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Signs 101: Good Sign Design

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The [March 2008 issue](#) of the DCPF eNewsletter provided an overview of sign issues. As a follow-up, this issue will delve into the details of good sign design.

Elements of Good Sign Design

Similar to locating a picture or painting in one's home, a sign should be well chosen and placed. A well-designed sign should accomplish three things:

1. It should **convey its message clearly and concisely**. There is nothing worse for a business than for it not to be found or readily identified by potential customers. Whether it is a single sign that identifies a group of businesses, or a single tenant sign, the ability of a sign to quickly convey its message is essential.
2. It should be **compatible with its surrounding environment and buildings**. As one wouldn't place an oversized painting above a mantel, a sign shouldn't be oversized for a building, or out of scale with other area signs. Signs are an accessory use and should work within, not dominate, the building or landscape.
3. It should **promote a visual image of the entire community**. For instance, if a sign is to be placed in an historic village, the sign should be designed to reflect that aspect of the community's character. A community's comprehensive plan should also be reviewed to get a clear vision of the community's character. Often, particular areas of a municipality are discussed in detail, including a description of what the community should look like.

General Sign Guidelines

Signs come in all shapes and sizes, sometimes feature company colors and logos, and have to be designed to be seen in a variety of settings, be they rural or urban. What is called for in one setting may differ from what is necessary or preferred in the next. With that in mind, **the following sign guidelines should work for every sign type in every situation:**

- **Number of Words** – It stands to reason that the fewer words one must read, the easier they will be read. [Greenway Guide E2](#) recommends that a maximum of 6 words be allowed for quick recognition.

- **Colors** – Simple color schemes can aid in accentuating important words. No more than three colors should be necessary. When a sign gets too “busy” it becomes harder to get its message across to the reader.
- **Lettering Color Scheme** - In addition to limiting the number of colors, the Greenway Guide also recommends that light-colored lettering be used on a dark background. The purpose for this is two-fold: light-colored lettering stands out and is easier to read, plus signs which are proposed as internally illuminated or lit up at night will cause less glare when the letters are illuminated more than the background.

Guidelines for Monument or Freestanding Signs

- Signs of this type should be no greater than 7 feet in height. Rather than a tall sign mounted on poles that competes with landscaping, lower monument signs are better suited for visibility as they are located below the tree canopy and are readily seen.
- Multiple listings on directory signs should be discouraged as they distract motorists who may try to read all the names on the sign. If tenant panels are proposed for a sign, their number should be limited to no more than 4.
- Use stone or other natural materials for the base of the sign.
- Landscaping around the base can help to accentuate the sign, making it more noticeable in the landscape without visually detracting from the area.
- If external illumination is proposed, the sign should be lit from the top down. To avoid skyglow and to provide lighting for the sign in snowy conditions, down-lighting adds light without spilling into the immediate environment or night sky.



This attractive and well-designed monument sign illustrates many of the principles of good sign design.



This monument sign has too many tenant panels, colors, fonts and logos competing for the attention of passing drivers. The result is a distracting sign that is hard to read and may pose a safety hazard.

Guidelines for Building Signs

- Signs of this type should be compatible with surrounding signs and appropriate for the area. If a sign is proposed in a walkable area, the sign should address pedestrians. If constructed in a historic district, it should complement the historic character of the district.
- Instead of competing with a building's architecture, a sign should complement it. False facades that create large backdrops for the purpose of a bigger sign should not be allowed.
- Alternative sign types should be encouraged. Awning, hanging, and projecting signs, and even window signs can be creatively used to add greater dimension to a streetscape.



This streetscape includes a variety of pedestrian-oriented signs, each illustrating one or more of the principles of good sign design.

Impact of Signs

A well-designed sign will affect a community in a positive way, but a poorly-designed sign will detract from a community, creating a negative image. Communities should work with business owners and developers to not only build architecturally beautiful buildings, but to also design signs which are complementary, or even inspiring.

Even if a simple building with modest architecture is proposed, a creative, well-placed, high quality sign will add to its aesthetic character, benefitting both the business owner and the community.

For More Information

Dutchess County [Greenway Guide E2 – Signs](#)

DCPF eNewsletter March 2008 Issue [Signs 101: How Many Do We Really Need?](#)

Clarification to April 2008 Issue:

Dutchess County will continue to deliver data as we have in the past, with a limited amount available over the Internet via [ParcelAccess](#) and [GeoAccess](#), more data and tools available through municipal access over the Intranet via *Atlas*, and distribution of data on disc at the request of interested parties. Expanded data delivery and a public 3D GIS capability are not planned at this time.

Once the Sanborn project is completed in early 2009, Dutchess County can, upon request, deliver our 3D data in a format that can be used by individuals in programs such as Google Earth. However, we will not be supporting or training in any third-party software, nor developing any 3D programs of our own.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view past issues of the DCPF's newsletter, *Plan On It*.

This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development,
in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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