

SUMMARY

DATE:	April 23, 2025
REQUEST:	Ordinance Amendment to Ukiah City Code to update the City's sign regulations, modifying standards for signage type, placement, illumination, and design consistency across zoning districts.
LOCATION:	Within the incorporated areas of the City of Ukiah
ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:	Categorical Exemption pursuant to CEQA Guidelines §15301, §15303, §15311, and (CEQA Guidelines §15061(b)(3)
RECOMMENDATION:	Adopt a resolution making the Planning Commission's report and recommendation to the City Council on a proposed amendment to Ukiah City Code.
STAFF	Jesse Davis, Chief Planning Manager

INTRODUCTION

The proposed ordinance amends the City's sign regulations within Ukiah City Code Division 9, Chapter 7, entitled "Signs," to ensure consistency in these regulations across zoning districts and address concerns related to prohibited signage. Key modifications include clarifying signage types and illumination standards while aligning regulations with the 2040 Ukiah General Plan, which emphasizes streamlining and simplifying the sign review and approval process.

If adopted, these changes will clarify existing regulations, enhance consistency with the General Plan, and improve readability and enforcement of the associated regulations, particularly regarding prohibited signage. The amendments aim to balance business visibility with community aesthetics while minimizing visual clutter, conserving staff resources, streamlining application reviews, and addressing potential concerns created by digital signage. It would also streamline the review of signage that does not require a building permit, by allowing such review to be processed according to objective standards. Finally, 'Mural Permits' on private structures would no longer be subject to Planning Commission review but would instead be evaluated administratively by the Zoning Administrator as a means to encourage more public artwork throughout Ukiah by reducing associated application barriers.

These updates are part of the City's ongoing efforts to modernize development standards, support local businesses, and enhance visual character across all commercial and neighborhood nodes.

BACKGROUND

The City of Ukiah's sign regulations are set forth in Division 9, Chapter 7 of the Ukiah City Code (Attachment 1) and govern the size, placement, and design of signs across most zoning districts,

with the exception of the Airport Industrial Park – Planned Development/Airport Park Boulevard. While minor amendments have been made over the years, the regulatory framework remains largely based on the original Ordinance No. 685 (1976), with subsequent modifications through Ordinances 756 (1981), 822 (1983), 1106 (2008), and 1148 (2014).

In addition to these updates, the Ukiah Redevelopment Agency adopted two sets of Design Guidelines in 1992—one for the Downtown Design District and another for commercial areas outside of the Downtown Design District. While these Guidelines were comprehensive, they largely mirrored existing City Code requirements regarding sign placement, location, and area, or referred to existing signage regulations within Ukiah City Code for details such as allowed sign area.

On June 27, 2007, the Planning Commission adopted a Commercial Development Design Guidelines Checklist to assist developers, staff, and policymakers in evaluating project consistency with the Guidelines. However, this checklist was based on the existing 1992 Guidelines and applied only to projects requiring a Site Development Permit or those seeking financial assistance for façade improvements or restoration grants from the City's Redevelopment Agency. Similar to the 1992 Guidelines, the Checklist deferred to the existing City Code for most signage requirements (e.g. type, location, area, etc.), but provided clarifications regarding signage, as follows:

Outside the Downtown Design District

- *Signs are compatible with architectural character of buildings (signage does not dominate site, uses compatible colors and material, lighting is restrained and harmonious, sandwich boards are creative/subdued co/or/minimal copy).*

Inside the Downtown Design District

- *Signs are compatible with architectural character of buildings (historic period, style, location, size, configuration, materials, color- harmonize with design, do not obscure architectural features).*
- *Sign program minimizes visual clutter (reduce large and multiple signs, sign area is minimum necessary to identify business, window signs not exceeding 25% of window area, sandwich boards have subdued co/or/minimal copy/located outside ROW, size of signs on converted residential buildings minimized, signs over public right of way: minimum 8 feet above grade).*
- *Preferred commercial sign types: Painted on band above windows on stuccoed building, painted window signs, narrow/flat signs hung from stationary canopies, flat signs flush-mounted on building fronts, projecting signs attached to building front, exposed neon tube signs integrated into building design, signs on awnings.*
- *Detached freestanding signs for structures on sidewalk line not allowed.*

Following the statewide dissolution of redevelopment agencies in 2012, the City no longer had financial incentives to require design compliance outside of the discretionary review process, and property owners were not incentivized to pursue Site Development Permits, as evidenced by the limited new construction in the City since that time. Without redevelopment funding, the Design Guidelines became less relevant, as their application was primarily applied to projects that required discretionary review. This was primarily facilitated through the associated findings required for Site Development Permits, which often cite or consider the relevant Design Guidelines.

