

§ 15.21. Signs. [Amended 8-5-2025 by Ord. No. 2283]

- A. Purpose and intent. This section's intent is to provide comprehensive and balanced sign regulations that will preserve the right of free speech and expression; avoid excessive levels of visual clutter or distraction that are potentially harmful to traffic and pedestrian safety, property values, business opportunities, and community appearance; and ensure that signs are well-constructed, maintained, and expressive of the identity of individual activities and the community.
- B. Compliance. No person shall locate, erect, move, reconstruct, extend, enlarge, convert, or structurally alter any sign without conforming to the provisions of this chapter and a sign permit, unless exempted from sign permit requirements under Subsection C or G.
- C. Exemptions. The City exempts the following signs from the regulations contained in this chapter.
- (1) A sign posted by a governmental agency.
 - (2) A sign integrated into or on an automatic teller machine, coin-operated machine, or vending machine.
 - (3) Fuel price signs on lots occupied by fueling stations, as required by Wis. Stats., § 100.18(8).
 - (4) A sign carried by a person.
 - (5) Street addresses and numbers.
 - (6) Murals and other works of art that are not related by logo, pictorial depiction, or other means to the advertisement of any product or service or the identification of any business.
 - (7) Holiday lights and decorations containing no commercial message and displayed during the appropriate time of year.
 - (8) Flags, up to a maximum of three per lot or parcel. The length of the hoist side of any flag shall not exceed 20% of the vertical height of the pole. Property owners must fly U.S. flags in accordance with protocol established by the U.S. Congress. The City considers any flag that does not meet these requirements a sign subject to the requirements of this chapter.
- D. Abandoned signs. Property owners shall remove all signs, sign messages, and supporting structures, as applicable, when the related use concludes or it is dilapidated beyond repair under the provisions of Wis. Stats., § 66.0413. If the owner fails to remove such signs, the Zoning Administrator may follow § 15.12.
- E. Construction and maintenance.
- (1) Wind pressure and dead load requirements. Property owners shall design and construct all signs and supporting structures to withstand wind pressure of not less than 40 pounds per square foot of area (1,916.74 Pa) and to receive dead loads as required in the Building Code.
 - (2) Protection of the public. The City permits temporary occupancy of a sidewalk, street, or other public property during the construction, removal, repair, alteration, or maintenance of a sign provided the applicant ropes off or isolates the temporarily occupied space.
 - (3) Maintenance. The owner of any sign shall keep the sign and supporting structure in good maintenance and repair which includes restoring, repainting, or replacing worn or damaged legally existing signage to its original permitted condition. Property owners shall maintain the signage premises in a clean, sanitary, and inoffensive condition, free and clear of all obnoxious substances, rubbish, and weeds.

- (4) Construction. Property owners shall construct all sign elements in materials resistant to rust, rot, or other degradation. Property owners shall attach all sign elements to support structures or adjacent buildings via methods approved by the Building Inspector.
- (5) Prohibited attachment areas. No property owner may attach, fasten, or anchor any sign element to any fire escape, fire ladder, or standpipe. No sign element may hinder or prevent ingress or egress through any door, window, or fire escape or hinder or prevent the Fire Department from raising or placing of ladders against a building.
- (6) Electrical permits. Signs with electrical wiring require a separate electrical permit from the Building Inspector. No property owner may serve any sign with electricity via overhead electrical wiring.
- (7) Unmovable base. If the Zoning Administrator approves a sign with external illumination, the property owner shall mount the illumination fixture on a permanent unmovable base to prevent the tampering or redirection of the fixture from the permitted configuration.

F. General provisions.

- (1) Signs resembling other signs. No sign shall resemble, imitate, or approximate the shape, size, form, or color of railroad or traffic signs, signals, or devices and shall not obstruct or interfere with the effectiveness of railroad or traffic signs, signals, or devices.
- (2) Obstructing signs. No property owner shall locate a sign that obstructs or interferes with traffic visibility, nor illuminate it in a way that causes glare or impairs driver visibility upon public ways.
- (3) Illuminated signs. Property owners may illuminate signs provided they, other than public traffic control signs, have no elements that flash, blink, rotate, or pulsate. All illuminated signage must meet the outdoor lighting standards of § 15.24. The City shall not consider signs that include changeable copy reader boards and electronic message boards (EMBs) flashing or pulsating signs, provided they comply with all other applicable provisions of this section.

