

Rochester Historic District Guidelines Signage

Adopted by the Rochester Historic District Commission on February 10, 2010

Purpose

These guidelines have been prepared to help business owners and property owners, along with their sign makers, develop signs that meet the objectives of the Historic District Ordinance, and to facilitate the Historic District Commission's implementation of the ordinance. This document is intended to serve as a guide and is not regulatory. Note that all of the signs depicted here are considered to be high quality signs that conform with the goals of these guidelines.

The City of Rochester encourages signage within the Historic District that is handsome, distinctive, and creative. At the same time, it should also be pedestrian-oriented, restrained in character, and harmonious with the sensitive nature of the district. Large, bright, and conspicuous designs may be suitable on commercial corridors, such as Route 11 and Route 125, that are geared to motorists, but such designs are not appropriate within the Historic District.



Overview

The following aspects of a sign are subject to review by the Historic District Commission:

- a) Overall design
- b) Location of the sign on a building
- c) Size and shape
- d) Materials
- e) Colors
- f) Typefaces
- g) Illumination

The commission does not have purview over the specific words or message of a sign.

All signs must comply with: a) the Sign Ordinance, a separate section (42.8) within the Zoning Ordinance that controls the types of signs, dimensions of signs, number of signs,

and other elements and b) the Historic District Ordinance, also a separate section (42.33) within the Zoning Ordinance, as administered and interpreted by the Historic District Commission. These guidelines are provided to help clarify the intent of the Historic District Ordinance. Pursuant to the Historic District Ordinance, the HDC may stipulate requirements that are stricter than the Sign Ordinance.

Because every building and every application is unique, the Historic District Ordinance and these guidelines do not specify precise expectations. Rather, the Historic District Commission uses its reasonable judgment in applying them.

Where terms such as “should”, “appropriate”, “encouraged”, “desirable”, and “preferred” are used, the HDC may require conformance with the provision to the extent that it is applicable, practical, and reasonable in a given situation.

The signs depicted here illustrate “good signage”, though each individual sign does not necessarily exemplify all of the desirable features that are discussed in this document. All of the pictures here are from Rochester. Some are not in the historic district and some are no longer in place.



General Principles

Signage should be harmonious with the character of the building with which it is associated in terms of form, design, scale, and proportion. Where multiple signs are used on one site they should be compatible with one another regarding these four elements and part of an overall sign plan for the building. Signage should be designed and placed in order to avoid a sense of clutter or chaos on the building façade.

While imaginative signage is encouraged, simplicity and legibility is key to good design. A sign with fewer words is more effective in conveying the message.

Signs should be mounted in such a way so as to minimize damage to historic materials. On masonry buildings, it is preferable that bolts extend through mortar joints rather than through masonry units.

Building mounted signage is more pedestrian oriented than free standing signs. Free standing signs within a historic district should be carefully designed, located, and scaled in order that it not undermine the scale and character of the district. It is preferable that freestanding signage not be used but it is allowed if there is sufficient space and it is desired by the applicant.



Building-mounted sign

Size and Shape

Signs within the historic district should be significantly smaller than those situated on commercial corridors. They should be scaled and oriented to relate to pedestrians, as well as passing motorists.

Signs should be sized to the scale of the building, the storefront, and the street. *Within the Historic District*, Hanson Street and the block of North Main Street between Wakefield and Union Streets are *relatively* small scaled; Wakefield Street, Union Street, and North Main Street between Union Street and the bridge are medium scaled; and South Main Street is large scaled.

Generally, wall signs should not exceed one square foot in area for each linear foot of building frontage nor two feet in height. Generally, freestanding signs should not exceed ten square feet nor eight feet in height, though smaller signs are preferable.

Most signs are rectangular. Wall signs are typically horizontal and projecting signs are typically vertical. Freestanding signs are more pedestrian oriented when they are small and vertical. Nonrectangular shapes add variety and interest and can be appropriate, but use of strange or highly irregular shapes, where not rationalized by the nature of the business, should be avoided.



Colors

Use of the following colors is encouraged

- nature blending colors
- earth tone colors
- neutral colors
- pastel colors

The following colors are generally best limited to accent areas:

- bright colors
- primary colors
- metallic colors

Use of the following colors palettes is discouraged:

- high intensity colors
- fluorescent colors
- “day glow” colors

It is preferred that dark or medium colors be used for the main, background part of the sign and that light colors be used for the lettering. Use of white or light colors for the background is discouraged, especially for larger signs, reflective signs, and illuminated signs.

Suggested background colors are burgundy red, forest green, chocolate brown, black, charcoal, and navy blue. Suggested letter colors are ivory, white, or gold.

Colors should be chosen to complement the color of the building.

In general it is best to use no more than three colors on a sign: one for the background, one for the lettering, and a third color for accent (such as for borders, motifs, logos, or shading). A fourth color might be used for illustrations.

Many signs use gold leaf for lettering. With a dark background, gold leaf can bring much beauty to a sign. One need not be concerned about the gold being scraped off as the amount that could be collected would be virtually worthless.



Illumination

Lighting is an important factor in a sign's character. Signs may be externally illuminated - lit by one or more shielded, stationery bulbs projecting onto the sign; internally illuminated - where a translucent-plastic sign is lit from the inside; or made with neon - exposed tubes filled with a gas that glows when electrified. Often street lights or other area lights provide sufficient lighting, such that the sign need not be lit at all.

Use of internal illumination is strongly discouraged and will generally not be approved. The plastic feel of internally illuminated signs is inappropriate in a historic district. In rare cases, like the Edward Jones sign, below, where the wattage is low and the sign is quite dark, internal illumination can be effective and would be acceptable.

Neon is generally appropriate for interior window signage only.

Use of changeable copy signs is strongly discouraged. Where there is a need for changing advertising, portable signage may be a good solution. Electronic message signs are highly inappropriate in a historic district and should not be approved.



Internal illumination



Neon

Materials

Traditionally, the most attractive outdoor signs have generally been made of wood, mainly cedar, redwood and mahogany (though teak, cypress and others are sometimes used). These woods are dimensionally stable and resistant to rot and decay. They also hold paint and varnish well.

Various newer synthetic products achieve the desired look of hand-crafted traditional signage. Urethane, a synthetic material, is used increasingly. It is durable and easy to work, and, when painted, it resembles wood. Metal is also an appropriate material.

Materials should have a matt finish and not be reflective nor translucent.

The following materials are inappropriate:

- sheet plastic
- plastic substrates
- interior grade wood
- unfaced plywood

It is desirable that signs have a solid “feel” rather than a “plastic” feel.



Typefaces

A sign utilizing easily recognized symbols and clear, crisp lettering will identify a business or activity effectively and enhance and complement the general appearance of the street.

Every typeface has a particular style or “mood”. Typefaces should be carefully selected to be harmonious with the building and nature of the business.

The number of lettering styles should be limited to increase legibility, generally to two.



Building-Mounted Signs

Building mounted signs – including wall signs, projecting signs, awning signs, and canopy signs – should be located in the most appropriate location on the building. There is frequently a horizontal band or panel, or an open section on the wall which is clearly the most logical location for a sign.

Generally, the appropriate zone for signage, including the brackets for projecting signs, is above the storefront windows and below the sills under the second floor windows.

It may be appropriate to place an understated wall sign identifying a building on the band under the cornice (uppermost crown) at the top of a multistory building.

Window signage on upper stories, advertising businesses located on the upper stories, is appropriate provided it is not unduly prominent. Otherwise, signage placed above the second floor sills is discouraged, but may be approved if the design is suitably understated and is compatible with the building.

Signs should be placed where they respect an existing sign line established by the signs on adjacent establishments.

Signs should not obscure any architectural features, including the windows, of the building.

Wall signs should be affixed to the building, parallel to the building with one face showing.

Roofs signs are highly inappropriate, except on one story buildings where there are few other good locations for signage and the roof sign is especially well crafted to integrate effectively into the design of the roof (such as on the Federal Savings Bank building, below).



Projecting Signs

Projecting signs should be placed perpendicular to the building and should have two faces. Generally, it is best that they be vertical rather than horizontal in form.

Sign brackets should be made of painted wood or prefinished, pre-painted metal. Guy wires, if needed, should be as inconspicuous as possible.



Awning and Canopy Signs

Lettering should be placed on the front valance only (or on a cross gable as on the red sign, below) and on the side panels. Awnings should be made of canvas material.



Window Signs

Window signs may be painted on, attached to, or suspended behind the window. There should be a minimal area covered so that the signage does not block the view into the establishment nor appear to be cluttered or chaotic. It is best that lettering be placed either a) at the top and/or bottom of the window; or b) in the center of the window.



Freestanding Signs

Use of building signage is preferred in the Historic District but freestanding signs may be used if desired by the applicant. They should be small in area and low in height to reinforce the pedestrian character of the district. Larger signs should be further set back from the sidewalk in order not to overwhelm the pedestrian.

Freestanding signs should be supported by two wood, metal, or granite posts that, generally, are square in cross section. Alternatively, like the Governor's Inn sign, below, the sign may be hung from a bar cantilevered off one post. Use of round steel poles is not appropriate. Large pylon type signs are not appropriate.

