

SIGN CODE MODERNIZATION

March 31, 2026



Planning Department

CITY of BOSTON

ZOOM CONTROLS FOR INTERPRETATION

(EN) Look for the interpretation icon (**globe**) at the bottom of your screen and select the language you want to hear.

(Caboverdean) Djòbe íkune di interpretason (**un globu**) na parti inferior di tela y selesiona bu língua ki bu kre skuta reunion.

(Kreyòl Ayisyen) Chèche ikòn entèpretasyon ki gen fòm (**glòb**) anba ekran ou an epi seleksyone lang ou vle tande a.

(Español) Busque el ícono de la interpretación (**globo**) en el borde inferior de su pantalla y seleccione el idioma en el que desea escuchar.

(Tiếng Việt) Tìm biểu tượng phiên dịch (**hình quả địa cầu**) ở phía cuối màn hình của bạn và chọn ngôn ngữ bạn muốn nghe.

(简体中文) 查找屏幕底部的翻译图标(地球仪), 然后选择您想听到的语言。

(繁體中文) 查找屏幕底部的翻譯圖標(地球儀), 然後選擇您想听到的語言。

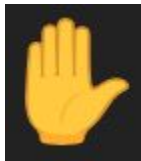


ZOOM CONTROLS FOR INTERPRETATION

- **The Planning Department will be recording this meeting** and posting it on the Sign Code Modernization webpage. If you do not wish to be recorded during the meeting, please turn off your microphone and camera.
- **Zoom controls are available at the bottom of your screen.** Clicking on these symbols activates different features.
- **Use raise hand function** (dial *9 if joining by phone) **and wait to be called upon to unmute** (dial *6 if joining by phone) before asking your question or providing comment.



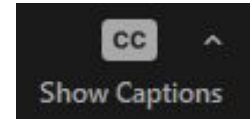
Mute/unmute



Raise hand to ask a question or provide comment



Turn video on/off



Turn on captions

PLEASE ASK FOR CLARIFICATION

Ask questions in the chat along the way!

Our staff are available to answer during the presentation.

Ask for us to clarify any terms or concepts we discuss!

We want to make sure that what we cover is accessible to everyone so you can all share your informed feedback.



SIGN CODE MODERNIZATION TEAM

Cyrus Miceli, Zoning Reform Planner

Lizzie Turac, Urban Design Assistant

Kathleen Onufer, Deputy Director of Zoning

Seth Riseman, Deputy Director of Design Review

Alexa Pinard, Asst. Deputy Director of Design Review



STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Sign Code Modernization seeks to...

1. **Update zoning to allow the majority of common, everyday signs (80%)** to be permitted under clear, effective zoning rules.
2. **Target the applicability of Planning Department review** to capture signs with outsized visual impacts on the public realm.
3. **Apply rules equally citywide** to simplify process, provide flexibility, and allow for the organic development of sign culture(s).



VALUE OF SIGNS

Signage is more than just functional; it's an element of design that reflects the history, identity, and expression of place.



“Understanding the historic layering of place, the scale, and the diversity of businesses, and the vibe of these places are key to their long-term sustainability.” (*Design Vision* p.62)

DISCLAIMER

Due to first amendment rights + established legal precedent, the regulation and review of signage must focus on certain things.

Things that **CAN** be regulated/commented on:

- Size of signs
- Location of signs
- Types of signs that are and are not allowed
- How signs may be illuminated

Things that are **PROTECTED** as expression of speech:

- Content of signs (ex. language or logos)
- Expression of sign content (ex. color, font, or imagery)
- Public art



DISCLAIMER

This project focuses on zoning for commercial signage.

