



Watertown City Council  
Monday, August 14, 2017  
7:00 p.m.

WORK SESSION AGENDA

Discussion Item:

Sign Ordinance

City of Watertown, NY  
Wednesday, August 9, 2017.

## Chapter 310. Zoning

### Article VIII. Miscellaneous Provisions

#### § 310-52.2. Signs.

[Added 6-17-1996]

- A. Purpose. The purpose of this section is to promote and protect the public health, safety and welfare by regulating exterior signs while allowing equitable use of the public environs to communicate necessary business and public information. It is intended to protect property values, create a more attractive economic and business atmosphere and protect the physical appearance of the community. It is further intended to reduce sign or advertising distractions and obstructions that may contribute to traffic accidents and reduce hazards that may be caused by signs overhanging or projecting over public rights-of-way.
- B. Application of regulations.
- (1) Scope. These standards and regulations shall apply to all signs within the boundaries of the City of Watertown, New York. No sign shall be installed or maintained, including such signs by the City, except in conformity with the provisions of this section.
  - (2) Nonconforming signs. Nonconforming signs which have permits issued by the Zoning Enforcement Officer before the effective date of this section may continue in use subject to the following conditions:
    - (a) Nonconforming signs may remain in use as long as the occupant for which they are established continues to occupy the premises and the sign remains in structurally sound condition. Upon an occupant vacating the premises, whether the occupant's nonconforming sign is structurally sound or not, the property owner shall cause the removal of all nonconforming signs, sign supports and attendant hardware used by the former occupant, except that any supports or hardware used in common with existing signs used by remaining occupants may remain.
    - (b) No additional sign(s) shall be permitted where the total surface area allowed for the parcel is exceeded.
    - (c) Nonconforming signs shall not be changed or altered in any manner except for maintenance. The maintenance shall not increase its nonconformity.
  - (3) Interpretation. Where the provisions of this section are inconsistent or conflicting, the most restrictive provision shall apply.
- C. Administration.
- (1) Sign permit required.

- (a) A permit shall be obtained by the property owner from the Zoning Enforcement Officer before the installation of any sign allowed with a permit may commence.
  - (b) No sign permit shall be required for maintenance.
  - (c) A building permit shall not constitute approval for signage. A sign permit is required for the installation of a sign in addition to any building permit issued.
- (2) Master signage plan.
- (a) For new developments or redevelopments, no sign permit shall be issued for any sign allowed with a permit until a master signage plan for the parcel on which the sign will be installed has been submitted by the parcel owner and approved by the Zoning Enforcement Officer as conforming with this section. A master signage plan is optional for all other parcels.
  - (b) The master signage plan shall contain the following:
    - [1] An accurate plot plan of the parcel (elevation drawings may also be required).
    - [2] Location of buildings, structures, parking lots, driveways, sidewalks, site utilities and landscaped areas on such parcel.
    - [3] Computation of the maximum total sign area, the allocation of sign area for each occupant and the height of signs allowed on the parcel.
    - [4] An accurate indication on the plan(s) of the location of all planned signs.
- (3) Application for a sign permit. Application for a sign permit shall be made on forms provided by the Zoning Enforcement Officer and shall be signed by the owner of the real property or be accompanied by an affidavit of the owner that such work is authorized. The applicant shall provide any additional information as may be determined necessary by the Zoning Enforcement Officer for processing such application. Each application may be for one (1) or more signs.
- (4) Fee. Each application for a sign permit must be accompanied by the fee as established at least annually by the Watertown City Council through a budget resolution that adopts a City Fees and Charges Schedule. Such schedule shall be available to the public at the office of the Watertown City Clerk.  
[Amended 9-19-2016]
- (5) Issuance of a sign permit. Upon filing of an application for a sign permit and submission of the appropriate fee, the Zoning Enforcement Officer shall determine whether the proposed sign(s) is in compliance with the requirements of this section and other ordinances and laws of the City. If it shall appear that the proposed sign(s) complies with all applicable requirements, the Zoning Enforcement Officer shall within five (5) business days from the filing of the completed application, issue a sign permit for the proposed sign(s). If the sign(s) authorized under any such permit has not been completed within two (2) months from the issuance of such permit, the permit shall expire.
- (6) Violations.
- (a) Installation of a sign without a permit or not in conformity with the requirements of this section, constitutes a violation. It is also a violation not to maintain a sign to the standards set in this section. Each day of nonconformance or substandard maintenance constitutes a separate violation.
  - (b)

The Zoning Enforcement Officer shall give written notice specifying the nature of the violation to the owner of the land upon which the nonconforming sign is located. The owner shall then cause such sign to be brought into conformance, including obtaining the proper permit, or removed within fifteen (15) days of the date of service of the notice.

