

City of Fitchburg Design Guidelines

Exterior Signs

Signage is regulated through the City of Fitchburg's Zoning Ordinances in section 181.53. Please be sure to review Zoning Ordinances as they related to signs in addition to guidelines.

General

Signs should be compatible with their building, neighboring buildings, and the character of Main Street as a whole. Typefaces used in signage should be compatible with the building architectural style, either a period font that echoes the style of the building, or a modern font that provides a clean contrast. Signs should be located within the sign band where one exists and avoid obscuring importance architectural features. Signs should present a clear message about the business they serve. They are one of the least expensive and most effective ways to enhance a storefront. With imagination and high quality design, signs can add a new level of visual excitement to the streetscape.

Signs for a row of storefronts in the same building should be of similar size, material, proportion and location on the building. While it is not necessary for them to be all the same color or design, they should look like a family - in this way they reinforce, rather than compete with, each other.

The sign alone should not attempt to convey the entire story a merchant wants to relay. Too many different signs can overwhelm viewers. The end result is that none of the intended messages are conveyed. It is the careful combination of sign, building storefront and window display working together that has the greatest impact.

There are five types of signs to be found on Main Street: freestanding or ground, wall, projecting, window, awning or canopy, and banner. Their use depends upon their context

Recommendations

- Choose a sign and typeface that is consistent and harmonious with the architectural style of the property and the surrounding district.
- Convey the message of the sign with simplicity
- Restrict copy to the name, address, function and logo of the establishment.
- Do not post rates and advertising of commodities and ancillary services.
- Install one primary and one secondary sign.

Ground Signs

Freestanding or ground signs are seen from furthest away, often from automobiles. They should be used for businesses occupying residential buildings, which typically have no sign band or display window, and for businesses or spaces, such as rear parking lots, not visible from the street. These types of private signs cannot be installed in the public way.

Recommendations

- Use ground signs no more than 10 square feet in area and no more than 8 feet in height, in front of residences which have been converted to commercial uses or to identify businesses in buildings not visible from the street.
- Use ground signs of no more than 4 feet in height to mark parking areas.
- Do not install tall pole signs.
- Do not install roof sign

Sign Bands

It is not necessary to create a sign band when one doesn't exist. Back-lit letters on a brick facade, for example, can be very effective in both announcing a business and highlighting its building. However, where multiple storefronts share the same building, it may be desirable to establish uniform location and style for signs. If a sign band does not exist in such cases, one can be created by a change in color, material, or relief, the sign band can be articulated or divided so that each section clearly relates to an individual store.

Recommendations

- In multiple storefront buildings, use signs of similar size, proportion and materials for each store.
- Coordinate colors in continuous sign bands or among contiguous signs.
- Vary the color of individual signs within a coordinated range.

Wall Signs

Among signs attached to buildings, wall signs need to be seen from furthest away, often from across the street, and should be legible from that distance. They should contain simple information such as the name of the store and the type of business. Wall signs should be carefully sized to fit in with the building's facade design and should avoid obscuring important architectural features.

Types of Wall Signs

Board signs use a background board, generally: rectangular in shape, which contains the letters, graphic image and logo, where applicable. Individual letters mounted directly on a building can also create appealing signs. Carefully sized and designed neon-like LED signs can add an element of excitement to the streetscape at night

Size and Placement

The size of a wall sign, within the allowable maximum, depends on the width of the street as well as the size of the business. Locate the sign within the sign band where one exists. Do not cover up important architectural details such as cornices, piers and pilasters, doorway pediments, and upper- floor window sills.

Lettering

Signs on main facades should generally use letters that range from 10 inches to 18 inches high. Smaller letters for smaller storefronts and larger letters for larger storefronts are possible. Internally illuminated individual letters are not encouraged, but back-lit letters are appropriate.

Recommendations

- Locate wall signs in a sign band when one exists, usually above the transom.
- Where a sign band does not exist, locate the wall sign between the first floor transom and the second floor window sill or below the eaves on a one-story building.
- Use the wall sign as the primary business sign.
- Install no more than two signs - one primary, one secondary.
- Use a maximum width of two-thirds of the width of the building- front and a maximum height of one-third of the height of the space between the first floor transom and the second floor window sill or eaves on one-story buildings.
- Locate signs so as not to obstruct display areas.
- Locate flush-mounted signs above the storefront display windows or transoms and below the second story window sills.
- Use lettering between 10 inches and 18 inches high and which occupies no more than 65% of the board.
- Do not use internally illuminated box sign

Projecting Signs

High quality projecting signs can add a special character to the streetscape. These signs should be small and unique in character; projecting signs are seen from a closer distance than wall signs, at medium to short range. They can highlight the storefront and attract pedestrians' attention as they walk along the sidewalk.

