



To: Rod Irwin, Assistant City Manager
From: Gina L. Clayton, Assistant Planning and Development Director
Date: October 10, 2014
RE: Response to Streetsense's 2010 Letter Regarding Sign Regulations

Sent Via E-Mail

Per your request please find the Planning and Development Department's responses to the questions/concerns raised by Streetsense about the City's sign ordinance and Downtown Design Guidelines.

- 1. Prohibited Signs – Section 3-1803 – Sandwich Board Signs. Streetsense thought there was lack of clarity as to whether or not sandwich board signs were allowed but suggested that well designed and maintained sandwich board signs could enhance the overall retail experience.*

At the time the memo was prepared sidewalk signs were allowed in the Downtown. In 2012 the City Council amended the sign ordinance to permit sidewalk signs for retail and restaurant uses throughout the City. The revised ordinance provides for specific location requirements (5' from the building wall in Downtown) as well as design criteria. In developing the provisions with the Chamber of Commerce it was evident that most businesses prefer to buy stock sidewalk signs so design criteria was developed to ensure a certain level of quality for these signs. The provisions also allow for flexibility with regard to the design criteria "in order to achieve a creatively designed sign using a particular symbol or logo indicative of the type of business and services being advertised." To date, no business has requested flexibility to do a creative design that would contribute to the overall retail experience. No special process or fee is associated with requesting this flexibility.

- 2. Section 3-1804.5 General Standards – The light which illuminates a sign shall be shaded, shielded, or directed so that no structure, including sign supports or awnings are illuminated by such lighting. Streetsense recommended that lighting may be directed so that signage on awnings may be illuminated, but care must also be taken to avoid lighting awnings support structures.*

The Planning and Development Department would agree that awnings that are front-lit are appropriate. Back-lit awning would be inappropriate and would require the entire awning to be counted as signage pursuant to the definition of sign structure.

3. *Section 3-1805 – Attached Menu Signs of no more than 4 square feet of sign face located at the entrance or service window of a restaurant. Streetsense questioned whether menu boards and accompanying signs count toward the total allowed sign area.*

A menu board is allowed without a permit and does not count toward the total allowed sign area for a particular storefront.

4. *Section 3-1805 – Signs permitted without a permit. In the Downtown District, one sandwich board sign for each business, but no more than two per lot. Streetsense thought these were not permitted based on Section 3-1803.1 and questioned why there was a limit on the number of signs. It also indicated that every retailer should be entitled to a sandwich board sign provided the sign is designed to match the retailer’s storefront aesthetic. Generic sandwich board signs should not be permitted.*

As indicated in the response to #1 above, the Chamber of Commerce desired an ordinance that supported the use of generic sandwich board signs. A flexibility provision was included in the ordinance to allow for creativity but no business has exercised that provision to date.

5. *Section 3-1806.3 – Permitted signs requiring development review – the following signs shall be permitted in all non-residential districts: a. One attached sign per business establishment. Streetsense didn’t review the definition of “attached” and thought the provision was restrictive. It wanted to know if multiple signs were permitted for a storefront if they vary in type. For example is a retailer permitted to have a wall-mounted sign, a projecting or blade sign and a menu board provided the maximum allowable signage area for the retailer is not exceeded? Are corner tenants allowed signage on both storefronts?*

Streetsense indicated that retailers should be encouraged to design their signage as an integral part of their storefront and should be encouraged to include multiple signage types. The total area of these signs should be less than or equal to an area permitted for all types of signage for a given storefront. Corner tenants should be allowed some signage on their secondary frontage, but not as much as allowed on the primary storefront.

