

Ann Arbor City Code

Chapter 61. Signs and Outdoor Advertising

Updated Summary of Proposed Amendments

Below is a summary of proposed amendments to Chapter 61, which highlights significant changes to the code. City planning staff met on April 13th and 20th, May 14th, and November 2nd and 12th to review draft language and to provide comments. The Sign Ordinance Review Committee also met on September 16th and 23rd and October 9th and 14th.

The section numbers below refer to the proposed new section numbers in the draft.

1. **Section 5:500. Purpose.** – a new section was added describing the purpose of the chapter. A former version of this section existed in the code as recently as 1984; however, it is unclear as to how or why the section was removed. Most sign codes for other municipalities contain a purpose section.
2. **Section 5:501 Application of Chapter.** – a statement was added indicating that signs would be subject to the current version of the City of Ann Arbor Public Service's Standard Specifications, specifically to prevent signs that create a transportation or public safety hazard as stated in Section 5:500. Public Service's Standard Specifications also reference the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) standards. The staff person reviewing a sign permit may seek comments from a city transportation engineer for any sign that potentially creates a transportation hazard, based on its proximity to intersections and points of egress/ingress.
3. **Section 5:502 Definitions.** – noteworthy changes are noted below.

(5) "Business Center" – the definition was amended to reduce the total number of businesses required to meet the definition of a business center from 5 to 2. Prior to 1986, the definition required two or more businesses. In 1986, the code was changed to require that business centers have five or more establishments. At that time, business center signs were allowed to have one square foot of signage per 2,000 square feet of lot area but not more than 300 square feet total (larger than a billboard). They were intended primarily for large commercial developments. The code was later changed to allow no more than 200 square foot of signage. In 1998, the code was amended to remove the reference to lot area and included standards based on building frontage. It appears that in the past 20+ years, the standards for business center signs have been amended to accommodate smaller commercial developments, but the required number of businesses necessary to meet the definition of a business center was never re-addressed. Furthermore, reducing the total number of businesses that qualify for a business center sign helps to consolidate and reduce the number of ground signs at multiple-tenant buildings.

Former 5:502(6) describing how to measure the distance between a building and a sign. This definition was removed, since it appears that this particular measurement is not used in any requirement in Chapter 61.

(8) "Frontage" – the definition was amended to include the length of the building where the primary entrance is located. Current building trends encourage commercial and mixed-use developments to be constructed closer to the street with business entrances and parking

lots located behind the buildings. As a result, some businesses (i.e., Plymouth/Green, Plymouth/Upland development, the Courtyard Shops, Stadium Plaza, Maple Village) do not front the street and are not permitted commercial signage under current code.

(10) “Maximum Height” and (11) “Minimum Height” were amended to clarify the definition of grade. Measurement from the sidewalk was removed.

(18) “Sign” – the definition was amended to include signs that may be visible from an “on-premise parking area”. Currently, a “sign” visible from an interior parking lot only (but not from “...a public street, sidewalk, alley, park, or public property”) is not considered a “sign” nor subject to a permit. Historically, the city has requested permits for these signs even though they did not meet the definition of a sign.

4. **Section 5:503. Permits Requirements.** - this section identifies the types of signs that require a permit and outlines the permit application requirements. This section was moved from the back of the chapter to the front to improve the reader’s accessibility to these requirements. Signs require a permit include exterior business signs; residential development signs; religious institutions, private schools, community centers, and library signs (land uses that may be located in or adjacent to residential areas); and, off-premise signs greater than 200 square feet (i.e., billboards). A temporary real estate signs will no longer require a permit. To provide clarification and to improve readability, the permit requirements were reformatted to include regulations for sign permit application, sign permit fee, building permit requirements, electrical permit requirements, and sign permit exceptions.
5. **Section 5:504. Exterior Business Signs.** – this section was reformatted to improve readability and to encourage consistent interpretation by staff and the public. Other noteworthy changes are noted below.
 - a) The 20% bonus for area and message units, if all signs are less than 15 feet in height, was eliminated. This bonus was rarely used, and the original intent is unknown.
 - b) In Section 5:504(3)(b), the required setback for a ground sign was reduced from 15 feet to 5 feet from both the right-of-way (ROW) and sidewalk. Setbacks were previously measured from the “street”, which was often interpreted by staff as “curbline”. City Code, Chapter 2 clearly defines “street” as ROW. The majority of ground signs throughout the City are set back at least 5 feet from the ROW. Unless a transportation hazard exists, a 5-foot setback and a 3-foot maximum height at the setback (allowing for increases in height upon further setback) are sufficient. A 15-foot setback from any lot line not facing a street would be required to protect adjacent property owners.

