

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 21, 2025

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Architectural Review

FROM: Brendan Harris, Urban Planner II, Historic Preservation

ISSUE: Summary of proposed updates to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts*

BAR staff is currently working with the Design Guidelines committee to update the signs chapter of the Parker-Gray design guidelines. Concurrently, staff is proposing to update the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts*. The proposed updates are intended to make the policies clearer and more concise for the reader, without changing any of the policies, such as sign number or area limits. The existing policies are found on pages 2-4 of this document, and the proposed policies are found on pages 5-7.

One notable change is the inclusion of projecting signs as a subset of wall signs, rather than projecting signs being classified as a separate sign type. This is being proposed because the new sign ordinance recently adopted by City Council has reclassified projecting signs as a type of wall sign. The specific policies for projecting signs would remain the same. Additionally, some definitions have been updated based on new definitions found in the zoning ordinance. The other proposed changes are minor and include reorganizing the headings and the order in which the information is presented. Lastly, there is a placeholder to add a hyperlink to the new design guidelines chapter for signs once it is adopted by the Board.

Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts

If permitted under the Zoning Ordinance or City Code, the following signs may be approved administratively pursuant to sections 10-113 and 10-203 of the Zoning Ordinance. Please note that terms not defined here are set out in the Zoning Ordinance or City Code.

SECTION I: CRITERIA FOR GENERAL SIGN TYPES

1. Sign Types

A total of any three signs from the following sign types may be approved for a non-corner building and up to four signs may be approved for a corner building (having frontage on two streets or a street and an alley). To receive approval of the maximum number of signs for your building type, one must be a changeable copy sign. Existing wall and projecting signs will be included in the total *number* of signs. However, all signs on the building, except temporary signs, count toward the total sign *area* allowed for administrative approval. Only the following sign types qualify for administrative approval.

Wall sign

A wall sign is a sign attached to a wall or painted on or against a flat vertical surface of a structure. The following signs are considered wall signs:

- A **flat** sign on a backing affixed to a wall;
- An **individual letter, pin-mounted** sign installed on a wood frieze board or sign band but not directly installed into a masonry wall;
- A **painted** wall sign, provided that it is painted on a frieze board or on an already painted building wall; and,
- **Changeable copy** sign
 - Only **one** sign, not to exceed 4 square feet in area, may be installed ~~for~~ on a building;
 - It should be located where it does not encroach into the public right-of-way, damage the building or hide building features;
 - It must be constructed of a durable material (such as wood or metal), in a single color, and may be no more than 4 inches deep;
 - No part of the sign may be back-lit or internally illuminated. The sign case may have subtle external illumination, such as a concealed LED rope or targeted mini spotlight; and,
 - The sign copy must be changed manually.

Projecting sign

A projecting sign, also known as a blade sign or a hanging sign, has two sides and projects from a wall or from the corner of a corner building. The maximum area of a projecting sign is 7 square feet and only one side of the sign is counted toward total sign area. The bottom of the sign must

be a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by vehicles. The sign and its bracket cannot extend more than 4 feet from the building wall, more than 4 feet into the public right-of-way, or within 1 foot of the curb line (City Code Sec. 5-2-29). Where feasible, new hanging signs should be hung from existing sign brackets previously approved by the BAR or administratively under this process.

2. Permitted Total Sign Area

All signs on the building, except temporary signs, count toward the total sign area allowed for administrative approval for each frontage. Total signage square footage may not exceed $\frac{3}{4}$ (75%) of the length of the building frontage (linear feet) where the signs are located.

3. Sign Lighting

Targeted external illumination (e.g. mini spotlights) which is small in size, illuminates only the proposed sign, and does not damage the building in installation may be approved administratively. Gooseneck lighting or halo illumination must be reviewed and approved by the BAR.

Window sign

Window signage may not exceed 20% of the glazing area of the window where it is installed. The total area of window signs shall be included in determining the total area of signs on the wall that contains the window.

SECTION II: GENERAL REQUIREMENTS AND INFORMATION

- If required, applicants must obtain a separate sign permit (and/or a building permit) through Code Administration.
- A sign which meets the requirements of a coordinated sign master plan which has already been approved by the BAR for a multi-tenant commercial building can be administratively approved by staff, regardless of whether the sign otherwise meets these requirements for administrative approval.
- Prior to receiving an administrative approval for signage, BAR staff will conduct research and/or visit the site to evaluate the subject property and its context to determine if the proposed signage is appropriate.
- Anchors for all signs and sign brackets must be installed into the mortar joints on masonry buildings to avoid damage to the brick or stone. Upon removal of signage and hardware, the tenant and/or business owner, in consultation with staff, shall appropriately repair damage caused by the sign (see *Masonry Guidelines*).

- Previously approved signs and awnings, or awnings with signage, may be replaced in the same size and material, and with new signs, provided that they have the same or less sign area. These awnings and signs may be administratively approved by staff.