Types of Projecting Signs

A three dimensional object or special shape often makes the most effective projecting sign. Merchants can use these signs to express what is unique about their merchandise or their business - for example, a hammer-shaped sign for a hardware store, or an eyeglasses-shaped sign for an optometrist. Projecting signs are not usually considered the predominant sign for any business. Internally illuminated projecting sign boxes tend to look heavy and are strongly discouraged

Size and Placement

Projecting signs should be small - no larger than six square feet in area - and eye-catching; Signs should project no more than twelve (12) inches out from the wall which is attached, except in the Downtown Business and Intown Business Districts where such signs may be authorized after Site Plan Review. Signs requiring Site Plan Review should project no more than four (4) feet out from the wall on which it's attached, or half the width of sidewalk, whichever is less. They should not block visibility of neighboring signs.

Lettering

Letters should be 4 to 10 inches high.

Special Concerns

The information on a projecting sign need not duplicate the information on the wall sign - it should augment the primary sign, describing the business in a different, more visual way. The design should be carefully coordinated with the building, the storefront, and the design of the primary wall sign. The bracket from which the sign hangs is part of the overall sign design. If several stores within a building are to have projecting signs, their design and placement should be considered together and in general they should be hung at the same height.

Recommendations

- Use a projecting sign to complement or to replace the principal wall sign. In a building with multiple storefronts, coordinate with other business owners for a uniform approach to either one or both types of signs.
- Locate projecting signs above the storefront display windows or transoms and below the second story window sills.
- Space projecting signs along storefronts so that they do not obstruct each other in the pedestrians' line of vision.
- Limit sign projection to within four feet of the facade of the building or half the width of the sidewalk, whichever is less.
- Use an area of 6 square feet and lettering between 8inches and 10inches high.

Window Signs

Window signs are seen from short range - in front of the store.

Types of Window Signs

Lettering may be hand painted directly on glass, etched in glass or applied with vinyl, die-cut letters. White, light colors or gold leaf are most legible for graphics on glass. Paper signs taped to glass never look good. Temporary signs should be hung about one foot behind the glass, fixed to a rigid backing board and highlighted with display spot lights. Neon-style window signs work best if they occupy a minimum amount of the display window.

Size and Placement.

Signs painted on second floor windows are seen from a greater distance than those on first floor windows, and the letter size and amount of information must be adjusted accordingly. Lettering on first floor windows should cover no more than 20% of the glass area. Lettering on second floor windows should cover no more than 25% of the glass area.

Lettering

The size of the lettering may vary from ½ to 8 inches. The amount of information to convey, the importance of the information, the design of the display area and the design of the storefront should all be considered in determining the height of the letters.

Recommendations

- Use window signs to provide more detailed information and to complement the window display. Signs painted on storefront glass are a traditional and effective way to present this information.
- Use small stenciled letters, addresses or logos for window signs; do not paint large areas of glass.
- Use colors and lighting appropriate to the building or neighborhood.
- Do not use internally-illuminated signs. Illuminate painted signs with exterior lighting.
- Use neon signs for business names and accent borders.
- Mount neon signs on a clear backing, such as glass or plexiglass, and hung in a window or door. Neon tubes may also be used on larger signs to accent a letter or logo, and to outline significant building features.
- Maintain signs regularly. Broken, faded signage and empty sign supports suggest a vacant or inactive business. Unused sign supports should be removed.

Awning/Canopy Signs

Signs on awnings or canopies can complement or become the principal wall sign. When a single business occupies several bays of a storefront, a small wall sign at each bay, or a sign on each awning or canopy, can be very effective in discreetly repeating the name of the business. More numerous, smaller signs also contribute to a fine-grain pedestrian experience along the sidewalk.

Recommendations

- Restrict the size of the sign to 25% of the area of the awning or canopy.
- Use lettering 6 inches to 8 inches in height for signs on awnings..
- Use the maximum allowable area for signage to create more, smaller signs on each awning, canopy, or bay width.

Banner

Banners can be a lively way to announce a special event or seasonal theme but should not be used as permanent signage. They are most effective when using a bold design and brightly colored shapes or letters.

Recommendations

- Use a banner not larger than 16 square feet in area.
- Use a banner as an on-premise temporary sign for a period not to exceed 30 days.

Materials for Signs

Wood can be used for backing or lettering. Wood is particularly useful for a sign that has carved, recessed or dimensional lettering or decoration. Use wood that allows the grain to contribute to the design. Large pieces of wood can crack or check as they age; exterior plywood (with protected edges) can help solve this problem.

Metal can be used for backing or lettering. Copper, bronze, brass and stainless steel offer richness and durability. Gold and silver leaf, properly applied, can last for fifty years or more.

