

## Signs of the Times: An Integrated Approach for Permanent Signs in Ottawa

### Analysis: Compatibility of Signs with Land Use

Signs reflect the specific needs of particular settings, but should be compatible with their surroundings. In the [Permanent Signs on Private Property By-law](#) (the By-law), the range of permitted sign types and the degree of regulation, such as size restrictions and setbacks, are aligned with the land use based zone categories of the City's Zoning By-law (see [attached table](#)). The zones themselves, and their associated development standards, are founded in the City's Official Plan designations and policy directions.

Specific direction with respect to signage is also included in Design Guidelines for some types of development and designations, including [Arterial Mainstreets](#), [Traditional Mainstreets](#), [Large Format Retail](#), [Gas Stations](#), [Outdoor Patios](#) and [Drive-Through Facilities](#).

The link between sign rules and land uses ensures that Ottawa's sign regulations are context sensitive and reflect a graduated approach to sign permissions from the most restrictive in residential and other sensitive areas to the most permissive in the more business-intensive commercial and industrial zones.

Graduated sign restrictions and the link to zoning categories are common among municipalities and there is broad acknowledgement that a "one-size-fits-all-areas" approach to regulating signage is unrealistic. However, how the restrictions apply to different areas varies from municipality to municipality. Most other Ontario municipalities do not have the diversity of uses that exist in Ottawa given its large land mass, significant rural component, and unique position as the nation's capital.



Signs along traditional mainstreet (above) and in industrial area (below)



Sign in residential neighbourhood

Factors generally taken into account in considering signage as complementary to the built form of cities include:

- The scale, height, intensity, nature and complexity of the built form, architecture and streetscapes
- The land use (residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, etc.) and the corresponding needs for signage
- The type of road (arterial, local, etc.), the speed limits along the road, the pedestrian component, etc.
- Setbacks of the buildings from the roads;
- In rural settings in particular, the impact of light trespass on the night sky
- In residential areas, light spillage affecting adjacent residents' enjoyment of their properties
- Specific restrictions for areas with distinctive characteristics, for example, heritage properties or heritage conservation districts, the Parliamentary Precinct, the National War Memorial, the Ceremonial Route, the Rideau Canal, Lansdowne, etc. (Signage for Distinctive Areas is discussed in a [separate paper](#).)



Village signage (above) and sign for a Bed & Breakfast (below)



In Ottawa, the most restrictive sign regulations (Districts 1 and 2) apply to residential areas, environmental protection zones, some open space zones and some minor institutional uses. The regulations in other districts (Districts 3 and 4) are less restrictive, but still take into account, primarily through setbacks, any impacts on residential uses in adjacent residential zones. Most rural uses, with the exception of residential and institutional, are covered in District 5 where the current signage regulations have generally preserved the rules that were in place for these uses prior to amalgamation.



Rural signage

The rural component of the City remains an integral part of the City's fabric. The By-law needs to recognize the unique concerns of rural areas in this context. For example the impact of a brightly lit sign viewed against a dark sky in a farm field can be greater than it is against a background with other sources of light such as street lamps and buildings. At the same time, incorporating new sign technologies into rural streetscapes may have

positive implications for businesses and residents alike. Should agricultural properties, the



rural countryside and rural commercial districts be subject to the same sign rules? Is the current By-law's intent of preserving pre-amalgamation signage requirements for rural areas still relevant?

Ninety percent of Ottawa's future growth is anticipated to be in its urban areas, where intensification and mixed-use developments are changing the dynamics of many neighbourhoods and blurring the traditional boundaries that form the basis for sign regulation. The same building could house a retail/commercial component, dwellings and a hotel, or restaurants and commercial establishments might be next door to residential uses. The incorporation of the



Mixed use development including residential, commercial

The new Light Rail Transit (LRT) system into Ottawa's transportation network will see mixed-use hubs throughout the City where residential uses are combined with or in close proximity to commercial and other uses. The use of setback-from-residential provisions in the By-law is becoming increasingly problematic given the challenge of balancing the needs of businesses and concerns of residents in these areas, particularly with respect to illuminated signs. For example, the By-law does not allow an illuminated sign within 30 metres of a residential use in a residential zone if it is visible from that residential use. But what about an illuminated sign that is within 30 metres of a residential use in a non-residential zone such as an apartment or stacked dwelling in a Mixed-use zone?