This project DOES NOT:

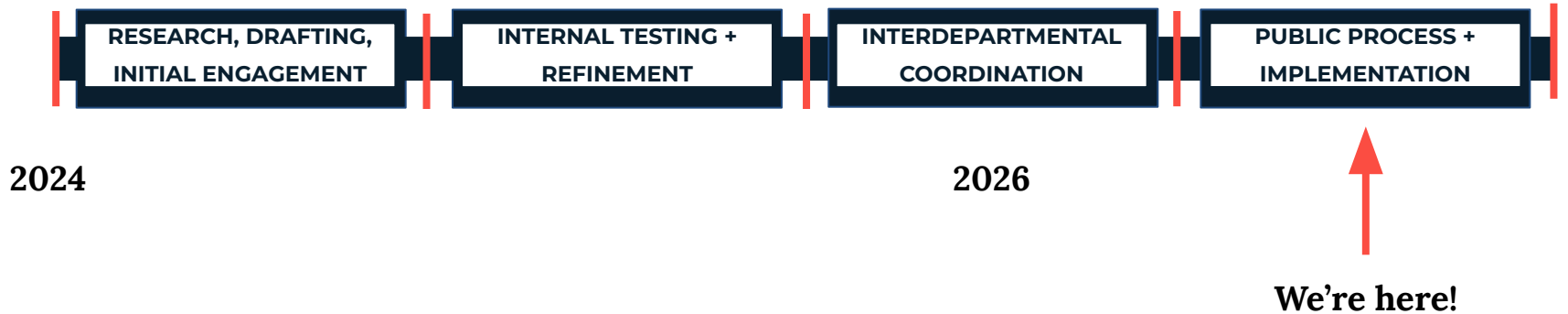
- Allow billboards
- Allow proliferation of electronic signage for all businesses
- Allow giant temporary leasing banners

This project CANNOT:

- Change the size or location of MBTA or MassDOT signage
- Regulate public art



PROJECT TIMELINE TO DATE



INITIAL ENGAGEMENT RECAP



What we've done...

- Public meeting - project launch (*March 2024*)
- Survey to sign vendors, designers, and expeditors
- Small business fair tabling

What we've heard...

- Permitting + review is confusing and takes too long (*a hurdle for small businesses*)
- People want to see more vibrant + unique signs created and allowed
- Signs should be big enough to read at different distances and speeds
- Signage shouldn't clash with architecture
- Allow flexibility for different neighborhood sign cultures to arise
- Supplements are needed to help proponents understand rules + review processes

RESEARCH + ANALYSIS

Analysis of past approvals (~850 sign packages + ~2,500 individual signs)



- Little difference in number, type, and size of signs proposed across different uses and geographies

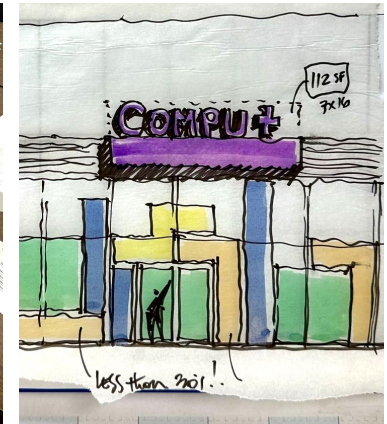
Peer codes + publications

- Reviewed the signage regulations of 15 peer cities + several sign publications

Test-fitting

- Did multiple rounds of test-fitting across different formats to refine standards

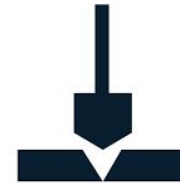
Business Type	Approval Link	Sign	Number of Wall Signs (package)	Building Height (stories)	Sign Type (primary or secondary)	Placement - Horizontal	Placement - Vertical	Sign Area (sqft)	Height (ft)	Height (% sign band)	Width (ft)	Width (frontage %)
Event	https://boda.gov		2	Multi	Secondary	Side of Building	4th Story	189 sqft	9'		21'	
Gym/Cosmet ic	https://boda.gov		2	Single	Secondary	Building Side	Below Parapet	156.5 sqft	7'2"		2'110"	20%



INTERDEPARTMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Interdepartmental coordination efforts have been critical to advancing Sign Code Modernization.

- Inspectional Services Department (ISD)
- Office of Economic Opportunity + Inclusion (OEI)
- Office of Historic Preservation (OHP)
- Public Improvement Commission (PIC)
- Department of Public Works (DPW)
- Mayor's Office of Arts + Culture (MOAC)
- Department of Parks + Recreation (Parks)
- Zoning Board of Appeal (ZBA)
- Office of Neighborhood Services (ONS)
- Mayor's Office



CURRENT SIGN RULES

Boston's sign regulations are bloated, out-of-date, uniquely decentralized, overly-restrictive, and missing important information.

