

Sign Ordinance FAQs

Save your business time and money! Before you display or install a sign at your business location, make sure that your sign complies with the City's Sign Ordinance. Owners of signs that violate the sign ordinance are subject to prosecution and possible fines. The information below is intended to provide a brief overview of what businesses should know before they install or display a sign. For more details, and to ensure compliance, refer to [Chapter 23](#) of the City's Code of Ordinances on the City's website. Citizens are also encouraged to contact the Service Center on the 3rd Floor of City Hall (874-7474) for additional information.

What is considered a "sign"?

City ordinance defines a "sign" as a structure that is arranged, intended, designed or used as an advertisement, announcement or direction. This would include a sign, sign screen, billboard, poster panel and advertising devices of every kind. However, it does not include signs placed on the inside of display cases or show windows fronted with glass which does not project more than six (6) inches from the outside surface of the building wall.

How do I know if I need a sign permit?

Nearly all commercial signs in Columbia need a permit, including modifications to or replacements of existing signs. Businesses can verify whether a sign permit is needed by calling or stopping by the Service Center.

Why is the proposed or existing use of the property where the sign will be located important?

Sign regulations differ based on the current or proposed use of the property. For example, sign regulations for industrial areas or shopping centers can be very different than sign regulations in residential areas. In addition, the central business district has its own specific sign regulations.

Where can I get a copy of the City's sign ordinance?

Chapter 23 of the City's Code of Ordinances can be found in the following location on the City's website:
http://www.gocolumbiamo.com/Council/Columbia_Code_of_Ordinances/Chapter_23/index.html.

I want to change the face of my existing sign, do I need a permit? Does maintenance of my existing sign require a permit?

Yes, a permit is required prior to the erection, construction, reconstruction, alteration, moving, conversion or maintenance of any sign.

Can I display a temporary banner or sign on my building?

Yes, temporary signs are allowed subject to the following conditions:

1. A permit is obtained from the Service Center.
2. The sign does not exceed 32 square feet in size or 4 feet in height.
3. The sign meets the setback requirements of the sign ordinance.
4. The sign is not displayed for more than 14 days in a calendar year.

What if I want to display a sign in my business window?

Signs may be placed on the inside of display cases or show windows provided that the glass does not project more than six (6) inches from the outside surface of the building wall.

I want to place a portable or A-frame type sign in front of my business. Is this allowed?

City ordinance refers to these signs as “sandwich boards”. Each business in the central business district with a street level entrance is allowed one sandwich board sign located on the sidewalk directly in front of the business, provided that a straight, unobstructed pathway at least 60 inches in width is maintained on the sidewalk. The sandwich board shall not exceed 8 square feet and cannot be attached to the building. A permit is not required for a sandwich board. Outside the central business district, where sidewalks are typically only 5 feet wide, sandwich board signs are not allowed within the public right of way.

How big can my sign be?

The maximum size allowed is determined by a number of factors, such as, among other things, the zoning district of the property and the adjacent street classification. Refer to the table in Section 23-25 of the sign ordinance for details and consider working with a professional sign company familiar with the City’s sign ordinance to help ensure compliance.

Where on my property can I put a sign?

Generally, signs must be located out of the right of way and clear of site obstructions for safe vehicular turning movements. Additional details can apply depending upon other factors such as the zoning district and adjacent street classification. Refer to the sign ordinance and contact the Service Center for specific questions.

What is a nonconforming sign?

Freestanding signs lawfully in existence on January 6, 1992 and on-premise signs lawfully in existence on December 20, 1993 are considered to be nonconforming signs. Nonconforming signs are not allowed to be enlarged or increased in height but the sign face itself may be altered as needed with a sign permit.

Can I install a sign that is not allowed by the sign ordinance?

No, signs that violate the sign ordinance are not allowed and are subject prosecution. However, a variance from the Board of Adjustment can be applied for if desired. To appear before the Board of Adjustment you will first need to obtain a denial letter from the Service Center.

How do I apply for a sign permit?

