

Better Sign Codes = Thriving Communities

From the smallest rural areas to the country's largest cities, sign codes can make or break small businesses. Better sign codes allow businesses to focus on growing their companies, creating jobs and contributing to the community's economic vitality. That's why it's critical to work with local chambers of commerce, economic development officials and sign companies to educate planners on the value that visible and effective signs bring to communities.

Here is a look at three ongoing examples:

Chicago: A Maze of Permit Approvals

In Chicago, the path to get from idea to installed sign looks like some bizarre maze filled with dozens of steps, including approval from the city council. For every sign. Adding to the complexity: public way sign permits must be re-approved every five years.

This negatively impacts many existing businesses—and new enterprises.

"In discussing the issues that are impacting local businesses, it became clear that the difficulties involved in displaying a sign was top of mind for the business organizations

and the entrepreneurs that want to open a business in the city of Chicago," said Elliot Richardson, co-CEO of the Small Business Advocacy Council. "There seem to be a real need to tackle some of these regulations and processes that make it difficult."

Among the many steps to approval: seeking approval from the alderman in whose district the sign will be installed. This must happen before seeking a public use way permit; all signs in Chicago must be approved by use by the public way, even if they extend over the public way by inches.

A coalition was formed with a number of local/community chambers of commerce. ISA and the Illinois Sign Association were natural—and valuable—members. The coalition, "Signs of Change," is focused on two steps: removing council approval for signs that overhang the public way by less than 12 inches; and removing the requirement for council approval of permit renewals when signs are unchanged.

"ISA and the Illinois Sign Association have been integral partners in helping us move this initiative forward," Richardson said. "They've been wonderful sources of knowledge with respect to the subject matter."

Currently, two aldermen are the chief

sponsors of a bill that will fill the coalition's aims. It is currently held up in committee, though it has enough co-sponsors signed on to be approved if it comes before the full city council, Richardson said.

While the time varies for business owners to obtain public way sign permits, the process often takes far too long. Richardson said "we hear from a lot of business organizations and business owners that this is unduly burdensome and has an impact. It does detract from business owners trying to grow their businesses and create jobs." This coalition of SBAC, ISA, the Illinois Sign Association and the local chambers of commerce is certainly up to the challenge of promoting positive change for the sign industry and small businesses.

Rural Texas: Taking Advantage of Opportunity

Peggy Rosser, small business development specialist with Angelo State University's Small Business Development Center, understands the importance of signs to a small business—especially in rural West Texas.

"Signage is what pulls people off the highway to stop and shop in those little towns," Rosser said. "I don't think people



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Textile printing—whether handled using dye transfer or durable latex or UV inks—has grown considerably is forecast to grow nearly 39 percent

look at signage with enough importance and the value that it brings to their business.”

She’s been a one-person advocate as she works with small businesses, using materials that she had gathered from the International Sign Association (ISA) website. “I thought, ‘we need to tap into the people with the knowledge and have them share this information, instead of me second-handing it.’”

In June, ISA and a representative from the Texas Sign Association (TSA) will present a session on signs during the Texas Rural Challenge. This event, June 9 & 10 will be held in Waco, Texas. The conference brings together Texas Small Business Development Centers, bankers and entrepreneurs to learn ways to help small businesses succeed.

Rosser believes that signs are a core element in that success. But in Texas there are inherent challenges. “Texas like most rural states is miles and miles of highway,” Rosser said. But there are a few unique issues: Interstate corridors, as well as state highways, are governed by the Highway Beautification Act, which limits signs.

In West Texas, “most of these small towns have a highway running through them, which means signs are regulated by the Texas Department of Transportation, not the local community,” Rosser said. “In some towns, like Junction, TxDOT has the regulations right up to the front door because they widened the highway. The space where the awning is, belongs to TxDOT. You can’t hang a perpendi-

cular sign because it’s over TxDOT’s sidewalk.”

Despite the challenges from regulations, Rosser wants business owners to understand “how important that sign above their shop is. It’s hard in small towns because they think everybody knows who they are and what they sell. But when a new family moves in or a tourist drives down the street, they read the signs to determine where they want to stop and shop. It’s just plain and simple.” Having ISA and TSA to educate attendees at this event will be a good way to spread this message.

Orlando Area: A Permit Issue Leads to More

Keith Chapman, vice president of business development at Mid Florida Signs & Graphics, was having difficulty getting a permit approved. A small franchisor was moving into the area and wanted to use its logo on its signs. The community balked, citing the fact that the franchisor was regional, not national. Community leaders wanted to limit the sign to two colors.

Working with ISA, Chapman received information on the Lanham Act, which prevents state and local governments from requiring federally registered trademarks from being altered to comply with community aesthetics.

Chapman took that information back to the community leaders. “I let them know that they couldn’t regulate the use of a national

brand and a logo,” he said. It led to a compromise: the franchisee was able to use four of five colors, creating a sign that looked essentially the same as its other locations. That led to a happy customer for Mid Florida Signs & Graphics.

But Chapman isn’t stopping there. He’s seen the value in this sort of work and isn’t willing to wait until he has another client with a sign permit denied.

In Osceola, Fla., a Growth Management Task Force is in the early stages of regulations that could significantly impact a heavy tourist corridor. “They’re making changes, but they don’t know what they want to do yet,” Chapman said. “They haven’t reached out to the right resources. I let them know that I was part of ISA and Southern States Sign Association and that we had resources to offer.”

He’s hoping that he and ISA and the Southern States Sign Association might help the task force determine the right terminology for identifying an entertainment sign. “Right now, it looks like an EMC graveyard with a bunch of old signs,” he said. “They want every sign to conform by 2022. I can’t see them being able to enforce it. If the intention really is to make the area more beautiful and consistent, I’d like to help them do it in the right way.” | 



NEED HELP?

Is your community exploring sign code changes? Visit www.signs.org/local to find resources that can help communities create sign codes that don’t negatively affect businesses. Or contact ISA’s government relations team at david.hickey@signs.org for help.

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between 2014 and 2019, according to the ISA white paper “Wide Format Cutting Devices: An Overview for Sign & Graphics Companies.”