



PLANNING COMMISSION

AGENDA REPORT

MEETING DATE: JANUARY 12, 2015

ITEM NUMBER: NB-1

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF CITY'S SIGN ORDINANCE PERTAINING TO FREESTANDING MONUMENT SIGNS IN COMMERCIAL ZONES

DATE: JANUARY 9, 2015

FROM: PLANNING DIVISION / DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT

PRESENTATION BY: STEPHANIE ROXAS, ASSOCIATE PLANNER

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

On May 6, 2014, the Costa Mesa City Council directed staff to work collaboratively with the Planning Commission to evaluate the City's existing monument sign regulations and develop potential Code amendments with the overall objective of enhancing the City's aesthetic image.

The purpose of this report is to provide background on the current Sign Code and review freestanding sign standards from surrounding cities. Staff is seeking direction from the Planning Commission regarding proposed changes based on a survey of other Cities and initial recommendations by Planning staff.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide feedback pertaining to the City's monument sign regulations and direct staff to prepare a draft ordinance.

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BACKGROUND

The City Council adopted the last major revision to the City's Sign Code in October of 2011 as Ordinance No. 11-11. The adopted ordinance included the following changes:

- A reduction in the maximum height allowed for freestanding signs from 25 feet to 12 feet;
- An increase in separation between freestanding signs on the same site from 150 feet to 300 feet;
- An amendment to the wall signage calculation to be based on the tenant's linear storefront, consistent with the majority of other cities;
- Prohibition of pole signs; and
- Added definitions related to murals and supergraphics.

As requested by City Council, staff prepared a memo summarizing the freestanding sign Code requirements from surrounding cities, which was presented to the City Council on May 6, 2014. At that meeting, the City Council expressed concern regarding the Code's generous size allowance for freestanding signs, and cited examples in which signs were recently installed and appeared disproportionately large to the size of the property.

The City Council directed staff to assess the current freestanding sign regulations and review sign codes from surrounding cities to identify "best practices." Furthermore, the Council directed staff to work with the Planning Commission to develop appropriate sign standards that strike a balance between providing adequate business identification while maintaining an attractive, uncluttered environment and ensuring signs are proportionate to the property and surrounding buildings.

ANALYSIS

Current Sign Code Regulations

The current Sign Code limits freestanding signs to 12 feet in height in commercial zones and 7 feet in industrial zones. The Code does not limit the number of freestanding signs allowed on a property. However, freestanding signs on the same site must be separated by 300 feet. The maximum size for freestanding signs is calculated using a three-step process:

1. Total Sign Area per Street Frontage: 1.0 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of lot width, plus 0.5 sq. ft. of sign area per lot depth. (This determines the total amount of all freestanding and wall signs allowed on a property.)
2. Total area of all freestanding signs may not exceed 50% of the above calculation.
3. Signs must be located in a landscaped planter equal to twice the sign area.

In other words, the "total sign area" for the property represents the total allocation allowed for all signs on the entire property. Freestanding signs may account for up to 50% of the total sign allocation.

The figure on the following page illustrates the calculation staff utilizes for the total sign area. Because sign area is computed based on the size of the entire lot, the Code may allow large freestanding signs for narrow lots with limited street frontage, such as the case in the example below.

Figure – Example of Sign Area Calculation



The maximum square footage per freestanding sign is determined by the lot dimensions and how much signage already exists on the property. Since these two factors may vary substantially, it is difficult to encourage a uniform appearance amongst new freestanding signs, and it may result in signs that are disproportionately large to the size of the property. Furthermore, because the size of freestanding signs is contingent upon the remaining balance of "total sign area," at times applicants must complete a substantial amount of research before submitting for a sign permit, thereby by potentially delaying the permit process.

The Code also requires freestanding signs to be located in a landscaped planter equal to twice the sign area. This requirement further regulates the allowable size of freestanding signs, especially on older properties with limited landscaping. However, there is no minimum setback requirement from the public right-of-way or sidewalk and therefore signs could be installed abutting the sidewalk with no landscape buffer.

Freestanding Sign Regulations from Surrounding Cities

Staff prepared a detailed matrix comparing the freestanding sign requirements from various cities (Attachment 1). For the Planning Commission's reference, a summary table is provided below focusing on the standards that regulate the maximum square footage and height of freestanding signs.

Table 1 – Freestanding Sign Regulations

City	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height
Costa Mesa	Total area of all freestanding signs may not exceed 50% of total allowed sign area per street frontage (1 sq. ft. per ft. of lot width + 0.5 sq. ft. per ft. of lot depth). No maximum square footage.	Commercial Zones: 12 ft. Industrial Zones: 7 ft.

