, or other direct-lighted signs are not permitted in residential districts and the local business and general business zoning districts.
- O. **[Amended 4-7-2008 ATM by Art. 24, approved 6-27-2008]** Internally and externally illuminated signs wherein such sign shall have any animation, flashing or intermittent image or illumination that includes an electronic, video, fixed, floating or moving text and/or picture that includes, but is not limited to the use of television, plasma, digital screens and/or light emitting diodes, liquid crystal displays, fiber optics, holography or hologram displays; other than those erected by a public entity for public safety and/or traffic control purposes.

§ 200-81. Signs in business and industrial districts.

- A. The following signs shall be permitted in business and industrial districts provided a permit is obtained from the Building Inspector pursuant to § 200-79A.
 - (1) Wall sign. Each sign shall be attached in its entirety and parallel to any wall of a building. No such sign shall project horizontally more than fifteen (15) inches from said wall or beyond the roof or sidewall lines. The surface area of the sign shall not aggregate more than ten (10) percent of the area of the wall on which it is displayed, or one-hundred fifty (150) square feet, whichever is the lesser;
 - (2) Projecting signs. Each sign shall be attached to any wall of the building. Such sign shall be set back a minimum of fifteen (15) feet from the street lot line. Projecting signs shall not exceed forty (40) square feet; and

- (3) Freestanding signs. No freestanding sign shall exceed forty (40) square feet in surface area. No portion of such sign shall be set back less than twenty (20) feet from any street curbline or fifteen (15) feet from any front property line where no curb exists. The top of the sign shall not be more than twenty-five (25) feet in height.

B. Shopping or business centers. For the purposes of this section, this shall mean any number of businesses greater than one (1) which share the same lot using common points of ingress and egress, and/or common parking facilities. Such centers shall be bound by the following restrictions on signs:

- (1) Master signage plan.

- (a) For any center in which the business owner proposes to erect one (1) or more signs requiring a permit, the property owner at his/her option, may submit for special permit approval by the Community Planning Commission, a master signage plan specifying the standards for consistency among all signs in the center subject to and containing the following:

- [1] An accurate plot plan of the lot(s) at such scale as the Community Planning Commission may reasonably require;

- [2] Location of buildings, parking lots, driveways, and landscaped areas;

- [3] Computation of the maximum total sign area, the maximum area for individual signs, the height of signs and the number of freestanding signs allowed on the lot(s) included in the plan under this bylaw;

- [4] An accurate indication on the plot plan of the proposed location of each present and future sign of any type, whether requiring a permit or not;

- [5] Signage details to include: color scheme, lettering or graphic style, lighting, location of each sign on the buildings, material and sign proportions;

- [6] Other provisions: The master signage plan may contain such other restrictions as the owners of the lots may reasonably determine.

- (b) Any center with an approved master signage plan conforming with the provisions of this section may be permitted up to a twenty-five-percent increase in the maximum total sign area. This bonus may be allocated within the center as the owner elects. This bonus is subject to a special permit pursuant to § 200-84.

- (c) Amendment. A master signage plan may be amended by filing a new master signage plan that conforms with all requirements of the ordinance then in effect.

- (d) Existing signs not conforming to master signage plan. If any new or amended signage plan is filed for a property on which existing signs are located, it shall include a schedule for bringing into conformance within three (3) years all signs not conforming to the proposed amended plan or to the requirements of this bylaw in effect on the date of submission.

- (e) Binding effect. After approval of a master signage plan, no sign shall be erected, placed, painted, or maintained, except in conformance with such plan, and such plan may be enforced in the same way as any provision of this bylaw. In case of any conflict between the provisions of such a plan and any other provision of this bylaw, the bylaw shall control.
- (2) There may be one (1) wall or freestanding multi-tenant sign facing each street on which the premises have frontage, identifying the plaza or center name and the names of individual businesses, such signs having a maximum size of forty (40) square feet.
- (3) In addition, each individual business within the plaza or shopping center shall be allowed a wall sign having a total sign area not to exceed fifteen (15) percent of the wall area assigned to that business or one hundred fifty (150) square feet, whichever is less. Each sign shall be attached in its entirety and shall be parallel to the wall of the building. No such sign shall project horizontally more than fifteen (15) inches from said wall or beyond the roof or sidewall lines.

