



Legislation Text

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Meeting Date: December 7, 2022

To: Members of the Heritage Preservation Commission

From: Reeve Needham, Assistant City Planner

Discussion on Signage Regulations within the Historic District.

Action Requested:

The Heritage Preservation Commission is asked to discuss the signage regulations within the Historic District.

Summary Report:

At the November HPC meeting, the HPC discussed signage requests and the sign code. Two signs were approved that did not meet the regulations in the Land Development Code (LDC). With this in mind, the HPC should consider amending the LDC regulations to provide more flexibility and consistent application of those regulations for all future applicants. The HPC is asked to critically examine the best practices for sign regulations and how the LDC regulations upholds or fails to uphold those practices. Ultimately, the goal of HPC sign regulation is to provide a clear, fair process for all applicants. Inconsistent application of the ordinance criteria leads to confusion and equity issues.

In looking to the National Park Service (NPS) for guidance in best practices, see the attached Preservation Brief. For new signs in the historic district, NPS recommends flexible regulations that encourage diversity in signage stating:

Yet many efforts to control signage lead to bland sameness. For this reason the National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that effectively dictate uniform signs within commercial districts. Instead, it encourages communities to promote diversity in signs - their sizes, types, colors, lighting, lettering and other qualities. It also encourages business owners to choose signs that reflect their own tastes, values, and personalities. (p. 11)

The following should be considered for signs:

- **Size:** The NPS brief states, “new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building.”
- **Placement/Attachment Method:** The NPS brief states, “sign placement is important: new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building.... New signs should be attached to the building carefully...”
- **Material:** The NPS brief states, “sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building.”

Locally, the Northfield Downtown Design Guidelines provide more specific guidance to Northfield’s district. See attached for the excerpts on signage in the guidelines. The following should be considered for signs:

- Size: “Signs should be sized appropriately and in proportion to its building.”
- Placement/Attachment Method: “Signage should be placed at traditional sign locations... Signs should not conceal any architectural features... Signage mounting brackets and hardware should be anchored into mortar, not masonry.”
- Material: “Signs should be made of traditional materials such as wood or metal panels with painted or ornamental metal lettering.”
- Illumination: “Signs which are lit should have concealed lighting... Internally-list or flashing signs are not appropriate...”
- Guidance is also given for lettering and colors

Additionally, signage regulations are found within the Land Development Code. There is a distinction between the Downtown Design Guidelines and the LDC Sign Code. The Design Guidelines are flexible and not strictly required, allowing for consideration of each building’s unique history and architecture. In contrast, the LDC Sign Code is legally binding, with regulations that must be upheld. The LDC uses language that should be clear, with “shall” as an enforcement. The Design Guidelines uses more vague language such as “should” and “might.”

Based on the Design Guidelines and the NPS guidelines there appear to be four important aspects of signage to regulate: size, placement/attachment method, material, and illumination. Other aspects related to lettering, sign shape, colors, etc. appear to be overly restrictive and encourage a “bland sameness” within the downtown.

The HPC is asked to consider what is most important for signage regulations as it relates to historic preservation. Signs are small and do not impact the historic integrity of the building. Additionally, signs are temporary in nature and are often changed with the turnover in tenants. In picking the battle over historic preservation, signage may not be the most crucial element to regulate, in comparison to larger aspects such as demolition, storefront design, and character-defining features such windows, etc.

In this discussion and all work the HPC engages in, the City Council has identified priorities with the Strategic Plan. This calls for alignment across all boards and commissions. While many aspects of the Strategic Plan are not directly related to the HPC’s daily work, the HPC is asked to consider how diversity, equity, and inclusion can be incorporated into the review of signage.

A supplemental memo will be provided with additional information on signage regulations from other cities.

With all of this in mind, staff have proposed some amendments to the sign code, attached as a redlined draft amendment with comments. This is an initial discussion on best practices, goals of historic preservation, and equity as it relates to signage.

Alternative Options:

HPC members can discuss other aspects of the signage regulations.

Financial Impacts:

N/A

Tentative Timeline:

TBD