



SAN FRANCISCO
PLANNING
DEPARTMENT

GENERAL PLANNING INFORMATION

Signs

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Date:
November 2012

Subject:
Sign Controls, Planning Code Article 6

Introduction

The San Francisco General Plan sets forth a comprehensive set of policies that intend to guide, control, and regulate growth and development. Zoning law which implements these principles are codified in the San Francisco Planning Code in order to promote and protect public health, safety, peace, morals, comfort, convenience and general welfare of San Francisco and its residents. Sign controls are found predominately in Article 6 of the Planning Code and exist for the following reason:

- To safeguard and enhance property values in residential, commercial and industrial areas.
- To protect public investment in and the character and dignity of public buildings.
- To protect open spaces and thoroughfares.
- To protect the distinctive appearance of San Francisco due to its unique geography, topography, street patterns, skyline and architectural features.
- To provide an environment that promotes the development of business in the City.
- To encourage sound practices and lessen objectionable effects in respect to size and placement of signs.
- To aid in the attraction of tourists and other visitors who are so important to the economy of the City and County.
- To reduce hazards to motorists and pedestrians traveling on the public way; and thereby to promote the public health, safety and welfare.

In order to accomplish the purposes stated above, a permit is required to install, replace, reconstruct, expand, intensify, or relocate any sign unless it is specifically exempted from the regulations. Signs must conform to the provisions set forth in Article 6 and other applicable sections of the Planning Code.

Sign Definitions

Definition of a Sign

A sign is defined as any structure, part thereof, or device or inscription which is located upon, attached to, or painted, projected or represented on any land or right-of-way, or on the outside of any building or structure including an awning, canopy, marquee or similar appendage, or affixed to the glass on the outside or inside of a window so as to be seen from the outside of the building, and which displays or includes any numeral, letter, word, model, banner, emblem, insignia, symbol, device, light, trademark, or other representation used as, or in the nature of, an announcement, advertisement, attention-arrester, direction, warning, or designation by or of any person, firm, group, organization, place, commodity, product, service, business, profession, enterprise or industry.

Business Sign

A sign which directs attention to a business, commodity, service, industry or other activity which is sold, offered, or conducted, other than incidentally, on the premises upon which such sign is located, or to which it is affixed.

Identifying Sign

An identifying sign is a sign for a use listed in Article 2 of the Planning Code as either a principal or a conditional use permitted in an R District, regardless of the district in which the use itself may be located. Such sign serves to tell only the name, address and lawful use of the premises upon which the sign is located, or to which it is affixed. A bulletin board of a public, charitable or religious institution, used to display announcements relative to meetings to be held on the premises, shall be deemed an identifying sign.

General Advertising Sign

A General Advertising Sign is a sign, legally erected prior to the effective date of Section 611 of the Planning Code, which directs attention to a business, commodity, industry or other activity which is sold, offered or conducted elsewhere than on the premises upon which sign is located, or to which it is affixed, and which is sold, offered or conducted on such premises only incidentally if at all.

No new general advertising signs shall be permitted at any location within the City and County of San Francisco as of March 5, 2002, when voters approved Proposition G.



Example of a business sign



Example of an identifying sign



Example of a general advertising sign

Automobile Service Stations

There are special standards for automobile service stations. Generally two oil company signs are permitted per site with varying height and area determined by proximity to a property line and the zoning district the property is located in.

Nonconforming Sign

If a sign was lawfully installed but no longer conforms to the requirements of the Planning Code, it may continue to remain but can not be replaced, intensified, or expanded in any way except to conform to current standards. A change in copy of a nonconforming sign is only allowed if it is for the same business, otherwise it would be considered a new sign and would need to be made conforming. A nonconforming sign that is voluntarily removed may not be replaced. However, if a sign is destroyed by fire or other calamity it may be replaced subject to the criteria set forth in Sections 181(d) and 188(b) of the Planning Code.



Example of a gas station, free standing sign

Sign Types



Example of a wall sign

Wall Sign

A sign painted directly on the wall or placed flat against a building wall with its copy parallel to the wall to which it is attached and not protruding more than the thickness of the sign cabinet. The sign cabinet can not be thicker than necessary to accommodate the electrical box. This is thought to be no more than one foot. One must show such necessity to provide an electrical box thicker than one foot.

A window sign could be a wall sign if the wall is completely made of glass. Typically wall signs are located above the storefront transom. Wall signs consisting of individual letters mounted to the building facade are encouraged; large, opaque sign panels behind individual letters are discouraged.