Article 11

- Written in 1972 → outdated
- No structure/hierarchy
- Missing important information

Neighborhood Articles

- Written 20-30 years ago
- Small, meaningless differences
- Provisions often refer to A11

Word Count of Peer City Sign Codes:

- Austin: 13,700
- Boston (Existing): **16,000 / 35 pages**
(across 22 different zoning articles)
- Brookline: 2,800
- Cambridge: 4,500
- Charlotte: 16,400
- Chicago: 9,700
- Hartford: 11,100
- Nashville: 9,800
- Portland: 10,000
- Providence: 5,500
- Seattle: 17,100
- Somerville: 4,500

SIGNAGE REVIEW

Boston's current sign review process exempts ISD from Code enforcement, instead placing the burden of review on the Planning Department through Comprehensive Sign Review (~300 sign packages / ~900 signs per year).

"Many people just avoid the process because it takes too long. It's called Saturday Signs!"

- Anonymous Sign Vendor



Average time to permit = 140 days (4.5 months)

"Nearly every town/city I have worked with will have a permit issued within 30 days of submission - we tell our customers that permitting in Boston can take 3-6 months."

- Anonymous Sign Vendor

PROPOSED UPDATES



ALLOWED SIGNS

Administrative review by ISD

- Common, every-day commercial signs that you might find on a typical main street.

CONDITIONAL SIGNS

Design review @ Planning + ZBA (CUP)

- Signs that have a unique, outsized visual or physical impact on the public realm.

FORBIDDEN SIGN TYPES

ZBA (variance)

- Signs of excessive scale, which create undesirable urban design conditions or may have harmful impacts on the public realm.

EXEMPT SIGN TYPES

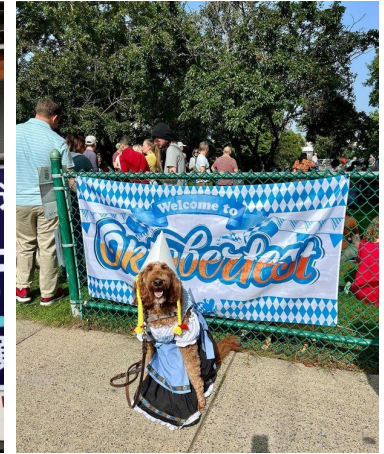
NO REVIEW Required

- Common, small-scale signs with negligible impacts on the public realm (like open/close signs or address numbers).

SIGNS THAT DON'T REQUIRE A PERMIT / REVIEW

Exempt Signs

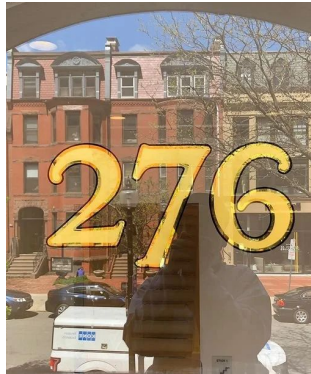
- Building addresses + directories
- Signs for community/political events
- Historic markers
- Hours of operation
- Official signs (City, State, or Federal)



Maintenance of Existing Signs

(that doesn't enlarge, relocate, or structurally change sign)

- Cleaning + safety-related repairs
- Painting/repainting
- Replacement of interchangeable sign elements (like refacing an existing sign)



ALLOWED SIGNS (90-95% OF SIGNS)



WALL SIGNS



CANOPY SIGNS



WINDOW SIGNS



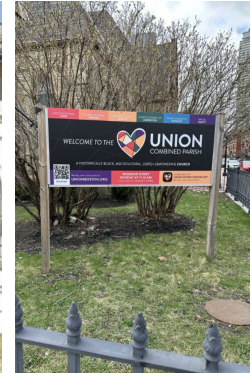
PROJECTING SIGNS



AWNING SIGNS



FREE-STANDING SIGNS



ALLOWED SIGNS (90-95% OF SIGNS)