Glass The transparency of glass allows graphics or lettering painted on its surface to float in place, while also allowing a view beyond. Glass can be etched or sandblasted and lit from the bottom edge for dramatic effects. Glass may also be entirely back-painted with a solid color after lettering has been applied.

Plastic is most successful when used for individual letters. In large amounts, plastic can look flimsy and cheap. If used as a backing, it should be made rigid or placed in a frame. Vacuum-formed plastic faces in metal frames are generally inappropriate.

Color for Signs

Coordinate sign and building colors so that the entire face of the building works together to look attractive and draw attention. Too many colors used together on a sign (or on adjacent signs) tend to overwhelm the viewer. It is best to limit the number of colors on a sign to three or four. Any additional colors should be used sparingly as accents.

Contrast- Make sure that there is enough contrast between lettering and background colors. In general, lighter letters on a dark background are more legible than dark letters on a light background. This applies to signage on glass or on board backing. If a building contains a number of shops, it is best if all signs have dark backgrounds and light letters, or light backgrounds and dark letters. Lack of this basic uniformity destroys the rhythm of a building's facade.

Sign Lighting

Well-lit signs are particularly important for stores that stay open at night. But well-lit facades, displays and signs, even for businesses closed in the evening, also contribute to the safety, enjoyment and visual interest of the streetscape. Illuminated signs attract attention after-hours and lend a warmth to a commercial district. Exterior lights can be controlled by timers or photo-electric cells. A full understanding of the lighting options for signage can help discourage the use of internally illuminated sign boxes. No sign or other advertising device shall be permitted that has visible moving or movable parts or that has flashing animated or intermittent illumination, with the exception of appropriate lights during holiday seasons.

LED/Incandescent Light

Spots or flood lights attached to the building facade and spaced at intervals can usually illuminate the full area of a sign. There are a variety of exterior fixtures that can be used as decorative elements - from those with neutral, small housings to elaborate, fluted, gooseneck fixtures. Signs with opaque backgrounds should be lit from the exterior by wall-mounted, focused, directional lights such as gooseneck lights or sconces. The light source should be shielded and the bulb exposure limited to that sufficient to illuminate the sign content. We strongly encourage the use of energy efficient lighting whenever possible.

Fluorescent Light

Properly shielded with hoods, a series of fluorescent fixtures can light signs more uniformly than incandescent spot lights. They are typically cooler in color but new tube types can closely match the quality and color range of incandescent lights, which many people still prefer. Fluorescent fixtures typically look more utilitarian than incandescent ones and blend less easily with historic building facades; therefore, the provision of a valence to conceal the fixture is appropriate.

Back-lit Signs or Letters

Micro-fluorescent tubes or LED equivalents behind solid letters or signs can highlight a building's textured surface as well as provide a pleasant glow around an establishment's name.

Coordination

If a building has multiple storefronts, the lighting for their signs should be coordinated. If all storefronts have signs lit externally with hooded fluorescent lights, for example, all the lamp colors should be the same – all warm white, all cool white; etc.

Up and Down Lighting

Although up-lighting signs from below is dramatic and allows fixtures to be more easily hidden, mounting fixtures above signs and lighting down avoids many weather and water-related problems.

Glare

Glare from unshielded lights makes adjacent signs or displays difficult to see. Bare bulbs are prohibited on all buildings. Overly bright signs, especially at night, can actually cause passers-by to look away rather than read them.

PROHIBITED SIGNS

Except from Fitchburg Zoning Ordinances
Chapter 181 of the Code of the City of Fitchburg

Please refer to section 181.53 of the Code for the full regulations related to sign and advertising devices

The following signs, permanent or temporary, accessory or non-accessory, are prohibited in all districts:

181.5361. All signs consisting of ribbons, streamers, spinners, strings of lights (unless associated with a specific holiday), revolving beacons, searchlights or animated signs.

181.5362. Signs which flash, rotate, make noise, move, or give the illusion of moving, except for indicators of time and temperature or barber poles.

181.5363. Off-premises signs except as provided in Section 181.5337.
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181.5364. Abandoned signs.

181.5365. Signs that contain tri-vision (multi-vision) displays.

181.5366. Temporary signs with digital or electric components.

181.5367. Signs illuminated by, producing, or containing sparks or open flames.

181.5368. Signs that imitate or resemble official traffic lights, signs, or signals, or which interfere with the effectiveness of any official traffic light, sign, or signal.

181.5369. Signs placed on or otherwise attached to:

- A. Trees, shrubbery, or other natural features.
- B. Dumpsters and dumpster enclosures.
- C. Publicly owned and maintained street furniture, the surface of public sidewalks, utility poles, utility boxes, and bollards.
- D. Windows, doors, fire escapes, or any opening required for ventilation or egress, when placed in such a way as to fully cover said features or prevent access or adequate ventilation.
- E. Fences, provided that this prohibition shall apply only to temporary signs