

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

Analysis: Distinctive Areas

There are areas of Ottawa that are distinctive in their nature and use. The vision for most of these is articulated in the City's Official Plan. They may warrant a differentiated approach to signage to reflect their unique character. Some are entirely within the City's jurisdiction; others fall under the purview of the National Capital Commission (NCC), the federal government, or the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO). Signs in areas that fall under non-municipal jurisdictions have to obtain approvals from and conform to any rules, policies or guidelines established by the entity with jurisdiction and usually have to comply with the City's [Permanent Signs on Private Property By-law](#) (the By-law).

Lansdowne. During the initial stages of the revitalization of Lansdowne, it was recognized that signage would be a key element of making it a vibrant and unique place and that it was important to ensure signage requirements be handled in a manner consistent with the overall vision for the site. This resulted in a comprehensive and detailed Signage and Wayfinding Plan specific to Lansdowne. It includes an overall policy framework for signs; specific policies and directions for signage that support Lansdowne's development as a distinctive and dynamic urban space; and applicable guidelines and performance standards for permanent, temporary and wayfinding signs. Permit issuance, inspection and enforcement of the signage requirements for Lansdowne remain within the context of the current permanent and temporary sign By-laws.

Canadian Tire Centre. The site of the Canadian Tire Centre is subject to signage rules spelled out in a separate pre-amalgamation Kanata By-law (147-95). These reflect the development and use of the land as a major sports and entertainment complex. The rules are generally less restrictive than the rules under the Permanent Signs on Private Property By-law and allow certain types of signs (for example, billboard landscape ground signs and animated marquee signs) not covered by the Permanent Signs By-law. .

Rideau Arts Precinct. The [Rideau Arts Precinct](#) is currently undergoing a significant transformation due to Confederation Line Light Rail Transit (LRT) construction, the revitalization of the Rideau Centre, the Ottawa Art Gallery/Arts Court Expansion, upgrades to the French theatre venue on King Edward Avenue, the impact of the new Shaw Centre (formerly the Ottawa Congress Centre), upgrades to the University of Ottawa campus, and ongoing residential and commercial development. The vision for the area will see it thrive as the arts, entertainment and shopping district of Ottawa's downtown and be a showcase for public art.

LeBreton Flats. [LeBreton Flats](#) is a unique site with considerable future potential given its central location along the LRT corridor. The vision is to make it a "people-place for the next century". It envisages a mixed-use (including the integration of residential and commercial and other uses within the same blocks and/or the same buildings), pedestrian-friendly space incorporating compact neighbourhoods surrounded by open spaces and supported by highly accessible public transit. Significant elements of the plan for future development

include retention of the waterfront in public hands as an accessible and open space, a “LeBreton Commons” as a major gathering place and stage for events, and preservation of heritage components such as the aqueduct, bridges and the Pumping Station. The site is subject to the National Capital Commission’s (NCC’s) Views Protection Policy (VPP).

ByWard Market. The [ByWard Market](#) is a designated [Heritage Conservation District](#) (HCD). It houses an open-air produce market, retail stores, restaurants and entertainment venues, along with dwellings and the largest concentration of heritage buildings in the City. The Official Plan objectives include protecting the area’s function as a heritage, pedestrian-oriented predominantly commercial area, and conserving its historical, architectural, social, cultural and environmental significance by ensuring sensitive development. Its multi-use aspect and the combination of historic and modern elements pose a challenge for signage that is compatible with its various uses (for example, digital menu boards for restaurants in or adjacent to heritage buildings).

Sparks Street Mall. [Sparks Street](#), also a [Heritage Conservation District](#) (HCD), is a hub for retail, commercial and pedestrian activity in the Central Business District. Policies established for Sparks Street include promoting it as a significant shopping area, a tourist destination and a vital business district, with continuous pedestrian-oriented uses at grade and varied uses above the street. Its pedestrian focus presents opportunities to provide more flexibility with respect to signage given the reduced risk of distraction to vehicular traffic. There is a focus on protecting heritage buildings and character and respecting views of the Centre Block of Parliament, the National War Memorial, Confederation Square, and the Rideau Canal. In addition to meeting the City’s By-law requirements, signage along Sparks Street Mall is subject to the NCC’s VPP aimed at “protecting and enhancing the views and symbolic primacy of the Parliament Buildings and other national symbols”. The NCC has recently undertaken a Vocation Study to explore opportunities for the reinvigoration of Sparks Street presenting the potential to revisit signage policy for this area.