Sprawling exterior commercial/retail plazas with numerous tenants and multiple entrances (such as the Trainyards) often request several ground signs, resulting in sign proliferation. Multiple signs may assist in business identification and wayfinding, but they also have an impact on the overall look and feel of the property and streetscapes. Which should be a priority? What factors (lot frontage, zoning of adjacent lots, etc.) should limit or expand permissions for multiple signs for this type of development?

Digital signs, including billboards and electronic message centres (EMCs) are becoming increasingly popular and in demand. A [separate paper](#) deals in greater depth with these and other new sign technologies.

The existing By-law restricts them mainly to commercial and industrial areas and requires minimum distances between them. In the case of EMCs, there are limits to their size and where they can be installed (mostly on ground signs). Multiple exceptions (through sign minor variances or By-law waivers) have been approved in recent years and the frequency of these requests raises the question as to whether, in the context of the City's objectives for signage, the rules might be appropriately changed to allow bigger EMCs and/or more permissible



Electronic message centre

locations for EMCs and digital billboards. Or, is there no place for digital signs in areas other than those where they are currently permitted?

There are also land-use compatibility questions to be addressed related to static (conventional) billboards. The By-law currently allows billboards in most commercial and



Billboard along arterial road with residential uses on one side

industrial zones, but includes provisions that require setbacks from residential zones. In some neighbourhoods where houses in a residential zone back onto an arterial road with commercial uses on the other side, this setback prohibits the

installation of a billboard on the commercial lots. Should the setback to residential uses be maintained along arterial roads? Are arterial roads an appropriate location for billboards?

The task at hand is to develop a new sign By-law that strikes a balance that will preserve public safety, improve the appearance of communities, and encourage a vibrant local economy. Is the City's current approach to graduated sign restrictions based on zones and sign districts still appropriate, or is there another basis for ensuring signage is compatible with its surroundings? Would elaborated sign design guidelines, as a complement to the By-law, be a useful way of encouraging closer linkages between signage requirements and the City's vision for how streetscapes and neighbourhoods should look?

## SIGN DISTRICTS AND REGULATIONS

### \*Notes

- These are general descriptions of the rules that apply, and do not include all specific conditions and/or exceptions. Refer to the By-law for actual provisions.
- “institutional use” means a community centre, community college, correctional facility, emergency service, hospital, park, place of worship, recreational and athletic facility, residential care facility, school, university or other public agency

### GENERAL RULES FOR ALL SIGNS

- no illumination within a residential zone or 30 m from a residential use in a residential zone (if visible)
- no signs within visibility triangles (intersections, driveways) or close to intersections
- must be on-premise signs (advertising the use on the property) (except directional farm signs, directional development signs, billboards and digital billboards)
- Ministry of Transportation of Ontario (MTO) approval required for signs within 400 m of controlled access provincial highways
- no signs within 150 m of or visible from National War Memorial or Parliamentary Precinct (subject to approval from National Capital Commission)
- no signs adjacent to or visible from Ceremonial Route – Sussex Drive, Wellington Street, Mackenzie Avenue, or Elgin Street from Laurier Avenue to Wellington Street) (subject to approval from National Capital Commission)