All other sign types not specifically addressed in this policy must be reviewed and approved by the BAR. Regardless of whether the sign appears to meet the above criteria, staff may determine that the sign(s) must be approved by the BAR at a public hearing.

Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts

Adopted 12/14/09; Amended 05/21/25

If permitted under the Zoning Ordinance or City Code, signs may be approved administratively pursuant to sections 10-113 and 10-203 of the Zoning Ordinance. Please note that terms not defined here are set out in the Zoning Ordinance or City Code. For more information on BAR guidelines for signs, refer to the Design Guidelines chapter (hyperlink to be added).

SECTION I: CRITERIA FOR SIGN TYPES, NUMBER, AREA, AND LIGHTING

1. Permitted Sign Types

The following sign types qualify for administrative approval. Any sign type not specifically addressed in this policy must be reviewed by the Board at a public hearing, including but not limited to new awning/canopy signs and new freestanding/monument signs. However, any sign previously approved by the Board may be resurfaced through the administratively approval process.

Wall Sign: a sign attached to a building or painted on or against a flat vertical surface of a structure. The following signs are considered wall signs:

- A **flat** sign on a backing affixed to a wall;
- An **individual letter, pin-mounted** sign installed on a sign band or backing rather than anchored directly onto a wall;
- A **painted** wall sign painted on a frieze board or on an already painted building wall;
- A **projecting** sign (also known as a blade sign or a hanging sign) that has two sides and projects from a wall or from the corner of a corner building.

Changeable Copy Sign: a non-electronic sign that is designed so that characters, letters or illustrations can be changed or rearranged without altering the face or surface of the sign. Common examples of changeable copy signs include restaurant menu boxes and directory signs for multi-tenant commercial buildings. The following guidelines apply to changeable copy signs:

- It should be located where it does not encroach into the public right-of-way, damage the building, or hide architectural features;
- It must be constructed of a durable material (such as wood or metal), in a single color, and may be no more than 4 inches deep;
- No part of the sign may be back-lit or internally illuminated. The sign case may have subtle external illumination, such as a concealed LED rope or targeted mini spotlight;
- The sign copy must be changed manually.

Window Sign: a sign visible through any window or door and attached to or within four feet in front of or behind a window or door.

2. Permitted Total Number of Signs

- Wall signs and changeable copy signs are included in the total number of signs permitted for administrative approval. Window signs and temporary signs are not included in this calculation.
- On a corner building (having frontage on two streets or a street and a public alley), a total of three wall signs may be approved, plus one changeable copy sign.
- On a non-corner building, a total of two wall signs may be approved, plus one changeable copy sign.

3. Permitted Total Sign Area

- Sign area is the sum of the areas of the smallest rectangle around each individual word, figure, design, symbol, logo, or similar and any distinctive background, separate from the building, containing these elements;
- The maximum permitted sign area is calculated separately for each frontage of a building and resets for every 20 feet of building height;
- All signs on a building, including window signs but excluding temporary signs, count toward the total sign area permitted;
- The total area of all signs displayed on a building wall may not exceed 0.75 square feet for each foot of building width;
- The maximum permitted area of a projecting sign is 7 square feet and only one side of the sign is counted toward the total sign area;
- The maximum permitted area of a changeable copy sign is 4 square feet;
- Window signage may not exceed 20% of the glazing area of the window where it is installed.

4. Permitted Sign Lighting

Targeted external illumination, such as mini spotlights, which illuminates only the proposed sign and does not damage the building in installation, may be approved administratively. Gooseneck lighting, internal illumination, halo illumination, and back-lit illumination must be reviewed by the Board.

SECTION II: GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

- Before a sign can be administratively approved, BAR staff will conduct research and/or visit the site to evaluate the subject property and its context to determine if the proposed signage is appropriate. Signs should be designed in styles and materials that are appropriate and sympathetic to the age and architectural style of the building.
- Applicants must obtain a separate sign permit (and/or a building permit) through Code Administration.
- A sign which meets the requirements of a comprehensive sign plan which has already been approved by the Board for a multi-tenant commercial building can be

administratively approved by staff, regardless of whether the sign otherwise meets these requirements for administrative approval.

- Signs should be attached in a manner that causes the least damage to the building material. Where feasible, new hanging signs should be hung from existing sign brackets previously approved by the BAR or administratively under this process. On masonry buildings, anchors and brackets should be installed into the mortar joints to avoid damage to the brick or stone. Upon removal of the signage and hardware, any damage caused by the sign should be repaired.
- The bottom of a projecting sign must be a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by vehicles. The sign and its bracket cannot extend more than 4 feet from the building wall, more than 4 feet into the public right-of-way, or within 1 foot of the curb line (City Code Sec. 5-2-29).
- Regardless of whether a sign appears to meet the administrative approval criteria, staff may determine that the sign must be approved by the Board at a public hearing.