Other Heritage Conservation Districts. Other [Heritage Conservation Districts](#) (HCDs) in Ottawa, designated under Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act, are mostly in the Sandy Hill, New Edinburgh, Glebe and Rockcliffe Park areas. HCD plans outline the cultural heritage value and attributes of individual HCDs and provide policies and guidelines to manage change in these districts. Generally, these encourage development that reflects massing, scale, location, size and design to ensure compatibility with the heritage resources. Further to a [2009 Report to Council](#), general design criteria were established and measures were instituted to ensure that applications for signs on heritage buildings or in HCDs were circulated to Heritage staff (and, where applicable, to the NCC) for their consideration and input, and provisions were incorporated in the By-law to reflect this process. These include prohibiting electronic message centres (EMCs) on lots containing a building designated under part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act*, not allowing painted wall signs or murals on heritage buildings, and prohibiting billboards within 30 metres of a lot on which there is a heritage building,

Rideau Canal, the Parliamentary Precinct and the Ceremonial Route/National War Memorial. The [Rideau Canal](#) is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The [Parliamentary Precinct](#), the Ceremonial Route and the National War Memorial are also subject to the NCC's VPP. The current sign By-law includes National Monuments and Ceremonial Route buffers (Sections 80 and 81) requiring that signage adjacent to or visible from these sites obtains a written statement from the NCC to confirm it does not detract from their view or function. The City's Official Plan recognizes these areas as unique and historical environments which are conducive to year-round ceremonial, leisure and tourism activities at both the national and local level and sets out land-use policies that are compatible with this vision.

Highway corridors. Signs along provincially-owned highways are managed by the MTO through its [Corridor Signing Policy](#). Three provincial highways cross all or some part of the City of Ottawa – Highways 7, 416 and 417. Section 79 of the By-law requires that signs visible from and oriented toward a controlled access provincial highway and located within 400 metres of that highway obtain approval from the MTO as part of the permit application process. Ottawa Road 174 (commonly referred to as “Highway 174”), with the exception of a small portion of the interchange near Blair Road, is now managed by the City and signage along this highway does not require MTO approval and does not have to comply with its signing policies.

How can we develop signage rules for these areas that support the City's vision for them as outlined in the Official Plan?

Ensuring that signs are compatible with their surroundings in these distinctive areas is important to preserving and enhancing their unique character.

For example, guidelines for signs in heritage districts should encourage signs that do not detract from their cultural, historical or heritage value and that are consistent with the architecture and streetscapes where they are situated. This is consistent with the objectives set out for HCDs. However, do the general design guidelines established in 2009 and the existing heritage-related provisions in the By-law go far enough to ensure these objectives are met? Another challenge is whether new sign technologies, such as digital menu boards for restaurants and electronic message centres (EMCs), can be appropriately integrated into these areas without adversely impacting on their overall look and feel. Does modern technology necessarily clash with the past?



Signage reflecting heritage character of neighbourhood

Signs situated within view of the Rideau Canal and the Parliamentary Precinct and subject to the NCC's VPP should not draw a viewer's focus away from significant views of Parliament, national monuments and the World Heritage Site. Typical signage can be readily modified to reflect these types of guidelines without compromising a business's identity and visibility. The Deloitte logo sign on a building façade facing Parliament Hill is an example of how this has been done successfully. In fact, such accommodations are more likely to evoke a positive attitude from the public towards businesses in unique areas who are seen to be respectful of and sensitive to their surroundings.



[Logo sign \(Deloitte\) respecting NCC's VPP policy](#)

Rules for signage in entertainment districts may be less restrictive than those in traditional neighbourhoods, reflecting the vitality and creativity of these land uses and the need for

signs that can be readily seen in the dark. This is not to say the impact on any adjacent residential uses areas should be ignored, but there could be greater scope for allowing signage that complements the entertainment district's look and feel as is currently the case at Lansdowne. For example, these would be ideal locations to permit projection signage and more extensive digital signage. Would the current approach to how the City regulates signage at Lansdowne serve as a model for dealing with signage in other entertainment districts?

Signage permitted in Lansdowne special sign district



Recognizing these distinctive areas from a signage perspective would enable the City to better customize sign requirements through differentiated sign regulations and facilitate a better correlation between City rules and guidelines/rules established by other entities (MTO, NCC, etc.). It would also encourage signage as a defining characteristic of these areas, supporting their uniqueness. Ensuring that signs in heritage districts are consistent with the overall design objectives for these areas contributes to honouring their history, maintaining their look and feel and avoiding visual discontinuity when inappropriate signage is juxtaposed with iconic landmarks. Encouraging new sign technologies in entertainment districts and areas such as Lansdowne may support their development and the concentration of similar activities, and reinforces their identity as bold, creative, modern and vibrant places.