While the 2008 and 2014 Ordinances amended general provisions regarding signage, the City's current sign regulations do not fully align with the expectations of the 2040 Ukiah General Plan. Specifically, Land Use Element Policy LU-11.7 (Sign Regulations) calls for streamlining and clarifying the sign review and approval process. This policy, originally derived from the 1995 General Plan (Existing Program CD-13.1c, modified), remains unfulfilled, as past efforts primarily focused on design guidance for new construction. However, given Ukiah's existing built environment and a limited expectation for new commercial development, an updated approach to sign regulations is necessary to better serve existing business owners, provide clarity in the approval process, and allow staff to apply resources more effectively. For example, Staff notes that only a limited number of sign permits that do not require a building review (e.g. changes in sign copy; temporary banners, etc.) have been received or processed in recent years.

Where new commercial development has occurred—such as along Airport Park Boulevard—the City has relied on comprehensive Sign Programs to regulate the type and location of proposed signage when the associated development is approved by the Planning Commission. For instance, the City applied standard sign program requirements for the phased development at 1236 Airport Park Boulevard (Panda Express), ensuring consistency and balance in signage placement and design for all existing and future tenants.

In addition to business signage, murals on private structures are regulated under Division 9, Chapter 7 and are processed via Mural Permits. Per Ukiah City Code §3225.G, murals are still evaluated as a form of signage or advertisement in the City, and are evaluated by the Planning Commission. Since 2019, the City has evaluated two such murals in this manner, one at 810 North State Street, and the other at 534 East Perkins Street. Private murals, like the one at the Pear Tree Center, enhance community identity, beautify spaces, and support local artists while fostering a sense of place. As noted at the Planning Commission Public Art Workshop on February 28, 2024, in recent years, public art on private structures has become an important revitalization tool, helping to reinvest in underutilized areas and highlight community identity or concerns.

Presently, murals on public structures undergo review by both the Planning Commission and the Design Review Board as designed by the City's public art policy. In 2016, the City adopted a more rigorous public art policy for murals on public places. This adopted Policy governs Public Artwork in the following Public Places, particularly:

1. City - Owned Park
2. City - Owned Open Space or Public Right of Way
3. City - Owned Pathway or Trail
4. City - Owned Buildings
5. City - Owned Parcels

Presently, murals are evaluated as both art and advertising and are also analyzed for: compatibility with the surrounding environment and community; appropriateness to site; relationship to use of building upon which it is placed; impact on motorists and traffic hazards; and advertising potential.

PROPOSED ORDINANCE

The City of Ukiah's existing sign regulations aim to balance business visibility with aesthetic and safety considerations while maintaining consistency with broader zoning and land use policies.

However, existing regulations require updates to address technological advancements, evolving advertising methods, and administrative inefficiencies in the existing regulations. The proposed amendments include the following modifications to Ukiah City Code:

Prohibited Signs

The City proposes clarifications and expansion of existing sign prohibitions to address emerging technologies and novel advertising trends. The updated regulations more directly and explicitly prohibit attention-getting devices such as flashing, rotating, animated, blinking, or moving signs, including dynamic digital signage such as video screens, LED displays with frequent image changes, and scrolling text. Additionally, air-powered inflatable advertising devices and temporary flags designed to attract attention through motion are directly identified and prohibited.

Signs that emit sound or visual effects—including interactive fuel dispenser screens displaying advertisements or media—are also identified for prohibition. Furthermore, signage related to cannabis, alcohol, and tobacco that depicts minors or features imagery, cartoons, or branding appealing to children, where not already prohibited by state or federal law, would be further restricted. Outdoor advertising displays, such as billboards, and all off-site commercial signs advertising businesses or services not located on the premises, would continue to be prohibited elsewhere in Ukiah City Code, but more direct regulations would be inserted into sections related to signage.

Moreover, any signs that physically or visually move, scroll, rotate, or create the illusion of movement—including digital signs with frequently changing images, videos, or animated graphics—would be explicitly prohibited. Notably, the existing regulations include provisions and timelines for addressing prohibited and nonconforming signs. Staff suggests reducing those timelines from 60 days to 30 days. These updates aim to enhance visual aesthetics, reduce distractions, and preserve the community's character.

Staff also recommends language to address previously raised concerns regarding signage and advertisements for Cannabis-Related Businesses. To ensure consistent local regulations, staff proposes signage prohibitions based on California Code of Regulations §15040 (Advertising Placement and Prohibitions) and extends these considerations locally to alcohol- and tobacco-related signage. It is noted, however, that alcohol and tobacco related signage are already regulated effectively through a combination of state, federal, and industry-adopted standards.

Streamlined Review Process

To align more effectively with the General Plan, Staff proposes streamlining the sign review process by ensuring that all sign approvals be conducted through the Building Permit process, thereby eliminating the need for parallel reviews for planning specific permits. Additionally, modifications to temporary signage regulations aim to reduce administrative burdens for applicants and staff by allowing for temporary signage to proceed without the need for a permit. Correspondingly, staff recommends reducing the allowable display period for temporary banners, pennants, and balloons from 45 days per year to 15 days per year.