- (c) If a sign is not brought into conformance or removed by the owner by the specified time given in the notice, the City may seek an injunction in a court of competent jurisdiction requiring that the sign be removed or may seek a penalty of two hundred fifty dollars (\$250.) per day of violation after the time within which to cure the violation has passed, or both.
  - (d) In any action to compel compliance with this section or to seek monetary penalties for violation of this section, the property owner shall pay, in addition thereto, the City's reasonable attorneys' fees and costs and disbursements in compelling compliance with this section.
- (7) City removal. The Zoning Enforcement Officer may cause any sign to be removed without notice to the owner of the property when it is the source of imminent danger to persons or property. The Zoning Enforcement Officer may cause any sign to be removed, without notice to anyone, if it is placed upon public property without a sign license agreement.
- D. Definitions. Certain words and terms shall have the following meanings:

**BUILDING FRONTAGE**

The first floor building elevation(s) facing a public street. In the case where the principal entrance(s) of the building(s) is oriented toward a parking lot, the elevation containing the principal entrance may be selected by the owner as the "building frontage," instead of the elevation(s) facing a public street.

**BUILDING SIGN**

Any sign attached to any part of a building, including windows.

**COMMERCE CENTER**

Any building containing four (4) or more contiguous stores, businesses, industrial or commercial spaces or tenants or where a lesser number of tenant spaces total not less than twenty thousand (20,000) square feet of gross leasable area.

**DIRECTIONAL SIGN**

A sign of a noncommercial nature which directs the reader to the location of public or educational institutions, historical structures or areas, or public parks, buildings or parking.

**FREESTANDING SIGN**

Any sign not attached to any part of a building, but affixed by any other means in or upon the ground.

**INCIDENTAL SIGNS**

A sign, generally informational, that has a purpose secondary to the primary use on the parcel, such as "no parking," "entrance," "loading only," "telephone" and other similar directives.

**INFORMATIONAL SIGN**

A sign of a noncommercial nature which provides the reader with information about the community or a community not-for-profit agency.

**INSTALLATION**

The act of placing, erecting or painting a sign, moving a sign or replacing a sign board with another. This term does not include repainting an existing sign, painting a new message over an existing sign or replacing the panel in a lighted sign box with the same type of material.

**MAINTENANCE**

The act of keeping a sign in the state of good repair, including repainting (whether with the same message or a new message), replacing the panel in a lighted box with the same type of material, bulb replacement and repair of electrical and structural parts.

**NONCONFORMING SIGN**

A sign existing before the effective date of this section which would otherwise not be allowed under the terms of this section.

**OCCUPANT**

An entity residing or doing business on a parcel. In the case of a single unit residential use, the entity is the household; for residential uses with more than one unit, the entity is the property owner; for a commercial or industrial use, the entity is the business whether it be a sole proprietorship, partnership or corporation; and in the case of a not-for-profit, the entity is the corporation.

**PARCEL**

All adjoining land owned by the same person and used for a single use or development.

**REDEVELOPMENT**

A project that substantially renovates and reuses a previously vacant or nearly vacant building.

**SANDWICH-BOARD SIGN**

A portable sign constructed in such a way that two sign boards connected at the top and angled so that the boards are freestanding.

**SIGN**

Any representation used to identify, advertise or promote the interests of any person or business when such sign is placed in the view of the general public out of doors or on the exterior of any building or structure, including interior and exterior window surfaces. "Representation" shall include any lettered or pictorial matter, including letters, words, symbols, emblems and insignias and the structure or device or part thereof which displays such representation. It does not include customary window display of products.

**SIGN STRUCTURE**

The supports, uprights, bracing, backing and framework for a sign, as distinguished from the facade or structural components of a building.

**WINDOW SIGN**

A sign which is painted or affixed on glass or other window material or placed within 12 inches of the window, but not including graphics in connection with customary window display of products or services rendered on the premises.

**ZONING ENFORCEMENT OFFICER**

The Zoning Enforcement Officer is the City Engineer or his designated subordinate.

- E. General prohibitions. The prohibitions listed below shall apply to all signs in all zoning districts in the City.