### SIGN DISTRICT 1

<b>Zones:</b>	<b>Lower density urban, village and rural residential (<i>detached, semi-detached and row dwellings in residential areas</i>)</b> <b>All environmental protection</b> <b>Some open space (<i>including neighbourhood parks and community centres</i>)</b> <b>All development reserve (<i>vacant lands for future development</i>)</b>
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Sign Type	Permitted	Area	Height	Illumination
Identification Ground	Yes – institutional, bed and breakfast and home-based business use only	2 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 m	No
Information Ground	Yes – institutional use only	0.2 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 m	No
Identification Wall	Yes	0.2 to 0.5 m <sup>2</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	No
Logo	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Information Wall	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mural	Yes – only in institutional use/utility installation, or conditionally in a residential use	100% of wall area of first three storeys	N/A	N/A

	in a residential zone directly abutting a commercial, industrial or institutionally zoned property			
Projecting	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Canopy	Yes – identification only, for institutional use	1 m <sup>2</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	No
Message Centre	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Billboard and Digital Billboard	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Development ( <i>advertising new construction projects</i> )	Yes	2 to 22 m <sup>2</sup> , max 1.4 m <sup>2</sup> for 4 or less dwelling units	3 to 7m, max. 1.5 m for 4 or less dwelling units	External (but non-illuminated for 4 or less dwelling units)
Directional development ( <i>directing the public to construction projects</i> )	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Directional ( <i>directing the public to specific businesses</i> )	No	N/A	N/A	N/A

## SIGN DISTRICT 2

<b>Zones:</b>	<b>Higher-density urban and village residential, including mobile home parks (<i>including apartments</i>)</b> <b>Central Experimental Farm</b> <b>Most open-space (<i>including community facilities and hydro corridors</i>)</b> <b>Some minor institutional and some rural institutional (<i>including places of worship, schools, cemeteries, etc.</i>)</b>			
<b>Sign Type</b>	<b>Permitted</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Height</b>	<b>Illumination</b>
Identification Ground	Yes – for non-residential uses, multi-residential with 10 or more units, bed and breakfast and home-based business uses	3 to 5 m <sup>2</sup>	2 to 3 m	External
Information Ground	Yes – for non-residential, bed and breakfast and home-based business uses	0.2 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 m	External – only for non-residential and non-institutional uses
Identification Wall	Yes	2 m <sup>2</sup> to 10% of wall face (up to 0.2 m <sup>2</sup> for bed and breakfast and home-based	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External - for non-residential uses

		business uses)		
Logo	Yes	5% of top storey wall area	Top storey	No
Information Wall	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mural	Yes – only in institutional use/utility installation, or conditionally in a residential use in a residential zone directly abutting a commercial, industrial or institutionally zoned property	100% of wall area of first three storeys	N/A	N/A
Projecting	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Canopy	Yes – in non-residential uses	10% of wall	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	No
Message Centre	Yes – manual only, institutional uses only	25% of sign face	N/A	No
Billboard and Digital Billboard	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Development ( <i>advertising new construction projects</i> )	Yes	2 to 22 m <sup>2</sup> max 1.4 m <sup>2</sup> for 4 or less dwelling units	3 to 7 m max. 1.5 m for 4 or less dwelling units	External (but non-illuminated for 4 or less dwelling units)
Directional development ( <i>directing the public to construction projects</i> )	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Directional ( <i>directing the public to specific businesses</i> )	Village pedestrian signs only - in non-residential/non-institutional uses	900 cm <sup>2</sup>	3 m	No