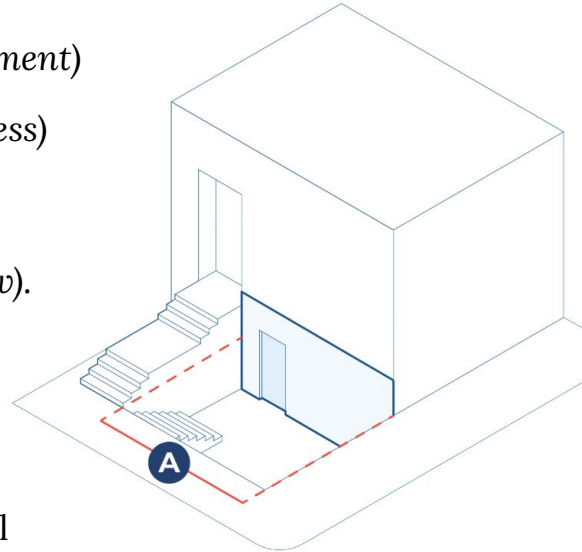
Zoning updates establish appropriate, but flexible requirements for allowed signs, and graphic measurement standards to assist in enforcing them.

- Dimensional regulations (ex. size + placement)
- Illumination controls (ex. glare + brightness)

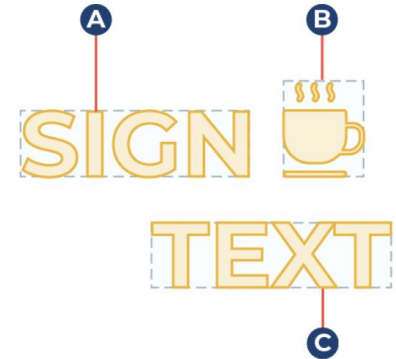
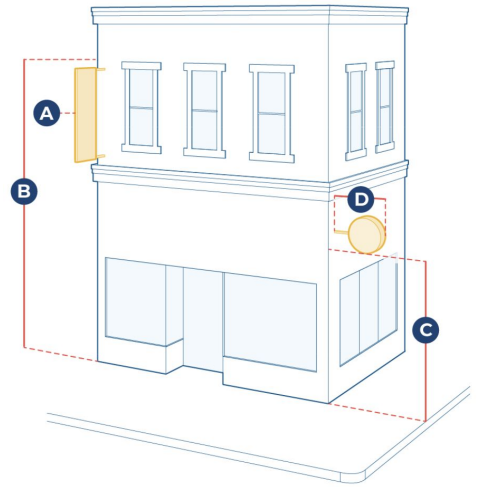
Compliant signs can be permitted without design review (OHP + Parks maintain review).

- Expected compliance rate: 80-85%
- 30 day permitting goal

Noncompliant signs require a ZBA approval (*conditional use permit*) to move forward.



Sign Frontage = A



Sign Area = A + B + C

Examples of graphic aids that will be embedded into zoning

WHAT WOULD ZONING REQUIREMENTS FLAG?



WHAT WOULD ZONING REQUIREMENTS ALLOW?



POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO INCREASING PERMIT SPEED

Re-establishing an administrative review and permitting pathway for everyday signs...

- Allows the vast majority of small businesses to get their signs permitted in 30 days or less
 - 80% reduction in average permitting timelines from existing
 - Nearly 100 years of cumulative sign permitting time saved ANNUALLY(!)
- Helps ISD + Public Works standardize enforcement of signs + regulations



CONDITIONAL SIGNS (0-5% OF SIGNS)

Conditional signs are those with unique, outsized visual or physical impacts on the public realm.

Such signs require:

- Planning Department design review
- ZBA approval (conditional use permit)
**except if otherwise specified in PDA*

***Note that Planning Department design review precedes the ZBA, as ZBA entitlements severely limit what the Planning Department may legally provide comment on.*

HIGH BUILDING SIGNS



ROOF SIGNS



ELECTRONIC SIGNS

(ENTERTAINMENT + HOSPITAL USES ONLY)



MARQUEES



ELECTRONIC SIGNS

This project proposes small tweaks to electronic sign allowances - to align zoning with existing context + process.