City	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height
Newport Beach	1 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of primary street frontage Maximum Area: 75 sq. ft.	Pylon Signs: 20 ft. Monument Signs: 8 ft. max. height, 6 ft. average height
Huntington Beach	0-399 ft. frontage: 30 sq. ft. to 70 sq. ft. depending on lot configuration 400+ ft. frontage: 100 sq. ft. for primary sign	0-399 ft. frontage: 7 ft. to 15 ft. depending on lot configuration 400+ ft. of street frontage: 20 ft. for primary sign Regional Mall: 25 ft.
Tustin	Center Identification: 75 sq. ft. Individual Business Identification: 32 sq. ft.	6 ft.
Orange	0.5 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of parcel frontage Maximum Area: 160 sq. ft.	0-99 lineal ft. of street frontage: 5 ft. 100+ ft. of street frontage: 15 ft.
Santa Ana	20 sq. ft. to 45 sq. ft. based on length of street frontage 750+ ft. of street frontage: 60 sq. ft. sign face area	5 ft. to 7 ft. based on length of street frontage 750+ ft. of street frontage: 15 ft.
Fountain Valley	0-499 ft. of street frontage: 50 sq. ft. 500+ ft. of street frontage: 80 sq. ft.	0-499 lineal ft. of street frontage: 8 ft. 500+ ft. of street frontage: 12 ft.
Irvine	Maximum Sign Structure: 90 sq. ft. Maximum Sign Panel Size: 40 sq. ft.	6 ft. at sign midpoint
Mission Viejo	36 sq. ft.	6 ft.
Lake Forest	Multi-Tenant Center: 120 sq. ft. Single-Tenant Bldg: 50 sq. ft.	Multi-Tenant Center: 7 ft. Single-Tenant Bldg: 5 ft.
Laguna Niguel	50 sq. ft.	6 ft.

All of the surrounding cities surveyed establish a maximum square footage for freestanding signs. Several cities establish different maximum square footages based on the lot width or type of development (shopping centers versus single-tenant buildings). Conversely, Costa Mesa does not have standalone requirements specific to freestanding signs. As noted previously, the City's monument sign requirements are extracted from the total sign area allowance for a property, which combines the sizes of all building wall and freestanding signs. Consequently, the current Sign Code may permit inconsistent sign patterns as the size of freestanding signs fluctuates based on the lot dimensions unique to each property.

The height limit for freestanding signs varies substantially amongst the cities surveyed. Several cities allow different sign heights based on the length of the property's street frontage (also referred to as lot width). Several cities also have different height limits based on the type of development (shopping centers versus single-tenant buildings).

Planned Signing Programs

Deviations from the Sign Code may be requested through a Planned Signing Program (PSP) application. Most large commercial centers in the City have an approved PSP. The Planned Signing Program is intended to provide maximum incentive and latitude to encourage variety and good design, and to allow response to special circumstances, such as building placement, lot configuration, site visibility and vehicular access. The freestanding sign regulations are applied to properties without an approved PSP. Property owners and businesses have the option of applying for a PSP which take into account the unique circumstances of the property.

Existing Non-Conforming Signs

If the City Council adopts an ordinance amending the Sign Code, the new regulations would apply only to new freestanding signs. Existing freestanding signs that do not conform to the current provisions of the Sign Code are considered "legal nonconforming" and may continue to be used and maintained in accordance with Article 5 of the Sign Code. However, as part of the proposed ordinance, the Planning Commission may recommend incorporating an amortization schedule to allow legal nonconforming signs to remain for a specific period of time before requiring the signs to be replaced with a sign conforming to the Sign Code.

Existing Planned Sign Programs (Harbor Boulevard of Cars)

Many of the existing car dealerships have Planned Sign Programs or existing nonconforming signs that exceed the current 12-foot height limitation. Staff will provide a comprehensive inventory of the existing monument signage at every car dealership along with the draft ordinance in a subsequent report. The proposed code amendment would not impact or modify any previous approval of these signs. Furthermore, due to the scale and nature of these businesses, staff is considering flexible sign standards for those existing dealerships which do not have a current Planned Sign Program.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SIGN CODE AMENDMENT

Direction is needed from the Planning Commission with regard to the specific changes to the Sign Code for monument signs.

Staff offers the following preliminary suggested changes as a starting point for the Planning Commission's discussion:

1) *Re-examine the sign calculation formula and make adjustments in line with other Cities.*

According to the survey prepared by staff, the current calculation methodology is not a standard practice in that most cities calculate the sign area based on total linear frontage with a specific maximum limit. The City's current Sign Code calculation, which utilizes the lot width and depth to arrive at the total sign area, is a significant factor that leads to inconsistent freestanding signs. For example, Attachment 2 illustrates existing monument signs that comply with the City's Sign Code, yet appear inconsistent with the size of the property and scale of the building. Staff recommends changing the freestanding sign computation method to be consistent with other cities.

