

Sign Regulations

DEFINITIONS

Signs. Signs are deemed to be a name, identification, description, display, illustration, or character which is affixed to, or represented directly or indirectly upon a building, structure, or piece of land and which directs attention to an object, product, place, activity, person, institution, organization, or business.

Signs (electrical). Electrical signs are signs that are electrically illuminated.

“Dynamic image display sign” means any sign, or portion thereof, with characteristics that appear to have movement or that appear to change, caused by any method other than physically removing and replacing the sign or its components, whether the apparent movement or change is in the display, the sign structure itself, or any other component of the sign. This includes a display that incorporates a technology or method allowing the sign face to change the image without having to physically or mechanically replace the sign face or its components. This also includes any rotating, revolving, moving, blinking, or animated display and any display that incorporates rotating panels, LED lights manipulated through digital input, “digital ink” or any other method or technology that allows the sign face to present a series of images or displays.

“Flat signs” means signs which are placed flat against the building or structure from which they are supported and which run parallel thereto. Signs supported from a canopy are deemed to be flat signs when they are single face.

“Ground signs” signs supported by a structure which rests on or in the ground.

“Luminance” means the photometric measure of luminous intensity per unit area of light travelling in a given direction. Luminance is measured in candelas per square meters or “nits.”

“Motion” or *“moving”* means the depiction of movement or change of position of text, images or graphics. Motion or moving shall include, but not be limited to, visual effects such as dissolving and fading text and images, travelling, running sequential text, graphic bursts, lighting that resembles zooming, twinkling or sparkling, changes in light or color, transitory bursts of light intensity, moving patterns or bands of light, expanding or contracting shapes, and similar actions.

“Nits” means a unit of measurement of brightness or luminance. One nit is equivalent to one candela per square meter.

“Off-premise sign” means signs that direct attention to a business, commodity, service, or entertainment conducted, sold, or offered elsewhere than upon the lot upon which it is located or to which it is affixed.

“On-premise Sign” means signs that direct attention to a business or profession conducted or to a commodity, service,

or entertainment sold or offered upon the premises where the sign is located.

“Projecting signs” means signs which project obliquely or at right angles from the building or structure from which they are supported.

“Roof signs.” Roof signs are signs which are erected on and supported by the roof of a building or structure.

“Static sign” means a sign that does not rotate, move, or have any appearance of changing or movement in the sign, sign components or structure. A “static sign” shall not include any sign that has any characteristics of a dynamic image display sign.

“Twirl time” means the time it takes for static text, images or graphics on a dynamic image display sign to change to different text, images or graphics.

PERMITS & EXCLUSIONS

A building permit is required for installation of signs—search “sign permit” at CityofChicago.org to apply online or visit Room 900 of City Hall. Fees range from \$50 (under 50 square feet) to \$1,000 (over 500 square feet). Permits are required for all signs (including vinyl signs) except when the sign is:

- constructed wholly from paper, vinyl, film or stickers and attached to a window for no more than 60 days
- painted directly onto the window, provided that signs are not applied to more than 25% of any single window (lettering that is painted directly onto the glass of a window and less than 2 inches in height will not be counted in the calculation of the 25% if it is an on-premises sign)
- an address sign, entrance/exit sign, open/closed sign, days/hours of operation sign or restroom sign, provided the sign contains no commercial or business name or commercial business logo
- an official sign, public notice sign or warning sign required by a federal, state or municipal law, such as a no smoking sign, a high voltage sign, a consumer rights notice sign

ADDITIONAL APPROVALS

If any portion of the sign (or awning/canopy) extends into the public way use (i.e. crosses over the private property line) then a **Use of Public Way permit** is required which must be reviewed and signed by the alderman of the ward.

If a sign **exceeds 100 square feet in area**, or if any roof or ground sign, structure or signboard is **located over 24 feet above ground**, then a city council order is required which is introduced by the alderman of the ward.

SIZE LIMITATIONS

While the Chicago zoning code allows a **total sign area of 32 square feet** for any given location, additional sign square footage is subject to zoning regulations based on location.