(1)

Hazards to public safety. Signs shall not be located in such a manner as to restrict vision of vehicular traffic or impair safety. Signs which by their use or simulation of colors, design or placement, tend to confuse, detract from or in any other way obstruct the utilization of traffic regulatory devices are prohibited.

- (2) Illumination. In no event shall an illuminated sign or lighting device be so placed or so directed as to permit the beams or illumination therefrom to be directed so as to cause glare or reflection upon a public street, sidewalk or adjacent privately owned premises.
  - (3) Public property. No sign shall be placed or erected on or over any City-owned property without first obtaining written approval in the form of a license agreement from the City Manager in addition to any required permit. Proof of liability insurance coverage is required in a form acceptable to the City Manager. Current minimum coverage requirements may be obtained from the Zoning Enforcement Officer.
- F. Signs allowed without a permit. The following signs are allowed on each parcel in any zoning district without a sign permit in addition to the signs allowed with a permit:
- (1) Nameplates. One nameplate and/or address sign, not exceeding one square foot in area.
  - (2) Temporary signs. Temporary signs of the following nature:
    - (a) One nonilluminated sign advertising the sale, rental or real estate open house of the premises or a garage sale or auction on the premises upon which the sign is located, not to exceed 10 square feet. Such sign shall be removed within 10 days after completion of the event or sale.
    - (b) One nonilluminated sign denoting the architect, engineer or contractor, placed on the premises where construction, repair or renovation is in progress, not exceeding 32 square feet in area. Such sign shall be removed within 10 days after completion of the project.
    - (c) Signs which are designed exclusively to inform the general public of a fundraising campaign, political campaign, social event, civic undertaking, annual festivity or related enterprise of a temporary nature sponsored by a nonprofit organization or governmental unit. Such sign shall be removed within 10 days after completion of the event.
  - (3) Traffic control signs. Traffic control signs and on-site parking lot directional signs.
  - (4) Amenity signs. Small unobtrusive amenity signs, including but not limited to, "Restrooms," "Office," etc. not to exceed one-half (1/2) square foot in area.
  - (5) Historical markers. Historical markers, tablets and statues, memorial signs and plaques; names of buildings and dates of erection when cut into any masonry surface or when constructed of bronze, stainless steel, aluminum or similar material, not exceeding six square feet.
  - (6) Public parks. Within City-owned public park and recreation lands there may be 100 square feet of sign area along external public streets. Signs that are more than 100 feet from an external public street are considered to be for internal use and are not restricted by a size limit.  
[Added 5-19-1997]
- G. Signs allowed with a permit. All signs which are not classified under "General prohibitions" or "Signs allowed without a permit" are considered "signs allowed with a permit" and are subject to the following requirements.

- (1) Allowed sign surface area.
  - (a) A parcel is allowed a total sign surface area not to exceed two square feet for each linear foot of building frontage. The total sign surface area may be allocated to the occupants of the parcel in any manner, except in no case shall the allocation per occupant exceed the maximum sign surface area listed in the following table:  
[Amended 1-6-1997; 3-17-2008; 6-6-2011]

<b>District</b>	<b>Occupant Maximum Sign Surface Area (square feet)</b>
Residence A, B and C	4
Limited Business	35
Neighborhood Business	75
Downtown Core Overlay	100
Commercial	200
Downtown	100
Health Services	200
Light and Heavy Industrial	200
Open Space and Recreation	200
Waterfront	100

- (b) In all districts, except Residence A, B and C, each occupant located above the ground floor level of a multistory building is allowed window signs covering 50% of the window surface area of the space occupied by the business. This allowed window sign surface area is in addition to the total sign surface area allowed.
- (c) In all districts, except Residence A, B and C, additional sign surface area is allowed on each parcel for directional and informational signs. One directional sign, not to exceed four square feet, and one informational sign, not to exceed 32 square feet, are allowed per parcel.
- (d) In Residence A, B and C Districts, churches, schools and other allowed institutions may have additional sign surface area of not more than 36 square feet.
- (e) In Residence A, B and C Districts, subdivisions and multifamily dwellings may have additional sign surface area of not more than 16 square feet for each street on which it has a frontage.
- (f) In Planned Development Districts, unless signs are addressed in the regulations adopted at the creation of the PDD, as amended, the sign regulations within this section pertaining to Commercial Districts shall apply to commercial uses and sign regulations within this section pertaining to Residential Districts shall apply to residential uses.
- (g) Commerce centers shall be allowed additional sign surface area to identify the center, up to the maximum per parcel for each district in the chart below:  
[Amended 3-17-2008; 6-6-2011]

