

# SIGN CODE MODERNIZATION

May 7, 2026



Planning Department

CITY of BOSTON

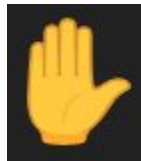
# ZOOM CONTROLS

---

- **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.



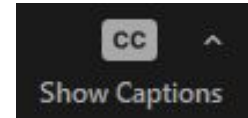
Mute/unmute



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**, Special Assistant for Design Review

**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).



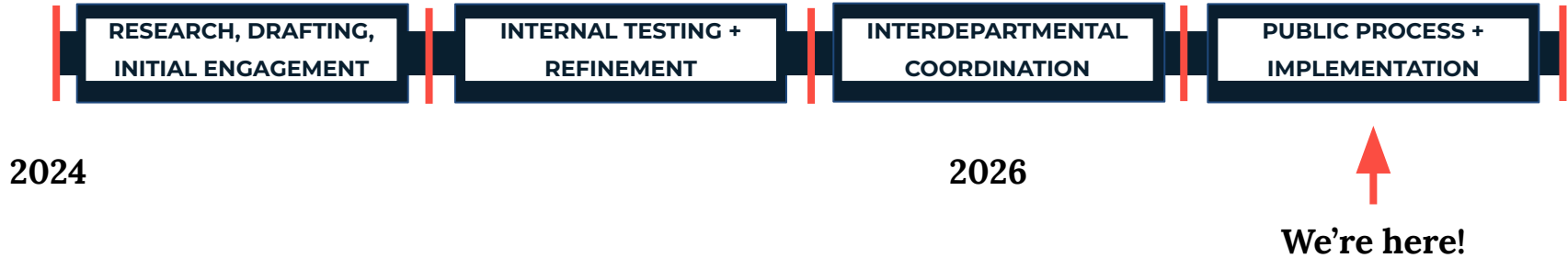
# VALUE OF SIGNS

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)

# PROJECT TIMELINE TO DATE



## Recent Updates:

- March 18: Release of draft recommendations
- March 31: Public meeting
- April: Office hours (4), public comment period, + stakeholder discussions
- May 7: Release of final recommendations + closeout meeting
- May - June: Anticipated legal adoption process

# 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



# SIGNAGE REVIEW TODAY

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

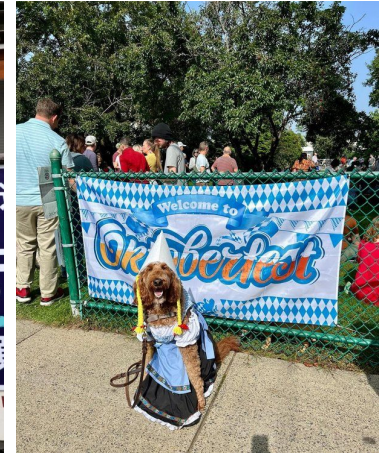
### NO REVIEW Required

- 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

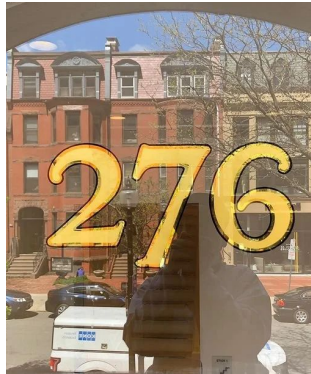
- Building addresses + directories
- Signs for community/political events
- Historic markers
- Hours of operation
- Official signs (City, State, or Federal)



## 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



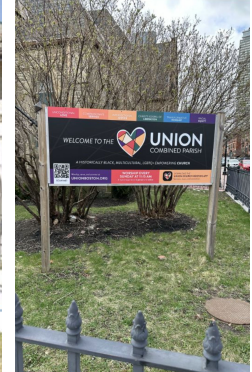
PROJECTING SIGNS



AWNING SIGNS



FREE-STANDING SIGNS



# ALLOWED SIGNS (90-95% OF SIGNS)

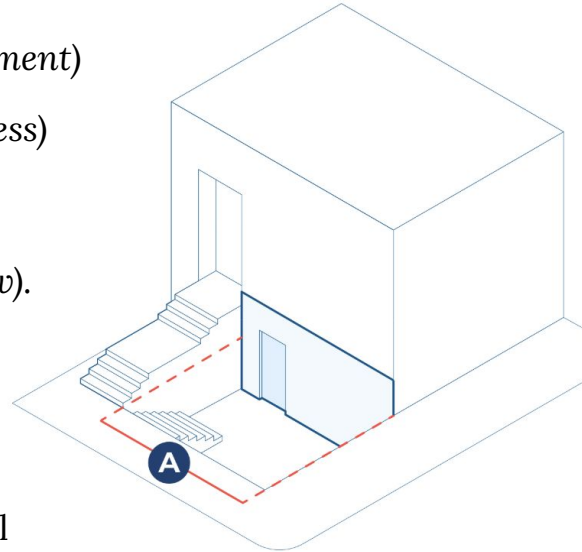
Zoning updates establish appropriate, but flexible requirements for allowed signs, and graphic measurement standards to assist in enforcing them.