G. Signs permitted without a permit. The City permits the following signs without a permit.

- (1) Sale, lease, or rent signage. The City permits temporary freestanding or wall signs on properties or buildings for sale, lease, or rent not exceeding 24 square feet in area and nine feet in height. Such signs shall meet the minimum accessory structure setbacks or nine feet, whichever is less. No person shall place a temporary sign in a public right-of-way. The property owner shall remove all sale, lease, or rent signage within 10 days after they sell, lease, or rent the property.
- (2) Construction signage. Each property may contain up to 32 square feet of temporary signage when it is subject to an active building permit. Building permit placards and other government-ordered signage do not count towards this allowance.
- (3) Universal temporary board and banner signage.
 - (a) Residential properties. The City permits one temporary freestanding sign, not exceeding six square feet in area, provided that no such signs exceed four feet in height or lie within a public right-of-way. The City limits universal temporary signage to no more than 30 consecutive days two times in any calendar year. Common examples of temporary signage include yard sale, congratulatory postings, or notices of gatherings.
 - (b) Other properties.

[1] Temporary signs shall be approved by the Zoning Administrator.

[a] Churches, schools and institutions:

[i] Size: up to 32 square feet.

[ii] Height: maximum of eight feet.

[iii] Duration: limited to 30 consecutive days, limited to two times per year.

[b] Other uses:

[i] Business signs are limited to grand openings. Temporary promotional signs are prohibited except as related to sandwich board signs and window signs in Subsections G and H.

[ii] Size: up to 24 square feet.

[iii] Duration: limited to 30 consecutive days.

[iv] Mounting:

[A] Business banners must be securely mounted to stable structures, such as buildings or fences.

[B] Temporary signs affixed to single poles are prohibited.

(c) Temporary signs shall not be illuminated.

(d) Special event signs: Signage promoting an event shall not be displayed more than 30 days before the event is held or more than 10 days after the event was held.

(4) Small permanent wall signage. The City permits small permanent wall signage that does not exceed two square feet in area and is mounted flush against a building.

(5) Interior and window signage. The City permits interior and inside-window signs intended for viewing from inside or outside the building, provided that such signs cover or obscure no more than 40% of the window's area.

(6) Election campaign signs. As provided in § 12.04, Wis. Stats., the City permits election campaign signs subject to the following requirements:

(a) No person may erect an election campaign sign before the first day of the election campaign period as defined in the Wisconsin Statutes. The property owner shall remove any election campaign sign within 10 days following the election.

(b) Election campaign signs shall not exceed 11 square feet in area unless the sign is affixed to a permanent structure; does not extend beyond the perimeter of the structure; and does not obstruct a window, door, fire escape, ventilation shaft, or other area which is required by the City building code to remain unobstructed.

(c) No person shall place any election campaign sign within a public right-of-way nor so close to a pedestrian way as to hinder or endanger safe passage.

H. Signs permitted with a permit.

Table IV-1 Sign Regulations				
Sign Type	Number Allowed	Sign Area (Maximum)	Sign Height (Maximum, feet)	Where Allowed
Ground	1 per street yard	1 square foot per linear foot of lot frontage	10	Street yard
Wall	No maximum so long as the total square feet of signage per facade does not exceed 1 square foot per linear foot of building facade		N/A	Street-facing building facade
Projecting	1 per business	12 square feet	N/A	Within 6 feet of entrance
Wayfinding	No limit	6 square feet	5	No limit

Table IV-1 Sign Regulations				
Sign Type	Number Allowed	Sign Area (Maximum)	Sign Height (Maximum, feet)	Where Allowed
Sandwich Board	1 per building, business, or tenant space as applicable	12 square feet	4	Street yard or public sidewalk within 10 feet of business entrance