The proposed changes also expand the categories of signs exempt from permit requirements, such as painted wall signs and window signs that do not require building, electrical, or encroachment permits, provided they comply with all applicable signage standards and regulations. Additionally, with property owner consent, an existing commercial sign may be replaced with another sign copy without requiring review by the Community Development

Director, provided no building permit or encroachment permit is necessary. These modifications aim to reduce administrative barriers, facilitate efficient signage transitions, and support local businesses by improving the review process—one of the City’s long-standing goals.

Minor Modifications

Throughout existing regulations, staff looked to facilitate long-identified, minor modifications. Key updates include streamlining the review process for murals on private structures to encourage artistic installations that improve community character. The Ordinance also expands signage allowances for churches and schools in R1 zoning districts, recognizing their unique community-serving roles and that the rigid nature of existing R1 district signage regulations did not fully consider the location and function of civic uses.

Additionally, the Ordinance includes provisions permitting advertisements on public sidewalks as part of City-sponsored events to support local businesses and institutions, such as “Pastels in the Plaza”. Lastly, the Ordinance updates titles and internal references related to the review process to ensure consistency with current City procedures and employees. Furthermore, Staff reviewed the existing regulations to identify subjective terms that were not easily defined, such as “tasteful.”

Design Standards & Illumination

In alignment with regulations in other California jurisdictions, the proposed signage regulations establish clear design standards and illumination requirements to ensure high-quality, architecturally compatible signage while minimizing light pollution.

Design Standards (UCC §3228): Requires that signage be integrated with building architecture, ensuring proportionality, appropriate materials, and placement that preserves architectural and historic features. It also restricts new internally illuminated signs in non-commercial zones and mandates the use of durable construction materials for long-term integrity.

Illumination (UCC §3229): Establishes regulations to prevent glare and light pollution by requiring shielding of light sources, dimming after 10:00 PM, and restrictions on brightness levels. External and halo lighting are preferred for new monument signs, and all illuminated signs must prevent light spill onto adjacent properties or public rights-of-way.

These updates enhance aesthetic consistency while balancing visibility needs with community character and environmental considerations.

Code Compliance

The proposed ordinance amendment enhances enforcement measures by clarifying fine structures, expanding the Community Development Director’s authority to take enforcement actions, and strengthening penalties through cumulative considerations. Additionally, the ordinance reduces compliance timeframes to improve the regulation and oversight of temporary signage, ensuring a more efficient and effective enforcement process.

Upon approval, Planning Division and Code Enforcement staff will utilize the interim period before the ordinance takes effect to conduct outreach and education efforts with property owners. This proactive approach aims to identify existing violations, provide guidance on compliance requirements, and offer an opportunity for businesses and individuals to rectify non-compliant signage before penalties are imposed. By fostering collaboration and voluntary compliance, the

City seeks to minimize enforcement actions while maintaining a visually cohesive and legally compliant signage environment.

Design Review Board

The Design Review Board (DRB) met in person and via Zoom on February 27, 2025. The meeting was called to order at 3:11 p.m. by Chair Tom Liden. Four members were present (Hawkes, Meaux, Liden, Akin), with Gordon absent by prior arrangement. The DRB reviewed a proposed amendment to the Ukiah City Code regarding the City's sign regulations. Staff presented the item and responded to questions. No public comments were received.

The DRB unanimously recommended the Planning Commission approve the amendment, with the following modifications:

1. Change the hearing body for *Mural Permits* from the Zoning Administrator to the Design Review Board.
2. Strengthen enforcement and clarity in the following sections:
 - UCC 3230: *Maintenance and Repair*; UCC 3231: *Abandoned Signs*; UCC 3232: *Sign Removal*

As a recommendation to the Planning Commission, the Design Review Board suggests that it serve as the hearing body to evaluate, review and make decisions on the issuance of mural permits for artwork on private commercial structures, and make recommendations concerning architecture, site design layout, landscaping, parking, signage, exterior lighting, and other aspects of urban design to City staff, Zoning Administrator, Planning Commission and City Council as appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide input and recommendation to the City Council on a proposed amendment to the City's Municipal Code.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 provides a draft resolution, while **Attachment 2** contains a redlined version of the proposed Ordinance amending the signage regulations, highlighting regulatory changes. **Attachments 3** present the 1992 Design Guidelines – Sign Highlights, offering historical context on signage standards. **Attachment 4** includes the 2007 Design Guidelines Checklist, which outlines key compliance considerations for sign permits. Finally, **Attachment 5** features the 2012 Signage, the existing handout for evaluating current signage compliance. Together, these documents provide a comprehensive resource for understanding past and proposed signage regulations, and standards.

1. Planning Commission Draft Resolution
2. Draft Ordinance
3. Design Guidelines – Sign Highlights (1992)
4. Design Guidelines – Checklist (2007)
5. City of Ukiah Signage Handout (2012)