Wall signs should be centered on horizontal surfaces, within bays or over storefront openings and should not extend above, below, or beyond the storefront the related business occupies.



Example of a projecting sign

Projecting Sign

A projecting business sign extends beyond a street property line or a building setback line. A sign placed flat against a wall of a building parallel to a street or alley shall not be deemed to project for purposes of this definition. A sign on an awning, canopy or marquee shall be deemed to project to the extent that such sign extends beyond a street property line or a building setback line.

Sign on Awnings or Marquees

A sign on an awning or marquee is another type of a projecting sign. Awnings, canopies and marquees are defined in Article 7 of the Planning Code, and regulated by Section 136.1 of the same code, and they may not be allowed in certain zoning districts.

A sign on an awning, canopy or marquee shall be considered to project to the extent that such sign extends beyond a street property line or a building setback line. Since awnings and marquees have many faces, all sign copy on each face shall be computed within one rectangular perimeter formed by extending lines around the extreme limits of writing, representation, or any figure of similar character depicted on the surface of the face of the awning or marquee.



Example of an awning sign

Window Sign

A sign painted directly on the surface of a window glass or placed in front of or behind the surface of a window glass. Generally frontages with active uses that are not residential or PDR must be fenestrated with transparent windows and doorways for no less than 60 percent of the street frontage at the ground level and allow visibility to the inside of the building. The installation of any window sign must comply with these transparency requirements.



Example of a window sign

Freestanding Sign

A freestanding sign is supported by columns or post and is in no part supported by a building. Height limitations for freestanding signs vary by zoning district. Freestanding signs for automobile service stations have separate and distinct regulations from other freestanding business signs.



Example of a freestanding sign

Roof Sign

A sign or any portion thereof erected or painted on or over the roof covering any portion of a building, and either supported on the roof or on an independent structural frame or sign tower, or located on the side or roof of a penthouse, roof tank, roof shed, elevator housing or other roof structure.



Example of a roof sign

Illumination



Example of a nonilluminated sign



Example of an indirectly illuminated sign



Example of a directly illuminated sign

The character of signs and other features projecting from buildings are an important part of the visual appeal of a street and the general quality and economic stability of neighborhoods. Opportunities exist to relate these signs and projections more effectively to street design and building design.

Physical characteristics of signs set them apart. Whether signs are directly illuminated, indirectly illuminated, nonilluminated, projecting, single or multiple, at the appropriate height or contained in the adequate area, the physical features set signs apart not only from each other, but also from where they are or not allowed.

Methods and Standards of Illumination

- Signs should appear to be indirectly illuminated.
- Text logos should be individually illuminated.
- Lighting conduits should be internal and not visible.
- Signs should have an opaque background that does not transmit light with the text and logos individually illuminated.
- There should be no flash or display animation, or moving text on a sign.
- In order to reduce the depth and profile of a sign, the transformer should be located in a remote location and not housed within the sign itself.
- A sign may also be reduced in profile or depth by using a light emitting diodes ("LED") method of illumination. For more information on LED lighting, please contact your sign contractor.

Nonilluminated Sign

A sign which is not illuminated, either directly or indirectly.

Indirectly Illuminated Sign

A sign illuminated with a light directed primarily toward such sign and so shielded that no direct rays from the light are visible elsewhere than on the lot where said illumination occurs. If not effectively so shielded, such sign shall be deemed to be a directly illuminated sign.

Directly Illuminated Sign

A sign designed to give forth artificial light directly (or through transparent or translucent material) from a source of light within such sign, including but not limited to neon and exposed lamp signs.

How to Measure Signs

Area of a Sign

The entire area within a single continuous rectangular perimeter formed by extending lines around the extreme limits of writing, representation, emblem, or any figure of similar character, including any frame or other material or color forming an integral part of the display or used to differentiate such sign from the background against which it is placed; excluding the necessary supports or uprights on which such sign is placed but including any sign tower. Where a sign has two or more faces, the area of all faces shall be included in determining the area of the sign, except that where two such faces are placed back to back and are at no point more than two feet from one another, the area of the sign shall be taken as the area of one face if the two faces are of equal area, or as the area of the larger face if the two faces are of unequal area.

Height of a Sign

The vertical distance from the uppermost point used in measuring the area of a sign to the ground immediately below such point or to the level of the upper surface of the nearest curb of a street, alley or highway (other than a structurally elevated roadway), whichever measurement permits the greater elevation of the sign.