2) *Establish in a maximum size (or proportional size) of a monument sign.*

The current Sign Code, which does not provide a maximum square footage for freestanding signs, is another factor in concerns raised by the City Council. Consequently, staff recommends establishing a maximum square footage for freestanding signs to create greater consistency and ensure signs are designed proportionate to the size of the property. Staff recommends limiting freestanding signs to 75 sq. ft. for multi-tenant centers and 50 sq. ft. single-tenant buildings. Other cities (e.g., Tustin and Lake Forest) establish different standards depending on the development type. Together with the maximum height (discussed below), the proposed amendments strike a balance between providing adequate business identification while encouraging quality design of signage. Furthermore, the proposed maximum sign area for centers (75 sq. ft.) is consistent with other cities, including Newport Beach and Tustin.

3) *Reduce sign height from 12 feet to 7 feet to minimize visual clutter.*

Staff recommends reducing the maximum height for freestanding signs from 12 feet to 7 feet in commercial zones. This proposed height would be consistent with the City's current height limit for freestanding signs in industrial zones. Furthermore, the reduced height will ensure freestanding signs do not detract from the building design. This proposed amendment would promote quality design particularly with smaller properties with single tenants as many of these properties do not have a Planned Signing Program.

4) *Modify landscape buffer requirement.*

The current Sign Code regulates the placement of freestanding signs relative to landscaping and traffic safety. Staff recommends the addition of a minimum setback requirement from the sidewalk to create a landscape buffer between the public right-of-way and sign.

5) *Create different standards for auto retail uses.*

Due to the nature of the industry, auto dealerships require more signage than other retail uses. Many cities establish more generous signage standards for auto dealerships (which often are visible from the freeway) or have approved different standards through a Planned Sign Program. Staff recommends creating different standards for auto dealership signs to provide maximum flexibility and accommodate the unique needs of auto retail uses.

Table 2 below provides a side-by-side comparison of the current freestanding sign regulations and the proposed regulations recommended by staff.

Table 2 – Proposed Freestanding Sign Regulations

City	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height	Location
Current Regulations	Total area of all freestanding signs may not exceed 50% of total allowed sign area per street frontage (1 sq. ft. per	Commercial Zones: 12 ft. Industrial Zones: 7 ft.	Must be located outside of sight distance triangle and in a landscaped planter equal to twice the sign area.

City	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height	Location
	ft. of lot width + 0.5 sq. ft. per ft. of lot depth). No maximum sq. ft.		
Proposed Regulations	1 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of street frontage Maximum Area: Multi-Tenant Centers: 75 sq. ft. Single-Tenant Bldg: 50 sq. ft. (*Does not apply to auto retail uses.)	Commercial & Industrial Zones: 7 ft. (*Does not apply to auto retail uses.)	In addition to the current regulations, signs must be setback 2 ft. from back of sidewalk.

These amendments are intended to accomplish the following objectives:

- Promote consistency in the size of freestanding monument signs
- Result in a method that is consistent with industry standards for calculating maximum area for freestanding signs.
- Create a reasonable standard to establish a certain aesthetic character whereby freestanding signs are more proportionate to the building it serves and appear proportionate relative to other signs in the general area.

Based on this initial research, staff believes that certain amendments to the City's Sign Code would be helpful to effectuate the objectives outlined by the City Council. The proposed Code modifications outlined above would establish greater uniformity and consistency amongst freestanding signs, while allowing a reasonable maximum sign area to accommodate the needs of businesses. Staff has provided the initial framework by which a recommendation could be made to City Council. At this time, staff is seeking the Planning Commission's direction on any, or all, of the proposed recommendations presented in this report.

Attachment: 1. Freestanding Sign Regulations from Surrounding Cities
2. Photos of Existing Monument Signs

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Transportation Services Manager
Fire Protection Analyst
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File (2)