- (1) Ground signs.
 - (a) Setbacks. Property owners must set ground signs back from the right-of-way a distance equal to their height.
 - (b) Grouping of uses. Property owners may group multiple uses within a single property on a single sign.
- (2) Wall signs.
 - (a) Projections above roof line. Wall signs may not project above the roof line or eaves of a building.
 - (b) Parking area. A facade which faces a customer parking area counts as street-facing building facade.
- (3) Projecting signs.
 - (a) Extension distance. Projecting signs may project no more than six feet into the public right-of-way and shall be at least 24 inches from the face of the street curb.
- (4) Sandwich board signs. Property owners must remove sandwich board signs from any sidewalk by 2:30 a.m.

(5) Signs on public ways. No person shall place, erect, or maintain a sign within the public right-of-way without City approval. Signs shall not obstruct pedestrian or vehicular visibility, interfere with traffic control devices, or impede access to public infrastructure such as sidewalks, fire hydrants, utility poles, or drainage systems. Unauthorized signs placed in the public right-of-way are subject to immediate removal by the City without notice. The erection of any sign in the public way in the City of South Milwaukee shall be subject to the following regulations:

(a) No signs shall be erected or painted in the public way until a written request has been submitted to the City Engineer providing:

[1] The size of the sign.

[2] The sign material and weight of the sign.

[3] The method of supporting the sign.

[4] The location of the sign shown on a site map.

[5] The written consent of the owner of the building(s) if the request is made by someone other than the owner.

(b) The City may remove any signs found in the public right-of-way in violation of this chapter at the property owner's expense.

I. Signs prohibited in any district. The City prohibits the following signs.

(1) Abandoned signs.

(2) A vehicle or trailer used exclusively as a sign or advertising device. No person shall park any such vehicle or trailer on a public right-of-way, on public property, or on private property to be visible from a public right-of-way. This provision does not prohibit vehicle signs customarily attached, lettered, or painted on a vehicle or trailer to identify the ownership or function of the vehicle.

(3) Signs whose content violates any laws or regulations, including but not limited to the obscenity provisions of Chapter 944 of the Wisconsin Statutes.

(4) Signs painted, attached, or affixed to trees or other living vegetation.

(5) In multi-story or mixed-use buildings, wall or projecting signs on floors occupied by R uses.

(6) Signs for any R use except those specifically listed within Subsection G.

(7) Permanent corrugated plastic signs and other materials intended for interior use.

J. Sign measurements.

(1) Signable area. The signable area of a building is designated as the area of the facade of the building up to the roof line which is free of windows and doors or major architectural detail on which signs may be displayed. In computing signable area, any facade which faces or abuts a public right-of-way may be utilized. Calculations may include parapet

walls, but shall exclude door and window openings.

(2) Measuring sign face.

- (a) Area of copy. In calculating the area of a sign to determine whether it meets the requirement of this chapter, the Zoning Administrator shall include the sign copy and any border or frame surrounding that copy, but shall exclude supporting posts or foundations from the area calculation.
- (b) Irregular shapes. The Zoning Administrator shall determine the area of irregularly shaped signs or signs containing two or more detached elements by measuring the area of the smallest regular polygon that will encompass all elements of the sign.
- (c) Multi-sided signs. The Zoning Administrator shall use the area of only one side of a multi-sided sign if the sides are less than or equal to 30° from parallel of each other. If the sides are greater than 30° from parallel of each other, the Zoning Administrator shall count all sign faces towards the total sign area.

(3) Measuring sign height. The Zoning Administrator shall calculate sign height by measuring the vertical distance from the normal grade at the base to the highest point of the sign structure. The Zoning Administrator shall set the normal grade as the lowest of:

- (a) The existing grade prior to construction;
- (b) The newly established grade after construction, excluding any filling, berms, mounds, or excavating solely for locating the sign;
- (c) The average elevation of the property within 100 feet of the sign location; and
- (d) The average between the sign elevation and the centerline elevation of an adjacent public right-of-way within 100 feet of the sign location.