Projection

The horizontal distance by which the furthestmost point used in measuring the area of a sign extends beyond a street property line or a building setback line. A sign placed flat against a wall of a building parallel to a street or alley shall not be deemed to project for purposes of this definition. A sign on an awning, canopy or marquee shall be deemed to project to the extent that such sign extends beyond a street property line or a building setback line.



Vintage Signs, Signs on Historic Buildings & Signs in Historic Districts

Signs proposed for installation on historical, architectural and aesthetic landmarks, as well as in any historic or conservation district are subject to specialized review concerning design, materials, placement and number, and methods of illumination and attachment. Sign permits in historic districts must be accompanied by an Administrative Certificate of Appropriateness Application and sign permits in conservation districts must be accompanied by a Minor Permit to Alter Application.



Example of a historic sign

Historic Sign and Historic Sign Districts

A historic sign is a sign which depicts a land use, a business activity, a public activity, a social activity or historical figure or an activity or use that recalls the City's historic past, as permitted by Sections 303 and 608.14 of the Planning Code.

A historic sign district is a specific geographic area depicted on the Zoning Map of the City and County of San Francisco, pursuant to Section 302 of this Code, within which historic signs may be permitted by Conditional Use authorization by the Planning Commission pursuant to Sections 303 and 608.14 of the Planning Code.



Example of a vintage sign

Vintage Signs

Signs which depict in text or graphic form a particular residential, business, cultural, economic, recreational, or other valued resource which is deemed by the Planning Commission to be a cultural artifact that contributes to the visual identity and historic character of a City neighborhood can be designated and shall be considered a vintage sign and allowed to be restored, reconstructed, maintained and technologically improved on a property by Conditional Use authorization of the Planning Commission.



Example of a historic movie theater sign

Historic Movie Theater Projecting Sign

A Historic Movie Theater Sign is a projecting business sign attached to a Qualified Movie Theater, as defined in Section 188(e)(1) of the Planning Code. Such signs are typically characterized by (i) perpendicularity to the primary facade of the building, (ii) fixed display of the name of the establishment, often in large lettering descending vertically throughout the length of the sign; (iii) a narrow width that extends for a majority of the vertical distance of a building's facade, typically terminating at or slightly above the roofline, and (iv) an overall scale and nature such that the sign comprises a significant and character defining architectural feature of the building to which it is attached.

Historic Movie Theater Marquee Sign

A Historic Movie Theater Marquee Sign is a marquee, as defined in Section 790.58, attached to a Qualified Movie Theater, as defined in Section 188(e)(1).

Signs within Article 11 Conservation Districts

Introduction

Signs are a vital part of all Downtown businesses. They serve as markers and create individual identities for businesses. Storefront signs are often the most common feature to be modified.

Article 11 of the Planning Code is the basic law governing preservation of buildings and districts architectural importance in the C-3 Districts (mostly downtown) of San Francisco.

These following standards are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and are meant to provide tenants and property owners with clear design guidance for all new commercial signs. Conformance with these standards authorizes the Department to administratively approve signage without a Historic Preservation Commission public hearing. Please note that the Sign Standards will be used by the Department to evaluate all new sign permit applications and while only those proposals that meet the standards will be approved, the Department will review all proposals on a case-by-case basis.

The information within this document is divided into general requirements for all signs and those requirements that are specific to each type. The general requirements address materials, methods of attachments, and methods of illumination. Additional requirements by sign type are outlined to address size, number, and location. All subsections are meant to provide clear instructions to meet the minimum requirements of this document. There are also images to serve as examples and to better express the intent of the standards.



Map of Downtown Article 11 Historic Districts



The purpose of this document is to avoid overwhelming and confusing streetscapes as shown above. In this example the signs and awnings do not correspond well to the appropriate business, extend over bays and storefronts, and they obscure the architectural features of the buildings.