<b>District</b>	<b>Commerce Center ID Maximum Sign Area (square feet)</b>
Limited Business	10

<b>District</b>	<b>Commerce Center ID Maximum Sign Area (square feet)</b>
Neighborhood Business	15
Downtown Core Overlay	20
Commercial	100
Downtown District	20
Light and Heavy Industrial	100

- (2) Computation of sign surface area.
- (a) For each sign, the surface area shall be that area within a single continuous perimeter enclosing the extreme limits of writing, representation, emblem or any figure of similar character, as included within the definition of a sign. The surface area shall also include any frame or other material or color forming an integral part of the display or differentiates such sign from the background against which it is placed. The supporting sign structure shall not be included in the computation of sign surface area.
  - (b) The surface area of letters, numbers and common symbols (i.e., #, \$, &, +) applied directly upon a wall, window or awning without a backing board or border shall be computed by drawing a single rectangle around the letters, numbers and common symbols in the sign. The sides of this rectangle will touch the top, bottom and sides of the letters, numbers and common symbols. The square footage of this rectangle will be the sign surface area.
  - (c) The total sign surface area shall be the combined surface areas of all signs categorized as "signs allowed with a permit" located upon a parcel, except those allowed as additional surface area.
  - (d) For signs with two faces not more than 24 inches apart and back to back, only one face (the largest) shall be used in calculating the surface area.
- (3) Requirements specific to sign type. The following regulations apply to the specific type of sign under which they are listed:
- (a) Building signs.
    - [1] Building signs shall be located on flat, unornamented surfaces. No part of the sign's supports or braces shall be affixed to any parapet cornice or any exterior trim.
    - [2] Building signs shall not extend above the roof line or parapet, if one exists, whichever is higher.
    - [3] No part of a sign projecting from a building shall extend into a vehicular traffic area.
    - [4] Any sign projecting more than six inches from a building face and over a pedestrian area shall have a minimum clearance of eight feet, except awnings which shall have a minimum clearance of seven feet six inches.
  - (b) Freestanding signs.
    - [1]

Freestanding signs allowed with a permit are prohibited in Residence A, B and C Districts, except for churches, schools, other allowed institutions, subdivision identification and multifamily dwelling identification.

- [2] The top of a freestanding sign shall be no greater than 20 feet above the ground in every district except commercial. The top of a freestanding sign in a commercial district shall be no greater than 50 feet above the ground.
- [3] Freestanding signs over pedestrian paths must have an eight-foot vertical clearance.
- [4] No part of a freestanding sign shall extend over a vehicular path.
- [5] No freestanding sign shall extend beyond property lines.
- [6] There shall be no more than one freestanding sign structure per parcel.

(c) Sandwich-board signs.

- [1] Sandwich-board signs allowed with a permit are prohibited in Residence A, B, and C Districts.
- [2] The top of a sandwich-board sign shall be no more than four feet above the ground.
- [3] The surface area of a sandwich-board sign shall be no greater than 12 square feet.
- [4] The owner of a sandwich-board sign shall have a sign permit and a license agreement with the City in order to place such a sign on any public property, including sidewalks.
- [5] If a sandwich-board sign is to be placed on a sidewalk, it shall not be any wider than 20% of the width of the sidewalk on which it is to be placed.
- [6] All sandwich-board signs shall be removed from public property after business hours.

H. Construction standards.

- (1) Securely anchored. All signs shall be securely anchored.
- (2) Electrical inspection. All signs employing electrical components, including the power source, shall be inspected and approved by an authorized electrical inspection agency.
- (3) Electrical components. All transformers, wires and similar items shall be concealed.
- (4) Sign stability. All exterior signs, other than sandwich and mobile signs, shall be designed to withstand a wind pressure of at least 30 pounds per square feet of surface area. Pole-mounted signs shall have a support and foundation adequate to cause the sign to be freestanding. The Zoning Enforcement Officer may require that appropriate calculations, certified by a licensed professional engineer, be submitted prior to the issuance of a sign permit.
- (5) Materials. Signs shall be erected and/or fabricated in accordance with generally accepted standards.
- (6) Maintenance. All signs, sign finishes, supports, and electric work shall be kept in good repair and free from all hazards.