### SIGN DISTRICT 3

<b>Zones:</b>	<b>Some open space (<i>including city wide open space parks and facilities</i>)</b> <b>Industrial business park</b> <b>Most traditional mainstreets (<i>for example, Somerset, Beechwood, Rideau, etc.</i>)</b> <b>All major institutional, some minor institutional, and some rural institutional (<i>including universities, hospitals, etc.</i>)</b> <b>Ground transportation facility (<i>for example, bus and train terminals</i>)</b> <b>Some mineral extraction</b> <b>Leisure facility, both community and major</b> <b>Local commercial</b> <b>Some rural commercial (<i>including campgrounds, Greenbelt employment area</i>)</b> <b>Some village mixed use (<i>for example, Mill Street in Manotick</i>)</b>			
Sign Type	Permitted	Area	Height	Illumination
Identification Ground	Yes	5 to 10 m <sup>2</sup>	2 to 4.5 m	External, reversed and internal
Information Ground	Yes	0.5 to 1 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 to 3 m	External, reversed and internal
Identification Wall	Yes	15 to 20% of wall	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External, reversed and internal
Logo	Yes	10% of top storey wall area	Top storey	No
Information Wall	Yes - only non-residential uses	If illuminated, 1 m <sup>2</sup> per sign to max. total of 2 m <sup>2</sup> per wall face	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal
Mural	Yes	100% of wall area of first three storeys	N/A	N/A
Projecting	Yes – only non-residential and non-institutional uses	1 m <sup>2</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External, reversed and internal
Canopy	Yes	15 to 20% of wall	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External, reversed and internal
Message Centre	Yes – manual only, in non-residential uses only, as part of a ground sign	25% of sign face	N/A	Yes
Billboard and Digital Billboard	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Development ( <i>advertising new construction projects</i> )	Yes	2 to 22 m <sup>2</sup> max 1.4 m <sup>2</sup> for 4 or less dwelling units	3 to 7 m max. 1.5 m for 4 or less dwelling units	External (but non-illuminated for 4 or less dwelling units)
Directional development	Yes, on vacant agricultural land,	Wall - 6 m <sup>2</sup> , not to exceed 50% of wall	Wall - 1 <sup>st</sup> storey	Yes, but off-premise



(directing the public to construction projects)	on a wall (other than front wall) of commercial or industrial building Ground or wall sign	area Ground – 0.9 m <sup>2</sup> (outside greenbelt) 0.3 m <sup>2</sup> (inside greenbelt)	Ground – 5 m (outside greenbelt) 3 m (inside greenbelt)	must be non-illuminated
		Setbacks 100 m from intersection 500 m from village		
Directional (directing the public to specific businesses)	Yes, for non-residential/non-institutional uses only Rural businesses Village pedestrian (separation distances apply)	14 m <sup>2</sup> 0.9 m <sup>2</sup>	3 m 3 m	Yes No

#### SIGN DISTRICT 4

**Zones:** **Mixed uses – downtown, centre, general (includes ByWard Market, major shopping centres, mixed use areas around transit stations, etc.)**  
**Some village mixed use**  
**Arterial mainstreet (such as St. Laurent, Carling, Innes, etc.)**  
**Air transportation facility (airports)**  
**Transit oriented development**  
**General, light and heavy industrial (except rural)**

Sign Type	Permitted	Area	Height	Illumination
Identification Ground	Yes	14 m <sup>2</sup> and up to 20 m <sup>2</sup> for a shopping centre	8 m	External and internal
Information Ground	Yes	0.5 to 1 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 to 3 m	External and internal
Identification Wall	Yes	20 to 25% of wall	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal
Logo	Yes	15% of top storey wall area	Top storey	External and internal
Information Wall	Yes - only non-residential	If illuminated, 1m <sup>2</sup> per sign to maximum total of 2 m <sup>2</sup> per wall face	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal
Mural	Yes	100% of wall area of first three storeys	N/A	N/A
Projecting	Yes	2 m <sup>2</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal
Canopy	Yes	20 to 25% of wall	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal
Message Centre	Yes –manual and electronic (EMC), as part of a ground sign	30% of sign face	N/A	Yes EMC subject to brightness and

				operational limits
Billboard and Digital Billboard	Yes	9 to 18.5 m <sup>2</sup> <u>Digital</u> – ground sign only <u>Conventional</u> – wall or ground sign <u>Conventional setbacks:</u> 300 m from residential zone 150 m from another billboard 1,000 m from another billboard in certain zones, including rural/agricultural 30 m from residential or institutional zone <u>Digital setbacks:</u> 100 m from intersection 300 m lightshed from residential, institutional, environmental, heritage 300 m from other digital billboards 150 m from other billboards	8 m	Yes Digital subject to brightness and operational limits
Development (advertising new construction projects)	Yes	2 to 22 m <sup>2</sup> max 1.4 m <sup>2</sup> for 4 or less dwelling units	3 to 7 m max. 1.5 m for 4 or less dwelling units	External (but non-illuminated for 4 or less dwelling units)
Directional development (directing the public to construction projects)	Yes, on vacant agricultural land, on a wall (other than front wall) of commercial or industrial building Ground or wall sign	Wall - 6 m <sup>2</sup> , not to exceed 50% of wall area Ground – 0.9 m <sup>2</sup> (outside greenbelt) 0.3 m <sup>2</sup> (inside greenbelt) Setbacks 100 m from intersection 500 m from village	Wall - 1 <sup>st</sup> storey Ground – 5 m (outside greenbelt) 3 m (inside greenbelt)	Yes, but off-premise must be non-illuminated
Directional (directing the public to specific businesses)	Yes, for non-residential/non-institutional uses only Farm Rural businesses Village pedestrian (separation distances apply)	4 m <sup>2</sup> 14 m <sup>2</sup> 0.9 m <sup>2</sup>	3 m 3 m 3 m	No Yes No