LOCATION LIMITATIONS

- (a) Except for high rise building signs permitted pursuant to section [17-12-1005-D](#), the overall vertical height of a sign shall **not exceed 75 feet above ground**, or grade, level.
- (b) Signs (and awnings) which **project over the public way more than 12 inches shall clear such public way (sidewalk) by nine feet and 16 feet in alleys.**
- (c) **Signs flat against the building shall not project more than 12 inches.** Flat signs complying with this subsection shall be permitted to be erected at entrance door height.
- (d) **Flat signs shall not project above the parapet** of the building unless in accordance with all of the following conditions:
- (1) The erection of the sign does not prohibit access to the roof from the exterior of the building without passing over the sign.
 - (2) The sign shall not extend more than four feet above the parapet of where there is no parapet more than four feet above the roof line.
 - (3) In no case shall more than 50 percent of the sign project above the parapet or above the roof line where there is no parapet.
 - (4) A sign shall not be permitted to be supported from the parapet.
 - (5) Special permission is obtained in writing from the building commissioner before the permit application is submitted.
- (e) A sign **may be erected at the edge of a roof on a building which has no parapet walls** provided:
- (1) The building is no more than one story in height, and
 - (2) No sign section is more than four feet in height and
 - (3) No sign section has an area of more than 40 feet.
- All such signs, where there is no parapet, shall be erected independently of each other.
- (f) **Projecting signs shall be supported by a structure anchored wholly within the lot line.**
- (g) Projecting signs shall **not extend into the public way a greater distance than within 18 inches of the curb line.**
- (h) Projecting signs shall have that portion of the sign nearest the supporting structure **not more than two feet from the lot line.**
- (i) **No sign shall be attached to or supported by a chimney** unless special permission has been obtained in writing from the building commissioner before the permit is issued.

DYNAMIC IMAGE DISPLAY SIGNS ADDITIONAL STANDARDS

Every dynamic image display sign, including a city digital sign for which a permit application is submitted on or after April 2, 2014, shall comply with the following:

- (a) *Luminance.*
- (1) For signs located within a designated expressway corridor, the maximum luminance for any such sign shall not be greater than (A) 7,000 nits between 5 a.m. and sunset; and (B) 300 nits between sunset and midnight.
 - (2) For all other signs not subject to subsection (a)(1), the maximum luminance for any such sign shall not be greater than (A) 7,000 nits between 5 a.m. and sunset; and (B) 250 nits between sunset and midnight.
 - (3) No sign shall be illuminated between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m.; provided that an entity may keep its on-premise sign illuminated to no greater than 250 nits between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m., when the entity is open for business. For purposes of this subsection, “open for business” means an entity that is conducting its normal business or occupation and admits clients, customers or patrons during such time. This subsection shall not apply to any sign that is part of an emergency response network while such sign is displaying emergency information from any federal, state, or unit of local government.
 - (4) For purposes of this subsection, “designated expressway corridor” means any area within 660 feet of the nearest edge of the right-of-way of a designated expressway or toll road, as that term is defined in section [17-17-0244.5](#).
- (b) *Dwell time.* The text, image or display on the face of the sign shall not change more than once every 10 seconds. Twirl time shall not exceed 0.25 seconds.
- (c) *Motion.*
- (1) All motion is prohibited on the sign;
 - (2) During the message transition, the sign shall not display any visible effects, including but not limited to action, motion, fading, dissolving, blinking, or the illusion of such effects; and
 - (3) No message shall transition from one face to another face.
- (d) *Control/testing.*
- (1) All signs shall be equipped with an automatic dimmer control or other mechanism that automatically controls the sign's luminance in compliance with this section. In instances where the sign malfunctions, the sign shall either automatically shut off or turn to a black screen;
 - (2) Prior to the issuance of any permit for a sign, the applicant shall submit an affidavit that attests that the sign has been tested and complies with the dwell time, luminance, motion and other requirements of this section, and that the luminance intensity, motion and dwell time requirements are protected from manipulation by password-protected software or other method satisfactory to the commissioner, as set forth in rules and regulations; and
 - (3) The test of the luminance levels required by this section shall be made when the sign is set to full white.