Attachment 1

FREESTANDING SIGN CODE REQUIREMENTS

City	Max. Number	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height	Max. Width	Landscaping
Costa Mesa	No maximum. Signs on same site must be separated by a minimum of 300 ft.	Total Sign Area per Street Frontage: 1 sq. ft. per ft. of lot width + 0.5 sq. ft. per ft. of lot depth Total area of all freestanding signs may not exceed 50% of total allowed sign area per street frontage.	Commercial Zones: 12 ft. Industrial Zones: 7 ft.	n/a	Must be located in landscaped planter equal to twice the sign area.
Newport Beach	1 sign per sites with at least 50 ft. of street frontage	1 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of primary street frontage Maximum Area: 75 sq. ft.	Pylon Signs: 20 ft. Monument Signs: 8 ft. maximum height, 6 ft. maximum average height	9 ft. maximum, or 1.5 x average height of sign	Landscaping required equal to twice the sign face area. Signs must be setback 5 ft. from right-of-way (ROW).
Huntington Beach	1 per street frontage Lots with more than 400 ft. of street frontage and regional malls may have additional signs	0-399 ft. frontage: 30 sq. ft. to 70 sq. ft. depending on lot configuration 400+ ft. frontage: 100 sq. ft. for primary sign Regional Mall: 100 sq. ft. facing street, 200 sq. ft. facing freeway	0-399 ft. of street frontage: 7 ft. to 15 ft. depending on lot configuration 400+ ft. of street frontage: 20 ft. for primary sign Regional Mall: 25 ft.	n/a	Signs shall be located in a landscape planter a minimum of 2 ft. wider than the sign itself.

City	Max. Number	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height	Max. Width	Landscaping
Tustin	1 per street frontage Additional monument signs allowed for individual tenants located in a freestanding building (subject to criteria).	Center Identification: 75 sq. ft. Individual Business Identification: 32 sq. ft.	6 ft.	n/a	Signs must be located in landscaped area outside of sight distance triangle.
Orange	1 sign per parcel Parcels with more than 400 ft. of frontage may have 1 additional sign	0.5 sq. ft. of sign area per lineal ft. of parcel frontage Maximum Area: 160 sq. ft.	0-99 lineal ft. of street frontage: 5 ft. 100+ ft. of street frontage: 15 ft.	n/a	n/a
Santa Ana	1 sign for every 300 ft. of street frontage	0-60 ft. of street frontage: 20 sq. ft. 61-119 ft. of street frontage: 30 sq. ft. 120+ ft. of street frontage: 45 sq. ft. max. sign face area 750+ ft. of street frontage: 60 sq. ft. max. sign face area Freeway-Oriented Signs: 100 sq. ft. (subject to criteria)	0-60 ft. of street frontage: 5 ft. 61-119 ft. of street frontage: 6 ft. 120+ ft. of street frontage: 7 ft. 750+ ft. of street frontage: 15 ft. Freeway-Oriented Signs: 35 sq. ft. (subject to criteria)	0-60 ft. of street frontage: n/a 61-119 ft. of street frontage: n/a 120+ ft. of street frontage: The overall height plus width shall not exceed 16 linear ft. 750+ ft. of street frontage: 10 ft.	Must be located in a landscaped planter, with such planter not less than 4 ft. in any direction from the edge of the planter to the sign.
Fountain Valley	1 sign for every 300 ft. of street frontage Signs must be separated by a minimum of 75 ft. Freeway-oriented signs: 1 sign per parcel with a minimum freeway frontage of 200 ft.	0-499 lineal ft. of street frontage: 50 sq. ft. 500+ ft. of street frontage: 80 sq. ft. Freeway-Oriented Signs: 200 sq. ft.	0-499 lineal ft. of street frontage: 8 ft. 500+ ft. of street frontage: 12 ft. Freeway-Oriented Signs: 20 ft.	n/a	Minimum of 200 sq. ft. of landscaping shall be provided at the sign base. Signs shall be setback 5 ft. from ROW.

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City	Max. Number	Max. Sign Area	Max. Height	Max. Width	Landscaping
Irvine	1 sign per unsignalized project entry; 1 sign per side of signalized project entry; 1 sign per street frontage with no vehicular access; and 1 sign per freeway frontage.	Maximum Sign Structure: 90 sq. ft. Maximum Sign Panel Size: 40 sq. ft.	6 ft. at sign midpoint	15 ft.	Landscaping not required at sign base. Signs must be setback 2 ft. behind sidewalk.
Mission Viejo	0-98 lineal ft. of street frontage: Freestanding signs not permitted. 99+ ft. of street frontage: 1 sign per street frontage in excess of 99 ft. in length	36 sq. ft.	6 ft.	10 ft.	Landscaping required. Signs must be setback 5 ft. from ROW.
Lake Forest	Multi-Tenant Center: 1 per 1,000 ft. of street frontage Single-Tenant Bldg: 1 per street frontage	Multi-Tenant Center: 120 sq. ft. Single-Tenant Bldg: 50 sq. ft.	Multi-Tenant Center: 7 ft. Single-Tenant Bldg: 5 ft.	n/a	n/a
Laguna Niguel	0-99 lineal ft. of street frontage: Freestanding signs not permitted. 100+ ft. of street frontage: 1 sign per street frontage	50 sq. ft.	6 ft.	n/a	Minimum 2 sq. ft. of landscaping and/or hard-scaping for every sq. ft. of sign area. Signs shall be setback 5 ft. from ROW.

Attachment 2
EXISTING FREESTANDING SIGNS