## SIGN DISTRICT 5

Zones:	Agricultural Most mineral extraction Most village mixed use Rural countryside Stittsville mainstreet Mineral aggregate reserve Most rural commercial Rural general and heavy industrial Some village mixed use (for example, Old Montreal Road in Cumberland, Manotick Main Street, Osgoode Main Street)			
	Sign Type	Permitted	Area	Height
Identification Ground	Yes	3 to 14 m <sup>2</sup>	3 to 6 m	External and internal, but restricted to external for residential
Information Ground	Yes	0.5 m <sup>2</sup> to 1 m <sup>2</sup>	1.5 to 3 m	External and internal
Identification Wall	Yes	2 m <sup>2</sup> for residential, 15% of wall face for institutional, 20% of wall face for other uses	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey only	External and internal, but restricted to external for residential
Logo	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Information Wall	Yes – only non-residential	If illuminated, 1 m <sup>2</sup> per sign to maximum total of 2 m <sup>2</sup> per wall face	1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> storey	Yes
Mural	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Projecting	Yes – only in non-residential, non-institutional uses	1 m <sup>2</sup>	N/A	External and internal/reversed
Canopy	Yes	2 m <sup>2</sup> (residential) 15% of wall (institutional) 20% of wall (other)	N/A	External and internal (external and reversed for residential uses)
Message Centre	Yes –manual only, for non-residential uses, as part of a ground sign	25% of sign area	N/A	Yes
Billboard and Digital Billboard	Yes	9 to 18.5 m <sup>2</sup>	8 m	Yes
	Conventional - in rural commercial, industrial and heavy industrial zones	Digital – ground sign only Conventional – wall or ground sign Conventional setbacks:		Digital subject to brightness and operational limits

	Digital – above zones, fronting on Carp Road, between Highway 417 and Rothbourne Road	2,500 from other billboards (1,000 if not visible to other billboard) 300 m from residential zone 150 m from another billboard Digital setbacks: 100 m from intersection 300 m lightshed from residential, institutional, environmental, heritage 300 m from other digital billboards 150 m from other billboards		
Development (advertising new construction projects)	Yes	2 to 22 m <sup>2</sup> max 1.4 m <sup>2</sup> for 4 or less dwelling units	3 to 7 m max. 1.5 m for 4 or less dwelling units	External (but non-illuminated for 4 or less dwelling units)
Directional development (directing the public to construction projects)	Yes, on vacant agricultural land, on a wall (other than front wall) of commercial or industrial building Ground or wall sign	Wall - 6 m <sup>2</sup> , not to exceed 50% of wall area Ground – 0.9 m <sup>2</sup> (outside greenbelt) 0.3 m <sup>2</sup> (inside greenbelt)	Wall - 1 <sup>st</sup> storey Ground – 5 m (outside greenbelt) 3 m (inside greenbelt)	Yes, but off-premise must be non-illuminated
		Setbacks 100 m from intersection 500 m from village		
Directional (directing the public to specific businesses)	Yes, for non-residential/non-institutional uses only Farm Rural businesses Village pedestrian (separation distances apply)	4 m <sup>2</sup> 14 m <sup>2</sup> 0.9 m <sup>2</sup>	3 m 3 m 3 m	No Yes No