A sign permit application can be obtained on the City website in the following location: http://www.gocolumbiamo.com/community_development/bsd/building_codes_permits_and_applications/documents/SignPermitApp0512.pdf. Upon completion the application can be faxed (874-7283) or delivered to the Service Center.

When will I get my sign permit?

The review and processing of sign permits typically takes 3 - 5 business days from the date that the application was submitted. Following review the applicant will either be provided a list of corrections to be made or notified that a permit can be picked up at the Service Center.

Will I have to pay a fee for the sign permit?

Yes, the fee for signs, billboards and other display structures for which permits are required is \$45.00 for the first 50 square feet of sign area and \$0.15 for each additional square foot over 50.

Can I attach a sign to a utility pole or street sign?

No, signs are not allowed within the City right of way. The only exceptions to this regulation are the Special Business District, the public library, and some of the local colleges, universities, and hospitals which have attachment agreements with the City.

I've been considering buying yard-stake signs to advertise my business. Where can I put these?

Yard-stake signs violate the sign ordinance and are not allowed. Note: The City is authorized to remove unlawful signs on the street right of way and on property owned by the City.

Can I install a flag on my property?

The sign ordinance defines a flag as “a piece of fabric attached to a staff.” Section 23-2(k) states that “no commercial flags shall be allowed except that a business may display one flag no larger than forty (40) square feet which bears the symbol or trademark or name of the business. No further advertising shall be permitted on such flags.”

What is a wind sign? Can I install one on my property?

The sign ordinance defines a wind sign as “a display or pennants, streamers, whirligigs or similar devices strung together and activated by wind.” Section 23-2(d) specifically prohibits wind signs.

What is an off-premise sign? Where are they allowed?

The sign ordinance defines an off-premise sign as “a sign which contains a message unrelated to a business or profession conducted, or to a commodity, service or entertainment, sold or offered upon the premises where such sign is located.” The only place where an off-premise sign is allowed is as defined in Section 23-16 Billboards or in the case of an open house or model home which allows a maximum of three (3) on- or off-premise signs pertaining to a specific piece of property, not exceeding four (4) square feet in sign surface area per sign, shall be allowed, provided that the signs are permitted only during the hours the home is open for viewing.

Common violations of this ordinance include signs placed near busy streets advertising a product or service that is not related to the business on the property. This would also include directional signs placed in the right of way of businesses nearby.

How does the sign ordinance address inflatable signs?

Inflatable signs come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and types. Some recent examples encountered by staff include the wacky, wavy inflatable arm flailing tube man, blimps, gorillas, and sheep. All are considered portable and/or wind signs and are therefore not allowed per Section 23-2 of the sign ordinance.

How does the sign ordinance address political signs?

Political signs are considered noncommercial signs and are regulated by Section 23-18 of the sign ordinance. There is no time limit for how long these signs can be in place. The sign must meet the size requirements of the zoning and street classification of the property, typically sixteen (16) square feet in residential areas. Banners are only allowed for fourteen (14) days per year. Signs must be located on private property, typically one foot behind the sidewalk. The City's enforcement policy regarding political signs is as follows:

For signs which constitute a hazard (typically those obstructing traffic sight distance):

1. If the sign is in the right of way, the property owner is notified, if present, that the sign must be taken down immediately. If the owner is not present or fails to comply, the sign is removed and placed in a designated area behind the dumpster at City Hall (northwest corner). Notice is also left on the property.
2. If the sign is not in the right of way, a correction notice is issued allowing the owner twenty four (24) hours to correct the violation.

For signs which do not constitute a hazard:

1. If the sign is in the right of way, a correction notice is issued allowing the owner seven (7) days to correct the violation by moving the sign onto private property. If the sign is not removed by the end of the seven (7) days, the sign is removed and placed in a designated area behind the dumpster at City Hall (northwest corner).
2. If the sign is not in the right of way, do nothing.

Who do I call if I have more questions?

Contact 874-7474 for additional questions or visit the Service Center on the 3rd Floor of City Hall between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Monday – Friday.