

Signage



St. Joseph Landmark Commission

Signs play an important role in helping to define the visual quality of St. Joseph's historic districts. Both residential neighborhoods and commercial areas include signage in public and private spaces as a means of communicating information. Used appropriately, signs can effectively convey information and enhance the environment in which they are placed. Used inappropriately, signs can create visual clutter in an otherwise harmonious grouping of structures.

Public traffic, informational, and directional signs are found throughout St. Joseph's residential and commercial historic districts. Because of their placement, proliferation, and standardized fabrication, they often erode the integrity of the streetscape and disrupt the pedestrian experience. Whenever possible, public signs should be consolidated and placed on uniform poles to reduce visual clutter. Standard locations should be designated for public signs in an effort to minimize their impact. Public signs should be located a sufficient distance from the curb to prevent damage to and from automobiles. In Downtown St. Joseph, the recommendations for public signage outlined in the St. Joseph Downtown Master Plan should be followed.

Signs in residential neighborhoods often take the form of historic district and property identification markers or signs advertising a home-based business such as a bed & breakfast establishment or a tour home. Historic district signs are usually placed at the boundaries of the historic district and are often located at prominent intersections for visibility. Said signs should be approved by both the municipality and the Landmark Commission prior to installation. Historic identification markers for individual buildings may be approved as a minor works item by staff following approval of the sign standard for the historic district by the Landmark Commission. A sign permit may then be obtained. Diversity of design may be accommodated for each designated historic district. Within the boundaries of each historic district, however, the sign design shall remain the same to achieve thematic consistency and neighborhood identity and to aid the public in recognizing the sign. Historic identification signs should be based on historic research and include the name of the original owner, date of construction, and the name and/or logo of the historic district. Multiple names may be included if those names are tied to important events or changes to the property such as a significant remodeling or restoration. The applicant requesting the historic identification sign should provide the City's Historic Preservation Planner with a copy of his/her research and justification for the name of the property to be placed on the sign.

The size of a sign is an important consideration. While signs should be consistent with the provisions found within the City's sign ordinance for the applicable zoning district in which they are found, said signs may be limited in terms of their size based on a review of the sign and its potential impact on the subject property by the Landmark Commission. In other words, the Landmark Commission may impose a stricter standard than the zoning ordinance permits. While highway commercial strip development may require large signs to catch the attention of speeding motorists,



Carefully placed signage will convey the needed message without distracting from the character of a site or building



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slow-moving vehicles on residential streets and pedestrians on foot need only a sign sized for legibility at a reasonable distance. Signs should be appropriately scaled to the building and should be positioned in a manner that does not obscure or destroy character-defining architectural features. In some cases, it may be less obtrusive to locate a sign on a historic structure than in the yard.

In commercial buildings with traditional storefronts, signs are often positioned in a signboard frieze located above the first floor display windows. In this location the sign serves as a boundary between the ground level storefront and the upper façade and/or cornice. Signs traditionally have also been placed on canvas awnings that were installed at the storefront level to block direct sunlight and to shelter the pedestrian from the elements. Re-installation of canvas awnings is encouraged as part of commercial storefront rehabilitation activities.

When signs are fastened into masonry, efforts should be made to anchor the signs into mortar joints between masonry units instead of directly into the masonry to avoid irreparable damage. Proper flashing between the sign and the wall should occur in order to prevent water penetration. If a yard location for a sign is chosen, consider placement in an area that does not block one's view of the building or an important landscape element from the public right-of-way. Low signs are encouraged. Plantings placed around the base of the sign will help to integrate the sign with the landscape.

The preferred material for signs in the historic district is wood. Neon and metal may be appropriate in certain applications in the City's commercial districts. Stone may also be appropriate for historic district identification signs. These signs may be incorporated into retaining walls and in sidewalks. Plastic has no precedent in a historic district and should be avoided. Illumination of signage generally should be avoided in residential areas. When deemed necessary, lighting should be indirect or concealed, external, non-flashing, and non-glaring. The level or direction of illumination should not be distracting to neighbors.

Graphic simplicity and compatibility with the existing architecture are the basic principles of designing effective and attractive signage. Simply designed signs which identify, at most, the name, function, and perhaps the address of a business are preferred. Simple stylized lettering rather than an overly ornate lettering style is recommended to enhance readability. Creativity is also welcomed.