Existing (district-based): Forbidden, except conditional uses in...

- Theater District
- Lansdowne District
- Seaport Convention Center District

Proposed (use-based): Forbidden, except conditional uses for...

- Entertainment/events uses
- Hospital uses

THIS DOES NOT ALTER EXISTING...

- Design review + ZBA requirements
- Conditions for approval (max luminance, hours of operation)
- Licensing process (Board Approval)
- Fees system (annual rate + % advertising revenue).



FORBIDDEN SIGNS (0-5% OF SIGNS)

Forbidden signs are excessive in scale or may have harmful impacts on the public realm, and include:

- Billboards and outdoor or off-premise advertising
- Sandwich boards or other signs obstructing ingress, egress, or passage
- Signs that move, inflate, or emit matter
- Electronic signs (*all other non-entertainment/hospital uses*)

Such signs may only be permitted after obtaining a **variance** from the ZBA.



TEMPORARY SIGNS

Sign Code Modernization sets strict requirements for temporary signs, **forbidding high-building leasing signs.**

Proposed requirements:

- Max 1 sign per lot frontage
- Max 32 sqft per sign
- May not be placed above 2nd story (building)
- Permit valid for 90 days

Temporary signs exceeding these recommendations require Planning Department **design review** + ZBA (conditional use permit)

**Excludes temporary signs for community events*



ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

Signs violating these rules or erected without a permit will be subject to enforcement from City Agencies (*including the potential for fines + removal*).

Signs in Public Realm:

- Department of Public Works (DPW), *Code Enforcement*
- To submit a complaint, call 311, 617-635-4500, or email 311@boston.gov

Signs on Private Property:

- Inspectional Services Department (ISD), *Counter 3*
- To submit a complaint, call 311, 617-635-5300, or email ISD@boston.gov



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HOW-TO-GUIDE

The Planning Department is developing supplemental tools to improve accessibility to process and encourage quality design.

- Process Explainer
 - Types of review + how they work
 - Submission Requirements
- Design Guidelines
 - Relationship to architecture
 - Hierarchy of information
 - Illumination preferences
 - Character + expression of identity

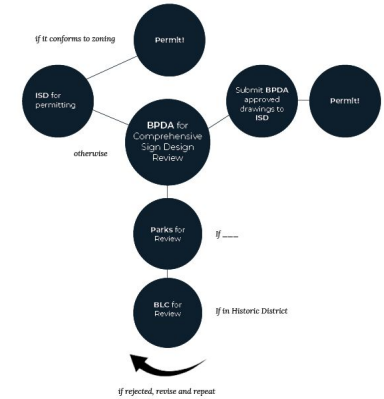
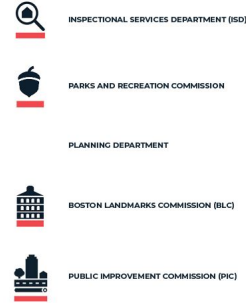
Approvals Process

Exempt Signage & Prohibited Signage

Explanation

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KEY PLAYERS:



Permitted Signs

Specific sign types allowed in Downtown Crossing district: vertical blade, horizontal blade, flat sign, awning sign, window sign, temporary window sign, icon sign, banner, big box sign, motor/marquee sign.



Prohibited Signs

Specific sign types prohibited in Downtown Crossing district: billboard, off-premise advertising, box sign, programmable electronic sign, sandwich board, waterfall awning, freestanding sign.



TIMELINE + ENGAGEMENT

- April: Public comment period, office hours, and stakeholder engagement
 - April 8: Virtual office hours (12-1pm)
 - April 14: Virtual office hours (6-7pm)
 - April 16: Virtual office hours (12-1pm)
 - April 23: Virtual office hours (6-7pm)
- May 1: Public comment period closes
- May 7: Anticipated follow-up meeting
- May-June: Anticipated legal adoption process





QUESTIONS + COMMENTS

OF ABOLITION :: OCT 31 - NOV 03 :: Tickets

THANK YOU!

For more information:
bit.ly/SignCodeModernization

Questions? Email us: SignCode@boston.gov