

Zoning Text Amendment #2025-00005 - Murals

Issue: (A) Initiation of a Text Amendment and (B) Public hearing and consideration of a Text Amendment to update Article IX of the Zoning Ordinance to add provisions for a mural program.	Planning Commission Hearing:	September 4, 2025
	City Council Hearing:	September 13, 2025
Staff: Tony LaColla, AICP, Division Chief, tony.lacolla@alexandriava.gov Rachel Drescher, Urban Planner, rachel.drescher@alexandriava.gov Sam Shelby, Principal Planner, sam.shelby@alexandriava.gov		

PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION, SEPTEMBER 4, 2025: On a motion by Vice Chair Koenig, seconded by Commissioner Lannihan, the Planning Commission voted to initiate Zoning Text Amendment #2025-00005. The motion carried on a vote to 6-0. On a motion by Vice Chair Koenig, seconded by Commissioner Manor, the Planning Commission voted to recommend approval of Zoning Text Amendment #2025-00005. The motion carried on a vote of 6-0.

Reason: The Planning Commission agreed with staff's analysis.

Discussion:

Chair McMahon asked staff whether the regulation of text size was related to the concept that sign ordinances must be content neutral. Staff confirmed that this was correct. Chair McMahon also asked how the proposal compared to the provisions in the old sign ordinance. Staff explained that the past ordinance needed improvement and that case law showed that having separate mural provisions would be the safest legal route to provide flexibility for murals.

Vice Chair Koenig stated he was supportive of the approach to distinguish murals from signs to encourage murals. He also highlighted the legacy clause which will ensure that current murals may continue to exist.

Commissioner Brown stated he thought the language was well researched and an excellent start to provide flexibility for murals. He acknowledged some potential implementation challenges as there could be some subjectivity in determining what would be an illustration versus what would be text.

I. Summary

Staff proposes amendments to the City’s sign regulations to provide flexibility for murals within defined parameters. The proposed changes include:

- (A) Add language to establish the purpose of mural provisions and define “mural.”
- (B) Establish mural provisions.

II. Background

Murals provide opportunities for creative expression, promote art and culture, contribute to neighborhood character and vibrant streetscapes. Additionally, several recently adopted small areas plans, such as Arlandria-Chirilagua and Alex West, encourage murals and art to activate spaces and promote neighborhood identity.

Under the Zoning Ordinance amendments to the sign regulations made in April 2025, murals became subject to the sign regulations. However, because of the benefits murals can provide, staff recommends that they be allowed under specific standards.

Staff reviewed how other jurisdictions regulate murals, specifically looking at Arlington and Loudoun Counties because they have mural programs. Arlington County does not allow text facing a public roadway or any commercial content; whereas Loudoun County takes a more flexible approach, allowing limited text and commercial content. Staff also reviewed existing murals in Alexandria to understand what regulations would be most appropriate within the city.

III. Discussion of Proposed Text Changes

Staff recommendations are as follows:

(A) Add language to establish the purpose of murals provisions and define “mural.”

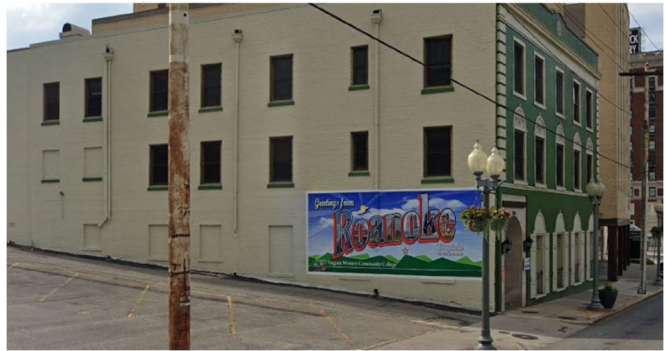
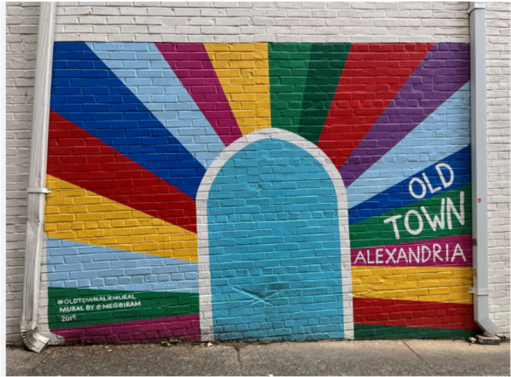
Staff proposes adding the following purpose statement to explain the intent of the mural section: *The purpose of these provisions is to encourage the creation of vibrant areas to serve as centers for human activity, encourage the development of inviting, distinctive public spaces that promote culture and the arts, and create usable, visually appealing streetscapes and sidewalks that foster street-level activity and public interaction.*

Staff proposes defining a mural as: *A work of art or artistic expression that is generally applied, painted, or placed directly on the exterior of a structure.*

(B) Establish mural provisions.

Murals can represent an opportunity for creative expression and can contribute to neighborhood character and identity. Staff recognizes that murals can also include distracting elements. Due to this, staff recommends any text, numbers, symbols, logos, or trademarks within murals to be

subject to Section 9-200 - Sign regulations and limitations. This would allow a mural to occupy an entire wall with artistic elements, while still limiting the size of its text, numbers, symbols, logos, or trademarks. These elements are regulated in the existing sign ordinance for similar reasons: to minimize visual distractions and help maintain a harmonious environment. Similar to the approval path available for other wall signs, staff proposes that murals that do not comply with the proposed size limits would also be eligible to request administrative Special Use Permit (SUP) approval for additional sign area up to two square feet for every one foot of wall width. Sign area that exceeds this amount would require a full hearing SUP.



Examples of murals allowed by-right



Example of a mural with text exceeding the sign area allowance but complies with the administrative SUP limitations



Examples of murals with text exceeding the sign area allowance for an administrative SUP, requiring City Council review

Murals that comply with the proposed provisions would not be subject to sign ordinance regulations, including Section 9-300 which require signs within historic districts to obtain a certificate of appropriateness from the Board of Architectural Review. After reviewing existing murals, staff found that most would comply with the proposed regulations. For the few that do not, staff recommends including an allowance for murals which were in existence as of April 26, 2025.

Staff also recommends requiring murals to incorporate artistic media such as paint or tile to promote artistry. Staff recommends including this provision to make as clear a distinction as possible between murals and signs.

IV. Recommendation

Staff recommends initiation and approval of the proposed text amendment.

Staff: Tony LaColla, AICP, Division Chief
 Rachel Drescher, Urban Planner
 Sam Shelby, Principal Planner

V. Proposed Text Changes

9-102 – Definitions.

(K.1) *Mural*. A work of art or artistic expression that is generally applied, painted, or placed directly on the exterior of a structure.

9-205 – Murals

The purpose of these provisions is to encourage the creation of vibrant areas to serve as centers for human activity, encourage the development of inviting, distinctive public spaces that promote culture and the arts, and create usable, visually appealing streetscapes and sidewalks that foster street-level activity and public interaction.

(A) Notwithstanding any contrary provisions under Articles IX, murals shall be permitted on any structure in any zone subject to the following requirements:

- (1) Murals shall incorporate paint, tile, or similar artistic media;
- (2) Murals shall be maintained in good condition; and
- (3) Any text, numbers, symbols, logos, or trademarks within the mural shall be considered signs and subject to Section 9-200.

(B) Any mural installed or displayed on or before April 26, 2025 may continue to be displayed and kept in good condition.