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

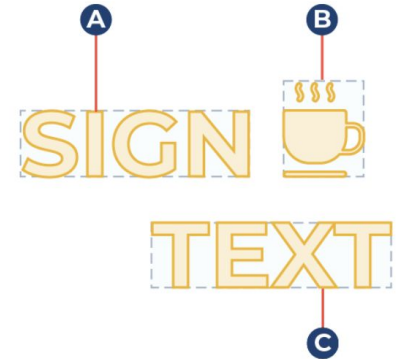
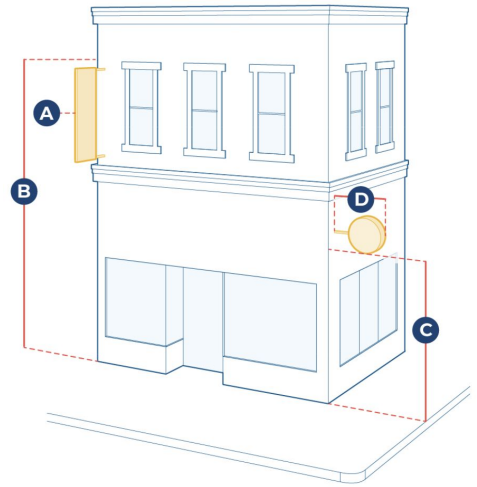
**Compliant signs** can be permitted without design review (OHP + Parks maintain review).

- 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

# 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 or IMP*

*\*\*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



# 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.

*\*except if otherwise specified in PDA or IMP*



# 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](mailto: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](mailto:ISD@boston.gov)



# 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
  - FAQs
- Design Guidelines
  - Relationship to architecture
  - Illumination preferences
  - Character + expression of identity

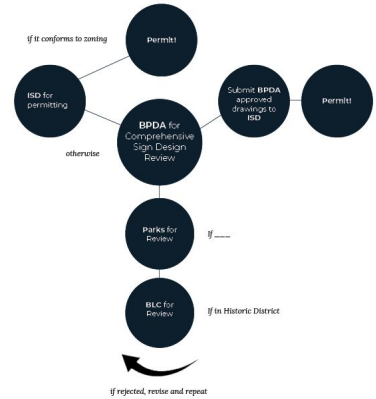
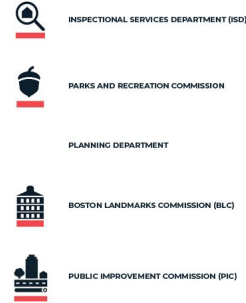
## Approvals Process

### Exempt Signage & Prohibited Signage

#### Explanation

Odipent molesti urecum rest autatur epedis sum fugiti ipunte eum fugiatum, nat. Ucidesto quas simoluptate dolupri asimgniant ipitam fugiat vid mint hucid moluptatit. La re non hucant. Blatium factum hilem las ant. Onssatam in Ila ata, TI. Sero, usperox se noodam prisquam. Fuitatod stam inam inatili cemo-

#### 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

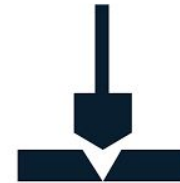
Specific sign types prohibited in Downtown Crossing district: billboard, off-premise advertising, box sign, programmable electronic sign, sandwich board, waterfall awning, freestanding sign.



# INTERDEPARTMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

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

- Inspectional Services Department (ISD)
- Office of Economic Opportunity + Inclusion (OEOI)
- 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



# WHAT WE'VE HEARD

---

Feedback received through public comment has focused on the following items:

- Electronic Signs
- Temporary Signs
- Signage Review + A80
- Additional Review Authorities
- Dimensional Requirements
- Illumination Requirements



# ELECTRONIC SIGNS

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

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

- Entertainment/events uses
- Hospital uses

THIS DOES NOT ALTER EXISTING...

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

UPDATES TO PROPOSAL...

- Clarify meaning of entertainment/events uses
- Remove 8-year zoning relief renewal requirement
- Maintain conditional process for existing electronic signs



# 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)
- Display limit of 180 days (increased from 90 days)

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

*\*Excludes temporary signs for community events*



# SIGNS + ARTICLE 80

---

## **Will Comprehensive Sign Review remain as the approval mechanism for noncompliant signs in A80B + A80E projects?**

- Signage for such projects may be discussed during the A80 review process, but when in excess of provisions of A11 will require zoning relief (similar to how projects require ZBA approval for dimensional violations)

## **What about for PDAs/IMPs?**

- CSR approvals will remain for PDAs/IMPs with language within the their PDA/IMP documents stipulating CSR as sign approval mechanism
- PDAs/IMPs without existing language may either seek to amend their PDA/IMP or follow the provisions of A11

## **Will signs in PDAs/IMPs require permits?**

- While Planning may satisfy zoning review in PDAs/IMPs (where stipulated), only ISD has the authority to issue building permits, which are required for all signs.

# ADDITIONAL REVIEW AUTHORITIES

---

## Historic Districts + Landmarks

- BLC will continue to have design review authority for signs proposed in historic districts and on officially designated landmarks (*not including pending landmarks*).

## Projection Permits

- Issued by DPW/PIC + required for signs projecting into the public right of way

## ZBA

- ONS has agreed that sign proposals requiring ZBA approval should go through an expedited community process, including a 7-14 day community flyering period.



# DIMENSIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Dimensional requirements for signs are applied equally across the city.

## 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

- Multiple rounds of test-fitting across different formats to refine standards



# ILLUMINATED SIGNS

New language added to proposed zoning that...

- Clarifies maintenance provisions to include hardware and technology updates that maintain a sign's existing illumination method and brightness

*\*Maintenance of an existing sign does not require a permit*

- Incorporates language and clarifications recommended by LIGHT Boston to illumination requirements



# REMINDER

---

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



# PROJECT TIMELINE TO DATE



2024

2026

↑  
We're here!

## Recent Updates:

- March 18: Release of draft recommendations
- March 31: Public meeting
- April: Office hours (4), public comment period, + stakeholder discussions
- May 7: Release of final recommendations + closeout meeting
- May - June: Anticipated legal adoption process



**QUESTIONS + COMMENTS**

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



**THANK YOU!**

**For more information:**  
[bit.ly/SignCodeModernization](http://bit.ly/SignCodeModernization)

**Questions? Email us:** [SignCode@boston.gov](mailto:SignCode@boston.gov)