

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 14, 2016

TO: CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE PARKER-GRAY DISTRICT BOARD
OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

FROM: HISTORIC PRESERVATION STAFF

SUBJECT: SIGN CHANGES AFFECTING THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS:
ZONING ORDINANCE TEXT AMENDMENT (FOR INFORMATION)
ADMINISTRATIVE SIGN POLICY (FOR VOTE)

The Board has received a number of updates during the on-going efforts to amend both the City's zoning ordinance sign chapter (Chapter 9) and the Board's administrative approval sign policy. This memo summarizes the final recommended changes to both documents. The zoning ordinance text amendment is docketed for the Planning Commission and City Council hearings in January 2017. The revised BAR administrative sign policy must be adopted by the Board.

Zoning Ordinance text amendment

Chapter 9 of the zoning ordinance sets out City-wide sign regulations, with Section 9-300 addressing signs within the historic districts. The full chapter was amended by City Council on June 18, 2016 in order to delete all references to sign content, including Section 9-300. At that time, it was noted that there would likely be additional amendments to section 9-300 for signs within the historic districts.

The majority of the proposed amendments are intended to make this section read more clearly and concisely. As a result, confusing or contradictory sections were either deleted, or combined. The only *substantive* change is to signs that are exempt from Certificate of Appropriateness approval per section (9-301), as noted below:

Current Certificate of Appropriateness exemptions (adopted summer 2016):

- Any non-illuminated window sign per building that is less than four feet in area.
- One temporary sign, no more than six square feet.

Proposed Certificate of Appropriateness exemptions (scheduled for January 2017 City Council adoption):

- Any legal window sign that is not internally illuminated.
- One sign of one square foot or less that is not internally illuminated.
- One temporary wall sign no greater than 20 square feet in area and located no more than 20 feet above the building's average finished grade.

Staff recommends that unlighted **window signs** no longer require a Certificate of Appropriateness, which is a significant departure from the Board's previous policies and practices. The primary reason for this recommendation is that these signs are often installed for a limited period of time. They could be window decals that a business changes with the seasons (Ann Taylor Loft at 423 King Street is a good example), flyers for community events or activities, or "sale" signs. The zoning ordinance is already quite restrictive with respect to window signs City-wide – no more than 20% of a window can be obscured by window signs – so this change would merely limit BAR's role in reviewing, and attempting to regulate, these signs. Eliminating window signs from BAR review will also allow staff to focus on permanent signs. Additionally, staff notes that most stores in the historic districts utilize their storefronts to display merchandise, so staff is not concerned that there will be a proliferation of window signs with this change.

The addition of a **one square foot sign** exemption adds back an exemption that existed prior to last summer's ordinance change. This exemption allows signs such as historic plaques or modest tenant signs (such as signs for upper level tenants) to be installed without requiring a Certificate of Appropriateness.

With respect to **temporary signs**, BAR staff feels that a six square foot sign is too small for many buildings in the historic districts (6 square foot being the typical size of a residential real estate sign), particularly those on Washington Street or corner buildings. A single sign of 20 square foot is the typical size real estate lease signs on a commercial building. Since by definition temporary signs are already time limited in the zoning ordinance, staff finds that increasing the allowable exempted size to 20 square feet benefits both the property owner and BAR by eliminating review of these temporary signs. Similar to the change proposed with window signs, this allows BAR and BAR staff to focus on permanent signs and correcting more egregious violations.

Administrative Sign Policy Changes

As a result of the changes required to make the zoning ordinance content neutral, the BAR's Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs (sign policy), first approved in 2009, must also be amended. Staff has also taken the opportunity to significantly streamline the document so that it is more much straightforward and user-friendly.

Summary

The proposed changes to the ordinance and to the administrative approval sign policy are positive changes for the business community, as the changes expand what signs are exempt from review and also what can be approved by staff administratively. Staff recommends that the Board:

1. **Recommend** that Planning Commission and City Council adopt the proposed zoning ordinance changes, and
2. **Adopt** the revised *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs*, which will go into effect immediately.

Attachments: Section 9 Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment (adopted June 18, 2016)
 Section 9-300 proposed text
 Draft Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs