ON-LINE ZONING ORDINANCE DISCLAIMER

The Web version of the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts Zoning Ordinance is provided for reference and the convenience of having the Ordinance in a computer-readable format. The print version of the Zoning Ordinance, together with any amendments adopted by the City Council subsequent to the most recent update to the print version, remains the official version of the Ordinance. If any discrepancies exist between the print and web versions of the Zoning Ordinance, the print version, together with any City Council amendments, shall be considered correct. Recent amendments to the Zoning Ordinance may appear on the Web prior to being incorporated into the print version of the Ordinance.

# ARTICLE 7.000 SIGNS AND ILLUMINATION

Text current through Ordinance #1372 of June 15, 2015.

**7.10 SIGNS**
**7.20 ILLUMINATION**
**7:30 SEVERABILITY**

## 7.10 SIGNS

### 7.11 *Findings and Purpose*

**7.11.1** Findings

This Article is based upon the following findings:

A. The City of Cambridge has been and is now taking appropriate action, through exercise of its zoning and other municipal authority, to improve the aesthetics and physical appearance of the City by means including the regulation of signs.

B. The regulation of signs is necessary in order to preserve and enhance the substantial governmental interests of the City of Cambridge in its natural, scenic, historic, cultural, and aesthetic qualities.

C. There is a substantial governmental interest in enhancing the physical appearance of all parts of the City of Cambridge, including residential, commercial, and industrial areas.

D. Regulating signs will improve the City's appearance; make the City's commercial, residential, and industrial areas more attractive for commercial and residential uses and commercial development; and enhance the economic climate of the City.

E. The regulations set forth in this Article will directly advance the public interest in aesthetics and other qualities of life by preserving and enhancing the appearance of residential, commercial and industrial buildings and areas; preserving and enhancing the appearance of public streets, parks and other public properties; and minimizing the intrusiveness of sign structures.

F. Nonconforming off-premise signs, which traditionally have been used primarily to advertise commercial goods and services not available on the same premises, have a significantly greater adverse aesthetic impact than on premises signs because of their larger sizes, greater heights, less attractive appearances, and/or more intrusive locations.

G. The public interest is served by use of signs by businesses and services to identify their premises, or the products or services there available, or to display noncommercial messages.

H. The City finds that it is in the City's interest to require removal of certain nonconforming signs after the grace period provided by Section 7.18 has expired.

I. The City in enacting this ordinance does hereby adopt the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the Planning Board in its report dated March 7, 1991.

**7.11.2** Purposes

The purposes of this Article are to preserve and enhance the substantial interests of the City of Cambridge in the appearance of the City; to preserve and enhance the public interest in aesthetics; to preserve and increase amenities of the City; to control and reduce visual clutter and blight; and to carry out the authority conferred by General Laws Chapter 40A.

**7.12** *Applicability*

A. General Applicability

No signs or advertising devices of any kind or nature shall be erected or maintained on any premises or affixed to the inside or outside of any structure to be visible from the outside of any structure except as specifically permitted in this Article 7.000.

B. MXD District

The provisions of this Section 7.10 shall not be applicable in the MXD District, Article 14.000 of this Ordinance, during the life of the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan, as amended.

C. Signs in the Public Way

Signs and banners located entirely within a public way are not subject to the provisions of this Article 7.000 except as may be specifically provided for elsewhere in this Article 7.000.

**7.13** *Definitions*

**7.13.1** Sign. Sign shall mean and include any permanent or temporary structure, device, letter, words, model, banner, pennant, insignia, trade flag, or representation used as, or which is in the nature of, an advertisement, announcement, or direction and which is designed to be seen from the outside of a building.

**7.13.2** Types of Signs:

A. Free Standing Sign - A sign that is attached to or part of a completely self-supporting structure and which is not attached to any building or other structure.

B. Projecting Sign - Any sign, other than a wall sign or free standing sign, that is attached to and projects from a building face. A projecting sign shall include marquee, canopy, and awning mounted signs.

C. Wall Sign - Any sign affixed in such a way that its exposed face and all sign area is parallel or approximately parallel to the plane of the building to which it is attached. A wall sign shall be considered a projecting sign if the sign face projects more than twelve (12) inches from the face of the building. Wall signs shall include signs located on or behind the surface of windows.

**7.13.3** Illumination:

A. Natural - natural or ambient light.

B. External - artificial illumination from a light source which provides light directly onto the sign face, or portions of the sign face, or its background, which light is then reflected back to the viewer.

C. Internal - artificial illumination from a light source located behind the sign face and which transmits light through the sign face or portions of the sign face to the viewer. Exposed neon tubing and similar lighting shall be considered internal illumination.

D. Indirect - placement of the artificial light device such that the source of light cannot be seen from a public way.

**7.13.4** Premises:

That part of a lot, building or structure occupied by a business, enterprise, institution, or other person and which is distinct and separate from the place occupied by any other business, enterprise, institution or other person.

**7.13.5** Sign Frontage:

The length of a building, or the length of a separate and distinct first floor establishment, abutting a street. The length of the building or ground floor establishment shall be that as defined in Section 5.24.4 of this Ordinance.

**7.13.6** Establishment, Ground Floor:

A separate and distinct use, business, enterprise, or institution having a separate public entrance to the outside of a building, which entrance is at grade or within six feet of grade as measured at the street line.

**7.14** *Calculations of Area and Height of Signs*

A. For a free-standing sign or sign attached to a building, the area of the sign shall be considered to include all lettering, wording, and accompanying designs and symbols, together with the background, whether open or enclosed, on which they are displayed, but not including any supporting framework and bracing which are incidental to the display itself.

B. For a sign painted upon or applied to a building, the area of the sign shall be considered to include all lettering, wording, and accompanying designs or symbols, together with any background of a color different from that of the building.

C. For all signs, where a color or graphic pattern constitutes a Corporate or Brand Identification (by custom, contract or practice) as illustrated in advertising or in sign or building designs employed at multiple locations, the full extent of that background color or graphic pattern shall be calculated as part of the sign area when it is associated with any logo, lettering, or other graphic element constituting a sign.

D. Where the sign consists of individual letters or symbols attached to or painted on a surface, wall or window, the area of the sign shall be considered to be that of the smallest rectangle or other geometric shape which encompasses all letters and symbols.

E. Only one face of a two-sided sign shall be counted in computing the area of a sign, provided the sign faces are parallel and of equal size.

F. The height of a sign shall be the vertical distance between the top of a sign and the mean grade of the ground adjoining that portion of the building to which the sign is attached; or that ground within ten feet of a free-standing sign.

**7.15** *General Limitations for All Signs Permitted in the City of Cambridge*

A. Signs shall be stationary and may not contain any visible moving or moveable parts.

B. All lighting shall be indirect, continuous, and installed in a manner that will prevent direct light from shining onto any street or adjacent property. Flashing or intermittent light creating flashing, moving, changing or animated graphics is prohibited, except that a warning sign, a device intended to tell the time and temperature, or official traffic and directional signs may have intermittent illumination.

C. No illumination shall be permitted after 11 P.M. in any Residence A, B, C, or C-1 district.

D. No sign, portion of a sign, or structural support for such sign may extend above the lowest point of the roof of a building, except that for one-story buildings having a continuous parapet above the lowest point of the roof, signs may be placed below the highest point of such parapet rather than below the lowest point of the roof.

E. Except as may be provided elsewhere in this ordinance for temporary signs, all signs shall be permanently mounted on a building or structure or permanently implanted in the ground. All graphic images on a sign shall be of durable material.

**7.16** *Permitted Signs*

The signs and advertising devices which are permitted in the City of Cambridge are set out below.

**7.16.1** Exempt, Temporary and Noncommercial Signs

The following signs shall be exempt from restrictions as to type, location, height, and size of signs or limitations as to the total area of signs permitted on a lot or business, as those limits are set forth in Section 7.16.2. Except as otherwise noted, such signs shall be naturally or externally illuminated only and shall be subject to all other provisions of this Article 7.000.

**7.16.11** Exempt Signs

A. In all districts:

1. Signs not visible from a public way. (All illumination permitted.)
2. Official traffic and directional signs, including bus and shuttle schedules. (All illumination permitted.)
3. Other signs in the public way.
4. Signs necessary for public safety and convenience not exceeding six (6) square feet per sign face, provided such signs contain no advertising.
5. Flags of a city, state or country.
6. Memorials such as grave stones and corner stones.

7. Historical site plaques installed or approved by a public Agency or duly established historical society.
8. Window display of merchandise or signs incidental to such display.
9. Signage necessary or appurtenant to the placement or operation of a Public Bicycle-Sharing Station (All illumination permitted.)

B. In business, office and industrial districts:

1. Permanent nonilluminated signs behind the glass of a window above the ground floor, provided:
   (a) The total area of the sign(s) does not exceed 20% of the area of the glass of the window;
   (b) The window is part of the premises to which the sign is accessory;
   (c) The sign consists of individual letters or symbols affixed to the window or mounted on a clear, transparent background;
   (d) The individual symbols or letters do not exceed 6" in height.
2. Permanent nonilluminated signs mounted on awnings on the ground floor of a building provided:
   (a) The total area of the sign does not exceed 2 square feet and the height of individual symbols or letters does not exceed 6";
   (b) The sign consists of individual letters or symbols affixed to the fabric of the awning;
   (c) No other graphic material appears on the awning.

**7.16.12** Temporary Signs

A. One for sale or for rent sign not exceeding six (6) square feet in residential districts or twenty (20) square feet in nonresidential districts and advertising only the premises on which the sign is located.

B. Building contractor's, promotional, leasing and other similar signs maintained on a lot during construction on that lot not exceeding in total area that area permitted by the application of the formula: one (1) square foot for each linear foot of sign frontage on the lot (after construction), or one hundred (100) square feet in business, office and industrial districts or twenty (20) square feet in residential districts, whichever is smaller. However, where a specific sign dimension is mandated by any city, state, or federal subsidy or support program providing assistance to the construction on the lot, which sign is greater in area than would be permitted in this paragraph, then the larger sign shall be permitted.

C. Temporary signs of a noncommercial nature, including political signs of any kind, not exceeding twenty (20) square feet in area.

D. In business, office, and industrial districts, temporary signs pertaining to special sales or events lasting no more than fifteen days, affixed to the inside of windows, provided that their total area does not exceed 30% of the area of the window glass to which they are affixed.

**7.16.13** Non Commercial Signs

In all districts, noncommercial signs which contain only noncommercial messages, including political messages of any kind, may be displayed, provided the sign does not exceed ten (10) square feet in area. This Section 7.16.13 shall not limit the effect of Section 7.17 on the display of noncommercial messages on permitted signs.

**7.16.2** All Other Permitted Signs

**7.16.21** Signs in Residence Districts

A. Identification Sign for Residential Uses:

Total Area of Signage Permitted per Lot: as permitted below.

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | 1 sq. ft./dwelling unit to a maximum of 10 sq.ft./dwelling |
| Number of signs: | One (1)/dwelling |
| Height of sign: | 4 ft. if free standing; 10 ft. if on a building |
| Location: | On building or a minimum of 3 feet from street line if free standing. |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |
| Limitations: | For the display of street number, name of occupant of the premises, and/or identification of an accessory professional office or other permitted accessory uses including customary home occupation. |

B. Identification Sign, Bulletin Board or Announcement Board for Permitted Nonresidential Uses Other than Permitted Hotel and Office Uses.

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | One at 10 sq. ft., one at 20 sq. ft. |
| Number of signs: | Two/building |
| Height of sign: | 4 ft. if free standing |
| Location: | On building or minimum of 1/2 the depth of required front yard if free standing |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |

C. Signs for Lawfully Maintained Nonconforming Uses.

Total Area of Signage Permitted per Lot: One (1) sq. ft. for each linear foot of sign frontage on the lot or 10 sq. ft. per ground floor establishment, whichever is less. However, individual signs shall be further limited as set forth below.

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | 10 sq. ft. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Number of signs: | One per ground floor establishment plus one per building |
| Height of sign: | 20 ft. if attached to building, 4 ft. if free- standing |
| Location: | On building or 1/2 depth of required front yard if free standing |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |

D. Permitted Hotel and Office Use:

Total Area of Signage Permitted Per Lot: One (1) sq. ft. for each linear foot of sign frontage on the lot or 200 sq. ft. per building, whichever is less.

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | As permitted in Section 7.16.22 |
| Number of signs: | As permitted in Section 7.16.22 |
| Height of sign: | As permitted in Section 7.16.22 |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |

**7.16.22** All Business, Office, and Industrial Districts

Total Area of Signage Permitted per Lot: One and a half (1 1/2) sq. ft. for each linear foot of sign frontage on the lot for sign frontage located one hundred (100) feet or less from the street line; provided that the total area of all signs on the exterior of the building, including free standing signs, shall not exceed one (1) square foot for each linear foot of sign frontage; or two (2) sq. ft. for each linear foot of sign frontage on the lot for sign frontage located more than one hundred feet from all street lines from which the sign frontage is visible. However, signs shall be further limited as set forth below.

A. Free Standing Signs:

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | 30 sq. ft. |
| Number of signs: | Two, provided the total area of all such signs shall not exceed 30 sq ft. on any lot. |
| Height of sign: | 15 ft. |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |

B. Projecting Signs:

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | 13 sq. ft. |
| Number of signs: | One (1)/ground floor establishment, plus one (1) for any public building entrance not serving a ground floor establishment |

| | |
|---|---|
| Height of sign: | 20 ft., provided it is below the sill line of the second floor windows or the lowest point of the roof, whichever is less |
| Illumination: | Natural or external lighting only |

C. Wall Signs:

*Maximum Permitted*

| | |
|---|---|
| Area of sign: | No individual sign may exceed sixty (60) sq. ft. in area.<br>However, for any building or ground floor establishment having a sign frontage less than sixty (60) ft., the maximum area of any individual sign shall be the product of the formula: sign frontage x one (1) sq. ft. |
| Number of signs: | Not Limited |
| Height of sign: | 20 ft., provided it is below the sill line of the second floor windows or the lowest point of the roof, whichever is less |

Illumination:

1. Natural or external lighting;
2. Exposed neon or gas ultra-violet tube type lighting behind the glass of windows, not exceeding five (5) sq. ft. in area;
3. Other internal illumination including any other exposed neon type lighting not included in (2) above under the following conditions:
   a. Either the vertical or horizontal dimension of the sign does not exceed thirty (30) inches; and
   b. The sign:
      (1) is located behind the glass of a window, or
      (2) is mounted such that the sign face does not extend more than two (2) inches beyond the plane of that portion of the building façade to which the sign is attached, or if extending more than two (2) inches beyond the plane of the building, only that portion of the sign face consisting of letters and numerals is illuminated, or
      (3) consists of independent, individual letters or graphic symbols mounted directly to the surface of the building facade to which the sign is attached or is mounted on an unilluminated raceway or channel which is then directly attached to the building facade.

D. Special Use Signs:

1. Wall and Free Standing Signs Accessory to Theaters and Cinemas.

   A wall or free standing sign accessory to a theater or cinema which announces the current program at the theater or cinema shall not be subject

to the limitations of paragraphs A or C above or of Section 7.16.3, paragraphs A and B, provided the following conditions are met.

(a) The maximum area does not exceed one hundred (100) square feet for all signs not meeting the requirements of paragraphs A and C of this Section 7.16.22.

(b) If internally illuminated, the maximum area shall be limited to forty (40) square feet for a single theater, plus an additional twenty (20) square feet for each additional theater served by the same sign, up to the maximum permitted in paragraph (a) above.

(c) The maximum height of the free standing sign shall not exceed twenty (20) feet.

(d) The total area of all signs on the lot shall not exceed the Total Area of Signage Permitted per Lot as limited in this Section 7.16.22.

2. Wall signs for Hotels and Motels. One or more wall signs accessory to a hotel or motel not exceeding two hundred (200) square feet in total area or one hundred (100) square feet for any individual sign shall not be subject to the limitations of paragraph C above or of Section 7.16.3, paragraphs A and B, provided the following conditions are met.

(a) If internally illuminated, the sign shall consist of independent letters or graphic symbols mounted directly to the surface of the building to which the sign(s) is attached.

**7.16. 23** Special Sign Provisions for Non-Profit Theaters, Other Performance Spaces, Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Cinemas.

Notwithstanding the limitations of Sections 7.16.21 and 7.16.22 above and Section 7.16.3 below, additional signs shall be permitted on lots containing a theater, performance space, museum, library or art gallery owned and operated by a non-profit institution (which institution is granted the educational and religious exemption provided in Section 3 of Chapter 40A) or municipality for the purpose of identifying current and future educational programs, lectures, performances, and exhibits open to the public occurring in those facilities, subject to the following limitations and conditions:

A. The signs may be any combination of wall, projecting or freestanding signs.

B. The signs shall not be subject to the Area of Sign, Height of Sign and Number of Signs limitations found in Sections 7.16.21, 7.16.22 and Section 7.16.3.

C. The signs shall be made of cloth, canvas or other similar flexible material and may only be naturally or externally illuminated.

D. A freestanding sign may not be higher than 25 feet. Signs on a building wall may not be higher than fifty feet.

E. Any individual sign shall be temporary in nature and removed at the conclusion of the event for which it provided notice; at a minimum, however, such signs shall be replaced at intervals not to exceed one year.

F. The maximum area of individual Freestanding or Projecting Signs shall be 50 square feet; the maximum area of individual Wall Signs shall be 200 square feet.

G. The total area of signs permitted on the lot shall be determined by the following:

(a) In non-residential districts the total area of signs on a lot shall be subject to the limitations for Total Area of Signs Permitted Per Lot as set forth in Section 7.16.22 for signs on the outside of the building (and shall be inclusive of any other signs on the lot not employing the provisions of this Section 7.16.23).

(b) In residential districts, the total area of signs on the lot shall be limited by the application of the formula of one square foot of sign for each linear foot of Sign Frontage on the lot for that portion of a building containing the eligible activity (and shall be inclusive of any other signs on the lot not employing the provisions of this Section 7.16.23).

H. All other provisions of this Article 7.000 shall continue to apply.

**7.16.3** Application of Sign Frontage Formula

Where the total permitted area of all signs on a lot or building is determined by the product of the formula: sign frontage x one (1), one and one half (1.5), or two (2) sq. ft., the following rules shall apply.

A. The total area of signs accessory to a ground floor establishment shall not exceed that determined by the application of the sign frontage formula to that ground floor establishment. Where two ground floor establishments occupy the same sign frontage the total permitted area of signs shall be shared equally by the two establishments.

B. The total area of all signs on any single building wall shall not exceed that determined by the application of the formula to the sign frontage for that wall; provided, a wall having no sign frontage may share the sign area permitted on any wall of the building having sign frontage.

**7.16.4** Sign Area For Lots Having No Buildings

In any district where the number or area of signs permitted on a lot is determined by the number of buildings located on said lot, one building shall be assumed to be present for the purposes of Section 7.10 for any use not contained within a building.

Where the total area of signs permitted on a lot is determined by the application of the sign frontage formula, a maximum of 30 sq. ft. of signs shall be permitted on any lot having no sign frontage.

**7.16.5** Signs Permitted in Planned Unit Development Districts

The sign requirements of the base zoning district shall apply, except that when business, office or industrial uses are authorized by the Planned Unit Development special permit the requirements of Section 7.16.22 shall apply to those portions of the Planned Unit Development containing those uses, in lieu of the base district requirements.

**7.17** *Noncommercial Messages*

Any sign permitted under this Article may contain, in lieu of or in addition to any other copy, any noncommercial message.

**7.18** *Noncomforming Signs*

**7.18.1** Signs Required to be Removed

The following nonconforming signs shall be removed within four (4) years from June 10, 1991, or the first date that the sign became nonconforming, whichever is later:

A. Signs located on rooftops.
B. Free standing signs in excess of thirty (30) square feet in area.
C. Wall signs in excess of sixty (60) square feet in area.
D. Projecting signs in excess of ten (10) square feet in area.

**7.18.2** Other Signs

A. Nonconforming signs not covered by Section 7.18.1 above may be altered, provided the basic supporting structure is not altered and further provided that any alterations made to a sign within the past three (3) years do not exceed fifty (50%) percent of the current replacement value of the sign.

B. Notwithstanding the limitations of Section 7.18.2 A above, where it is proposed to replace an existing sign where the ground floor establishment or the building as a whole contains a total area of legal nonconforming signs exceeding the maximum permitted under this Article 7.000, said new sign may be installed and may contain an area of six (6) square feet or that area permitted by the application of the formula: One (1) sq. ft. x sign frontage of the ground floor establishment, to the establishment to which the sign is accessory, whichever is greater; provided, the total area of signs accessory to the ground floor establishment or the building is not increased and all other size limitations for signs are met.

**7.19** *Community Development Department Certification*

All proposals for signs exceeding twenty-five (25) square feet in area shall be submitted to the Community Development Department for certification. The applicant for such a sign certification shall submit all information necessary for the Department to review the proposed sign for conformance to the requirements of this Article 7.000. The Department shall, within ten (10) business days, provide the applicant with a certification that the proposed sign conforms to the requirements of Article 7.000 or shall notify the applicant that the requirements have not been met. Said certification shall accompany the application for a building permit for the sign to the Inspectional Services Department.

## 7.20 ILLUMINATION

In Residence A, B, C, and C-1 districts no outdoor floodlighting or decorative lighting, except lighting primarily designed to illuminate walks, driveways, outdoor living areas, or outdoor recreational facilities, and except temporary holiday lighting in use for not longer than a four week period in any calendar year, shall be permitted. Any permanent lighting permitted by the preceding sentence shall be continuous, indirect, and installed in a manner that will prevent direct light from shining onto any street or adjacent property.

## 7.30 SEVERABILITY

The City by enacting this Article intends to regulate signs in order to carry out and achieve the findings and purposes of this Article. The City also wishes to require removal of certain non conforming signs to the maximum extent lawfully possible and in accordance with the effective date and removal schedule set forth in Section 7.18.1. Therefore, should any part of the City's Ordinance be declared invalid by a court of competent jurisdiction, then it is the specific intent of the City that the remainder of the Ordinance not specifically declared invalid shall continue in full force and effect as if and when originally enacted by the City.