Also in Section 5:504(3)(b), the maximum height for ground signs located within 20 feet of a building, which allowed the sign to be the same height as the building but not to exceed 25 feet, was eliminated. This was problematic for buildings located close to the street or sidewalk (i.e., Plymouth/Upland and the new development at N. Maple/Dexter). Unless the building has a significant setback, a tall sign is not always appropriate nor safe. The proposed code amendment allows the maximum

height to be regulated by the setback only, and the sign shall not exceed the height of the building or 25 feet.

- c) In Section 5:504(3)(b), ground signs have been limited to a maximum of one per premise. The purpose of this change is to encourage the consolidation of ground signs and the use of business center signs for multiple-tenant buildings.
 - d) In Section 5:504(3)(c), the marquee sign requirements were reformatted and provide a definition and standards that are consistent with the Michigan Building Code.
 - d) In Section 5:504(4)(c), placement standards were added for business center signs. These standards refer to the ground sign standards to maintain consistency. It also prohibits additional ground signs for individual businesses.
6. **Section 5:512. Off-Premise Signs.** – as amended, the section applies to off-premise signs over 200 square feet (billboards). Historically, the intent of the section was for billboards only; however, the language, as written, often was interpreted as applying to any off-premise signs.
7. **Section 5:507. Religious Institutions, Private Schools, Community Centers, and Library Signs.** – this section provides standards for non-business institutions. Such signs shall be required to obtain a sign permit.
8. **Section 5:508. Residential Signs.** – this section was reformatted. Residential development signs now require a sign permit and shall have a minimum setback of 10 feet from any ROW and 15 feet from any lot line not facing a public street.
9. **Section 5:509. Real Estate Signs.** – the title of this section was changed, since the section addresses real estate signs only. The section also was reformatted. Other noteworthy changes are noted below.
- a) Temporary real estate signs no longer require a sign permit. Code currently requires all temporary signs in this section to obtain a sign permit; however, only permits for real estate contractor signs were being required by city staff. Real estate signs will continue to be subject to code standards for height, width, setback and removal. Contractor signs will require 25 foot setbacks, unless attached to the building or fence, and are required to be removed at the end of construction. Historically, contractor signs have not created a public or transportation hazard, nor have they created enforcement problems. Staff agreed that temporary real estate signs do not warrant a permit and that enforcement would be pursued any real estate sign that did not follow the code regulations.
 - b) The reduction of setback from 15 feet to 5 feet from both the right-of-way and sidewalk for real estate signs other than real estate contractor signs. This setback standard will be consistent with exterior business signs.
10. **Section 5:512. Prohibited Signs.** – the exception clause in 5:512(2) was removed, which had indicated that banners could be used as an exterior business sign. Historically, very

few, if any, banner applications had been submitted under this exception. Furthermore, staff has not been permitting banners or pennants, unless permitted by 5:511(9) for “special occasions” as approved by City Council or the City Administrator. Staff indicated that the code should not encourage banners to be used as a permanent exterior business sign. Banners may be used as interior signs under 5:505.

11. **Section 5:516. Appeals.** – the appeals section was amended to give the Zoning Board of Appeals the authority to hear and decide appeals in connection with the enforcement of this chapter. This idea is part of an on-going discussion involving city staff and the city administration.
12. **Section 5:517 Penalties and Enforcement.** - staff and the review committee supported violations being reduced from a misdemeanor to a civil infraction.