§ 200-82. Business signs in residential districts.

In addition to the signs permitted pursuant to § 200-79, signs accessory to nonconforming business or commercial uses and not exceeding ten (10) square feet shall be permitted in residential districts provided a permit is obtained from the Building Inspector.

§ 200-83. Nonconforming signs.

- A. Any nonconforming sign, except a billboard, legally erected prior to the adoption of this section, or any amendment thereof, may continue to be maintained, provided that no such sign shall be redesigned, replaced or altered in any way or manner whatsoever unless in conformity with all the provisions of this Zoning Bylaw.
- B. Any nonconforming sign shall be removed if the sign:
 - (1) Advertises or calls attention to any product, business or activity which has not been traded, carried on, sold or dealt with at the particular premises for at least sixty (60) days; and
 - (2) Has not been repaired or properly maintained within sixty (60) days after notice of disrepair has been given by the Building Inspector.
- C. Any nonconforming sign which is destroyed, damaged or otherwise made unusable, shall be repaired, rebuilt or altered only in conformity with this article.

§ 200-84. Standards for granting special permits.

All applications for special permits shall be subject to site plan review.

- A. In reviewing applications for special permits pursuant to this article, the Community Planning Commission shall apply the following standards:

- (1) The sign(s) will not cause visual confusion, glare or offensive lighting in the neighborhood;
 - (2) The sign(s) will not be a detriment to the surrounding area;
 - (3) The sign(s) will not significantly alter the character of the zoning district;
 - (4) The sign(s) will not interfere with traffic safety in the area;
 - (5) Each sign shall be considered on its own merits and shall not be considered a precedent;
 - (6) The sign(s) conform to the provisions of any valid master signage plan;
 - (7) All zoning nonconformities and general bylaw violations must be removed or corrected.
- B. The CPC may impose any reasonable conditions on any special permit issued pursuant to this article.
- C. **[Added 4-7-2008 ATM by Art. 23, approved 6-27-2008]** Where a sign in a Priority Development Site requires a special permit under this article, the sign application shall be incorporated within the special permit application submitted to the Community Planning commission under §200-28(B).

§ 200-85. Sign content; maintenance.

- A. Protection of First Amendment rights. Any sign permitted under this article may, in lieu of any specified copy, contain any otherwise lawful, noncommercial message that does not direct attention to a business or to a service or commodity for sale.
- B. Maintenance. Every permanent sign, including any sign exempted from the permit requirements of this article shall be maintained in good structural condition and shall be kept painted and/or clean at all times. The Building Inspector shall have the authority to order the repair or removal of signs which have become dilapidated or which, in his opinion, constitute a physical hazard to public safety.

§ 200-86. Exemptions by special permit.

In business and industrial districts, for lots having frontage of not less than three hundred (300) feet, having area of not less than six (6) acres, the following provisions may be varied by special permit of the Community Planning Commission, provided that the sign in question will be used in connection with one (1) or more commercial buildings on the premises having a total of not less than twenty-five thousand (25,000) square feet of floor space:

- A. Setback requirements;
- B. Number of signs. The number of signs allowed in business and industrial districts may be increased provided that the total area of the signs does not exceed the following:
- (1) Freestanding signs may not exceed a total of one-half (1/2) square foot per foot of lot

- frontage; and
 - (2) Wall and roof signs may not exceed twenty (20) percent of front wall area.
- C. Size of sign. The area of freestanding and wall signs in business and industrial districts may be increased as follows:
 - (1) The area of wall signs may be increased to a maximum of twenty (20) percent of the area of the wall on which they are displayed; and
 - (2) The area of freestanding signs may be increased to a maximum of one-half (1/2) square foot per foot of lot frontage.
- D. Roof signs. Roof signs may be allowed by special permit, provided that:
 - (1) No such sign shall exceed one hundred (100) square feet or ten (10) percent of the area of the wall facing the direction of the sign, whichever is smaller; and
 - (2) No such sign shall project above the roof ridge except in the case of a flat roof, in which case the top of the sign shall not extend more than four (4) feet above the building.