One area of interest in the City's commercial districts is the presence of historic "ghost business" signs that remain on buildings. These signs are an important part of Downtown's character and their preservation is encouraged. It is not necessary to repaint these signs. Merely allowing them to exist in their decayed state and gradually fade away into history is an acceptable method of preservation. Property owners that have such signs on their buildings are encouraged to record them with photographs.

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Should the repainting of these ghost signs be desired, the Landmark Commission will treat them as mural art.

Mural painting as an art form offers opportunities to enrich the urban environment in both residential and commercial districts in St. Joseph. Often murals present a means of beautifying an exposed blank wall that has resulted from the demolition of an adjoining structure. In other situations, murals provide a whimsical way to create “architecture” when budgetary situations do not allow for the real architecture to be created. While mural painting is not appropriate in all situations, the Landmark Commission does acknowledge its importance as an art form and as a means of enriching the visual environment of a given area. When reviewing requests for murals, the Landmark Commission will evaluate the appropriateness of its placement and its impact on historic building features. The Commission will not endeavor to evaluate the appropriateness of the content due to the subjectivity of art.



Many of St. Joseph's commercial buildings retain “ghost business” signs. While repainting is not necessarily desired, retention of these fading images of the past is encouraged.

It should be noted that certain signs that are of a temporary nature do not require approval by the Landmark Commission. This includes real estate, political, and garage sale signs, among others. Such signs, however, may require a permit by the City. Property owners are encouraged to contact the City's Planning and Community Services Department at 816/271-8642 to determine whether or not a permit is required.

Signage: Guidelines

1. Design signs such that the size and proportion of the sign reflects the proportions and dimensional relationships of the building. Signs should not obscure or overwhelm the basic architectural character of the building.
2. Consolidate public signs, whenever possible, to reduce visual clutter.
3. Locate public signs a sufficient distance from the curb to prevent damage to and from automobiles.
4. Follow recommendations contained in the St. Joseph Downtown Master Plan for public and private signage in Downtown.
5. Adhere to the City's sign ordinance for dimensional restrictions on private signage. As per Section 31-131 Supplemental sign regulations of the City of St. Joseph Zoning Ordinance, properties located in local or National Register-listed districts, with the exception of those found in a C-2 Downtown Business District, shall be limited to 1) two (2) identification signs, one (1) square foot each; 2) a maximum height of five (5) feet for free-standing signs; and 3) a maximum sign area of four (4) square feet in area, either wall or free-standing.



Locate free-standing signs in areas that will not obscure a building or site's architectural elements or important site features.

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Signage: Guidelines continued

6. Recognize that the Landmark Commission may impose additional requirements on the size, location, design, lighting, and material of the sign.
7. Install historic district identification markers at the boundaries of the district near prominent intersections for increased visibility.
8. Use the style of historic identification marker that has been approved for the historic district in which you own property.
9. Locate an historic identification marker where it will not obscure or damage character-defining architectural features of the property. Information on said markers should include the name of the original owner, date of construction, and name and/or logo of the historic district. More than one name on the sign may be permitted if those individuals are linked to an important event or change to the property. Consult the City's Historic Preservation Planner prior to installation of a sign. Provide documentation on the history of the property.
10. Locate wall signs on traditional, storefront commercial buildings in the signboard frieze area located between the ground level storefront and the upper façade. On masonry, secure signs at mortar joints to prevent damage to the face of the masonry unit.
11. Provide proper flashing into the wall for wall-mounted signs to prevent deterioration.
12. Locate free-standing signs in areas that will not obscure a building or site's architectural elements or important features. Low shrubbery or plantings around the base of the sign may be required by the Landmark Commission.
13. Use materials that are compatible with the building's and historic district's overall character. Appropriate materials for signs in residential areas are wood and stone. These materials, along with metal, neon, and canvas may be appropriate for commercial buildings.
14. Choose colors and lettering styles carefully to ensure ease of readability and to harmonize with the architecture. Limit the number of lettering styles used on any one sign to two or three. Carefully space between letters, words, and lines. For an uncluttered appearance, limit the area occupied by lettering to not more than two-thirds of the sign area.
15. Preserve and maintain historic "ghost business" signs as they enrich the character of an area.
16. Consider the placement of murals and their impact on historic building features when contemplating the use of this art form.