Requirements for Signs within Article 11 Conservation Districts



DO NOT EXTEND SIGN BEYOND OPENING WIDTH



DO NOT INSTALL BOX SIGNS WITH ACRYLIC LENSES



DO NOT OBSCURE GLAZING WITH LARGE SIGNAGE



KEEP SIGN WITHIN STOREFRONT WIDTH



USE INDIVIDUAL LETTERS



TEMPORARY SIGNS LESS THAN 25% OF GLASS

General Requirements

- Signs may not extend beyond the width of the storefront opening.
- Signage, painted on glass doors, windows, and transoms, where the sign does not exceed 25% of the glazed area, is permitted.
- Non-illuminated letters or logos may be pin-mounted into the masonry if it is mounted into the mortar joints.
- Reduce the depth of signs, by placing the transformer in a remote location and not housed within the sign itself.
- Signs may be pin-mounted on a thin raceway that is mounted flat and horizontally within the signband or spandrel.
- Signs that are located on the inside of a storefront should be setback a minimum of 6" from the display glass.
- Small identification signs or plaques for second and third story tenants installed adjacent to the ground floor entrances are permitted.

Not Permitted

- General advertising signs and banners;
- Internally illuminated box signs with glass or plastic lenses;
- Internally illuminated fabric signs or awnings; and flashing signs,
- Moving signs, strobe lights, or signs that project an image on a surface
- Signage above the architectural base of the building

Sign Permits

- Business signs may be permitted as of right, or with conditions depending on the zoning districts and depending on their features such as type, area, number, material, illumination, animation, etc.
- In conservation districts a sign permit must be accompanied by a Minor Permit to Alter Application. (Article 11)
- In historic districts, a sign permit must be accompanied by an Administrative Certificate of Appropriateness Application. (Article 10)

Number and Placement of Signs

- Scale of signs and placement on the building shall be appropriate to the elements of the building and historic applications.
- One sign per ground floor tenant may be permitted.
- In buildings with more than one ground floor commercial tenant, one sign per establishment is permitted.
- The placement of the sign shall be in close proximity to the establishment that is identified on the sign.
- A ground floor establishment with a corner storefront may have one sign on each building façade.
- Upper story establishments are allowed to have one sign adjacent to the building entrance.

Materials

- Signs shall be constructed of durable high-quality materials that retain their characteristics within a high-traffic area over time.
- Materials shall be compatible with the color, craftsmanship, and finishes associated with the district. Glossy or highly reflective surfaces will not be approved.

Method of Attachment

- All signs shall be attached in a manner that avoids damaging or obscuring any of the character-defining features associated with the subject building.
- For non-terra cotta masonry buildings, signs shall be anchored through mortar joints or attached to the jamb of a non-historic storefront system.
- Under no circumstances shall a sign be anchored to any cast iron or terra cotta elements of a building.



Example of one sign per store



Example of compatible and non-glossy sign materials



Example of sign attachment

- Signs shall be attached in a manner that allows for their removal without adversely impacting the exterior of the subject building.
- The visibility of conduit and raceways associated with a sign shall be minimized; however, if raceways must be exposed, they should be finished to match the facade or integrated into the overall design of the sign.

Methods of Illumination

- All signs shall appear to be indirectly illuminated or externally illuminated such as by installing an external fixture to illuminate the sign or by using a reverse channel halo-lit means of illumination.
- All signs shall have an opaque background that does not transmit light and text. Logos shall be individually illuminated.
- Unless a sign has been determined to be of historic significance, no sign or awning should flash or display animation or moving text.
- In order to reduce the depth and profile of a sign, the transformer should be located in a remote location and not housed within the sign itself.
- A sign may also be reduced in profile or depth by using a light emitting diode (LED) method of illumination. For more information on LED lighting please contact your sign contractor.
- All conduit required for all new signage must be concealed and may never be attached or left exposed on the face of the building, the sign structure, or the sign itself.



Example of an indirectly-lit sign with a shallow profile.

Projecting Signs

When used incorrectly, blade signs create visual clutter, overwhelm pedestrians and drivers with visual stimulation, and obscure or damage architectural details of the building. The standards below detail the various sizes and locations that generally respect the character of the district. All proposals will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Size and Placement

- Scale of signs and placement on the building shall be appropriate to the elements of the building and historic applications.
- Signs shall relate to the character-defining features of the building.
- Signs near the base of the building shall relate to the pedestrian scale.
- Signs shall not extend above the roof line.
- Covering, altering or obscuring architectural details or window openings shall be avoided.
- Projecting signs shall be located on or immediately adjacent to the storefronts corresponding to the business and shall not extend below, above, or across other storefronts or along a frontage associated with a different use.

Location

- Projecting signs may not be located above the window sill of the first residential floor of a building, nor shall any portion of a sign be located at a height above the lintel of the corresponding storefront, unless it has been determined by the Planning Department Preservation Staff or the Historic Preservation Commission that an alternate location is acceptable in order to avoid obscuring or adversely impacting the character-defining features of the subject building.
- Signs shall be located in an area that does not obscure any of the building's character-defining features.
- Important factors to be considered are:
 - The amount of linear street frontage occupied by the business
 - The overall character-defining features of the building
 - The width of the sidewalk
 - The number of adjacent existing and potential establishments within the subject building
 - The floor-to-ceiling height of the commercial space visible from the public right-of-way.



LEFT: These overscaled signs overpower the building and the storefront. This excessive application of signs is discouraged.

RIGHT: The blade sign is attached according to the standards; it is anchored through the mortar joints, avoiding damage to the masonry.

Wall Signs

Wall signs are commonly comprised of signboards or individual die-cut letters that run parallel to the facade of a building. Often paired with a blade sign, wall signs have increased in size and number throughout the districts. Today, there are a number of examples throughout the city where wall signs appear at an overwhelming scale and blanket significant architectural details. When used correctly, wall signs express individuality, attract customers, and respect the architectural features of the building. The standards below detail the various sizes and locations that generally respect the character of the district. In general, the size of wall signs will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Size and Placement

- Scale of signs and placement on the building shall be appropriate to the elements of the building and historic applications. Wall signs consisting of individual letters mounted to the facade are encouraged.
- Large opaque sign panels behind individual letters are discouraged.
- Wall signs covering, altering, or obscuring architectural details or window openings should be avoided.
- Wall signs that obscure, cover, damage, or alter architectural elements such as friezes, lintels, spandrels, and historic sign bands will not be approved.
- Wall signs shall be located at a height that relates to a pedestrian scale.
- Wall signs shall be centered on horizontal surfaces, within bays or over storefront openings and shall not extend above, below, or beyond the storefront the related business occupies.
- Wall signs shall maintain a physical separation between all tenant signage so that it is clear which signs relate directly to the respective business.

Location

- Wall signs shall be located in an area that does not obscure any of the character-defining features associated with the subject building.
- The location of wall signs allowed for any one establishment will be based on the following factors:
 - The amount of linear street frontage occupied by the business;
 - The cumulative number and location of business signs attached to the subject building, including all existing and proposed signage.



DO SCALE WALL SIGNS PROPORTIONATELY TO SIGN BANDS

This wall sign is centered on the storefront, scaled proportionally to sign band and does not alter any character-defining features. This treatment is recommended.

Sign Permits

Permits

Certain kinds of signs that do not require a permit are listed in Section 603 and the following list below:

- 1) Unless otherwise prohibited, a sign painted or repainted on a door or window in an NC, C, or M district.
- 2) Ordinary maintenance and minor repairs which do not involve replacement, alteration, reconstruction, relocation, intensification or expansion of the sign.
- 3) Temporary sale or lease signs, temporary signs of persons and firms connected with work on buildings under actual construction or alteration, and temporary business signs.
- 4) A mere change of copy on a sign the customary use of which involves frequent and periodic changes of copy (i.e. theater marquee). A change in copy for all other signs (including a change of business name), change from general advertising to business sign, and any increase in sign area shall constitute a new sign and require a permit.

A permit is needed to install, place, replace, reconstruct or relocate, expand, change business sign copy, intensify in illumination or other aspect, or expand in area or dimension for all signs. Sometimes a permit may not be required under the Building Code (i.e. painted non-illuminated or projecting signs up to 2.5 square feet) but is still required to be reviewed under the Planning Code.

Permit Application

When a permit is required for a sign, a permit should be filed with the Central Permit Bureau of the Department of Building Inspection together with a permit fee and the completed permit application shall be accompanied by construction documents that include the following :

- A plot plan that shows the location of the proposed sign as well as all other existing signs on the site and their dimensions. The length of the business frontage along the public right-of-way and sidewalk should be indicated.
- Scaled front and lateral elevation drawings of the building with the sign including the dimensions, materials, and any other required details of construction as necessary depending on sign type.
- Detailed drawings of the proposed sign copy.
- Photographs of the entire subject site.

Your application to install or alter a sign will not be reviewed if any of the above listed materials are missing.

Nothing in the sign regulations shall be deemed to permit any use of property that is otherwise prohibited by the Planning Code, or to permit any sign that is prohibited by the regulations of any special sign district or the standards or procedures of any Redevelopment Plan or any other Code or legal restriction.



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*Planning staff are available by phone and at the PIC counter.
No appointment is necessary.*