The sign code permits a business to have one attached sign which could be either a wall sign, projecting/blade sign, hanging sign, or awning sign (corner properties are allow one sign on each façade abutting a street). Additionally, a business could erect the following:

- Window signage up to 25% of the total window area fronting a right-of-way provided all window signs do not exceed 50 square feet on any façade facing a street;
- A 16 square foot sign in the vicinity of a rear entrance if the business has a rear façade facing a parking lot with a rear entrance;

- A graphic element could be incorporated on an awning in addition to the allowable attached signage provided the awning is not back-lit and the graphic does not exceed 25% of the awning area or 16 square feet, whichever is less. This provision is intended to allow businesses flexibility to provide an attractive and interesting element to their building;
- 4 square foot menu sign for a restaurant; and
- Sidewalk sign for retail and restaurant uses 42 inches in height and 24 inches in width.

Increases in the number of signs and sign area may be requested through the Comprehensive Sign Program which is a design-based program focused on creativity and quality.

6. *3-1806.3 - Permitted signs requiring development review. The following signs shall be permitted in all non-residential districts: a. one attached sign per business establishment. The area of an attached sign face shall not exceed: i. One square foot per 100 square feet of building façade facing the street frontage to which the sign is to be attached. Streetsense asked if the calculation is based on the entire building or just the area of the storefront. It recommended that the City consider revising the calculation to be linked to the tenant's linear frontage. For example, consider allowing two square feet of signage for each linear foot of storefront.*

In 2012 the Planning and Development Department worked with the Chamber of Commerce and Business Task Force in developing amendments to the sign ordinance that replaced the formula outlined above which essentially limited sign area to a minimum of 20 feet to a maximum of 24 square feet. The new minimum sign standards allow 24 square feet by right for any type of sign through a building permit or sign area equal to 3% of the building (or tenant) façade area up to 36 square feet if a higher quality of signage is proposed such as channel letters mounted directly on the building, illuminated capsule signs, contour cabinet signs, etc. This additional sign area is allowed through a sign permit and does not require review and approval through the Comprehensive Sign Program application. The 3% option focuses on quality and creativity. Additional sign area or number of signs can be requested through the Comprehensive Sign Program if this is deemed insufficient by the business owner. Several Downtown businesses have used this process to erect additional signage such as Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts among others.

7. *Section 3-1806.3.b. – Attached signs – Signs shall be designed according to a common theme including similar style, color, materials or other characteristics to provide a sense of uniformity. Streetsense questioned why signage in a building with multiple tenants be designed to a common theme as signage is an integral part of a retailer's storefront and should be a visible expression of that retailer's identity. Requiring conformity to a particular style or aesthetic as one would expect in a typical strip shopping center is counter-productive to the goal of creating a dynamic and vibrant retail district. Streetsense recommended that tenants should be guided toward quality materials and quality design rather than a storefront that looks like their neighbors.*

The Planning and Development Department agrees with Streetsense's recommendation that quality materials and quality design should be emphasized. The Department recognizes that retailers want to distinguish themselves and does not require the use of the same exact colors, fonts, etc. in properties with multiple tenants. These type of properties have the visual impact of a single entity so Staff works with them to achieve points of agreement such as the same type of sign e.g. flush mounted channel letters, etc. but does not requires the fonts and colors to be the same, etc. These points of agreement can achieve the intent of the code while allowing the retailer to express their identity.

8. *3-1806.3.c. – Projecting signs may be used as a type of attached sign in the Downtown and Tourist District. Streetsense questioned if a projecting sign is permitted in conjunction with other types of signs, and if so is such a combination of signs bound by the 20 sf – 24 sf range.*

This sign provision allows a projecting sign to be used as a permitted attached sign. As the Code allows one attached sign through a building (sign) permit, the projecting sign would be allowed in lieu of another type of attached sign. Streetsense recommended that retailers be encouraged to include multiple sign types. This can be achieved in Downtown and the rest of Clearwater through a Comprehensive Sign Program application which requires design review to ensure the use of quality design and materials as advocated by Streetsense.

9. *3-1807.C.1.a and b – Comprehensive Sign Program Flexibility Criteria – The signs proposed in a comprehensive sign program shall be designed as part of the architectural theme of the principal building proposed or developed on the parcel proposed for development and shall be constructed of materials and colors which reflect integrated architectural vocabulary for the parcel proposed for development; or b. The design, character, location and/or materials of all freestanding and attached signs proposed in a comprehensive sign program shall be demonstrably more attractive than signs otherwise permitted on the parcel proposed for development under the minimum signs standards. All signs must be architecturally integrated into/with the design of the building and/or site using similar and coordinated design features, materials and colors, etc.*

Streetsense believes this section unnecessarily limits a retail tenant's opportunity for creative expression in their storefront and signage package. An emphasis on quality design and materials should take precedence over uniformity if one hopes to create a dynamic and unique shopping district. Its recommendation was that an emphasis be placed on guiding each tenant to quality materials and quality design. Storefronts which are too similar in character should, in fact, be discouraged. National tenants should be encouraged to go above and beyond their standard design and details in a special retail district. It is the level of quality and variety of storefronts that makes for a unique pedestrian experience.

The focus of the Comprehensive Sign Program is on quality design and materials. The goal is not to make every tenant sign look alike but to incentivize creative, attractive and quality signage. Rarely does the Department receive an application that proposes creative signage.

National retailers resist changes to their standard sign sizes and designs. Small businesses typically rely on the sign contractor/manufacturer to design the sign for them instead of a graphic designer. Without a creative/interesting logo, a sign's appearance is apt to be mundane.

10. Downtown Design Guidelines – Streetsense felt there are fewer questionable clauses in the Downtown Design Guidelines than with the sign code, but thought there seems to be an overall predisposition toward a homogenous retail expression. Some of the issues that stood out to Streetsense were as follows:

Bulkheads below windows – why are they necessary at every storefront?

Vibrant colors – why should these be prohibited, especially in storefronts?

Metal canopies and awnings – why are these prohibited?

Sandwich Board Signs – why are these prohibited?

Storefronts in historic structures – if the overall architectural integrity of the historic building is maintained, why must the storefront be of a historic nature as well?

Streetsense suggested that the first three items above limit the creative expression of a retailer in their storefront design. Furthermore it indicated that if quality materials are used in a thoughtful manner, any of these can help a storefront stand out from its neighbors and contribute to the overall streetscape. A modern storefront in a historic structure can be – if done well – quite striking and an overall positive for the pedestrian experience.

The Design Guidelines specify that bulkheads below display windows are appropriate based on the architectural style of the building; therefore they are not required on every building. There is no provision in the Design Guidelines that prohibits vibrant colors. Garish, gaudy, loud, excessive colors are considered inappropriate as well as using the deepest tones of the color wheel for the main body of the building. Awning and canopies are not prohibited; however, awnings made of high-gloss or fabrics which appear to be plastic are inappropriate. As discussed above sidewalk signs are now permitted. If a building is designated as a historic structure by City Council action, renovations must comply with the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation. These standards require the historic character of the building to be retained and preserved. Any change to a storefront would need to be reviewed for compliance with the Standards.

Since the Downtown Plan was adopted in 2003 I thought it would be helpful to know that the Design Guidelines were developed in conjunction with a steering committee comprised of representatives from the Main Street Program Committee, Downtown Development Board, Chamber of Commerce, affected neighborhood associations, business owners, local architects and contractors over a 7 month period. A total of 11 committee meetings were held and prior to the adoption process staff presented draft guidelines to the City Council on four occasions and once to the entire Main Street Committee, the Downtown Development Board, and the Community Development Code.

As indicated above, the Clearwater sign ordinance and the Downtown Design Guidelines focus on quality design, quality materials, creativity, as well as recognize there are multiple design solutions for any particular project. The issue seems to be there is a disconnect with the implementation of each. Our experience is that quality requirements are typically seen as obstacles and not objectives. It has also been our experience no renovation proposal has been made that mirrors the creativity and quality that Streetsense advocates.

If you need any additional information please let me know.