

March 2008

## Signs 101: How Many Do We Really Need?

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Several Dutchess County communities have been grappling with sign regulations and sign proposals over the past couple of years. We've seen companies threaten to leave town if they don't get the size signs they want, and businesses that think drivers cannot find their way through a parking lot without directional signs strewn across the site like candles on a birthday cake. Other companies insist that wall signs must be visible from every angle, prompting a building to be wrapped in a ribbon of repetitive signs. Larger businesses are also starting to request numerous extra signs to advertise some of the items or services available inside the store, such as "Bakery," "1-Hour Photo," "Pharmacy," and "ATM."

At some point we have to stop and ask, "Do all of these extra and larger signs *clear up* or *create* confusion? Do we really need all of these signs?"

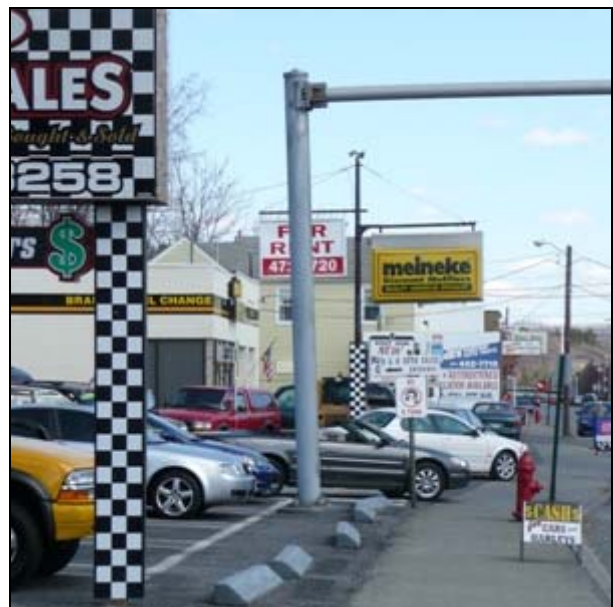
### How Much is Really Necessary?

The primary purpose of a sign is to clearly identify a place of business. But too often, several signs are visible for the same business. This clutters our plazas and main streets alike, and ultimately results in more businesses asking for even more signs so that they can be seen through the "sign haze."

This repetitive approach is self-defeating, with signs becoming larger and more numerous until we, as readers, begin glossing over all the signs, not being able to focus on any one in particular due to information overload.

### Sign Regulations: Firm but Flexible

Some businesses may be very visible to passersby, such as those located along a main road, while others may be located off a remote interior road in an industrial complex of



*A proliferation of signs is an eyesore that detracts from our communities.*

several buildings. Some business locations may have multiple tenants, while others may only have one or two. A single solution that works for one establishment may simply not work for another. A municipality's sign regulations must provide the necessary flexibility to address varying situations, without providing too much leeway that could result in "sign overload."

### What Does the Law Say?

Signs are a form of speech. Applicants may bring up free speech when arguing for additional signs on a property. The law is quite clear in this regard. Although governments may not regulate content (some exceptions apply), they can regulate the size, type, number, location, and temporary vs. permanent nature of signs. Therefore, communities must carefully craft sign regulations to allow for proper business identification without creating a proliferation of unnecessary signs. Read more about this topic in Part One of New York State's [Municipal Control of Signs](#) publication.

### Variances

This overview of signs wouldn't be complete without addressing variances. Applicants often request variances to allow larger or more numerous signs. New York State Law states that if a Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) is considering the granting of a variance, it must consider [five factors](#) in evaluating the benefit to the applicant versus the detriment to the community. Variance requests will seldom meet the five factor test and should only be granted for unique circumstances *and* when they will not result in a detriment to a community's character.

New York State Law directs that if the ZBA determines that a variance is justified, it should only grant the *minimum variance necessary to provide relief*, which is often far different from what the applicant is proposing. Boards must also keep in mind that granting variances will often set a precedent for future requests, as applicants will point to other businesses that have been granted larger or more numerous signs as justification for their own request. Boards must be careful to not get caught in this never-ending cycle of variances that ultimately undermines the local law adopted by the municipality's elected officials. After all, sign regulations are town law and are meant to be honored.

### Good Signs and Good Sign Plans

A good sign conveys its message clearly and quickly, is compatible with its surroundings, fits well within the architectural scheme, and promotes the desired image of the community. Remember: signs are supposed to be accessory uses to the building, so make sure that wall signs complement the architecture and freestanding signs do not visually block or dominate the building front. See [Greenway Guide E2](#) for more information and illustrations on what makes a good sign.

But good design includes more than just the sign's physical characteristics; good sign design also relates to the placement of the sign in the landscape. Signs that are placed



*Repetitive signs like these are unnecessary and clutter our communities.*

within a commercial site should not induce visual competition amongst each other. For example, businesses with a primary wall sign that is clearly visible from the road should not have a repetitive freestanding sign along the highway, especially if the business is located adjacent to the road.

In addition, wall signs that are placed on more than one face of a building are often both visible at the same time, again resulting in an unnecessary duplication of signs. There is a tendency to believe that the more signs a business has, the more visible it will become. However, the cumulative effect when all businesses take this approach is simply clutter and confusion.

Signs are an important contributor of community character and influence the perception of what a community is to visitors and residents alike. Local officials should review their municipal sign regulations to ensure that they result in signs that are clear and legible, and which do not compete or induce competition with other signs for the benefit of the community as a whole.

### **Stay Tuned....**

....for more information about signs in future issues of the *Plan On It* eNewsletter.

## **For More Information**

Dutchess County Dept. of Planning & Development: [Greenway Guide E2 "Signs"](#)  
["Variance Standards"](#) technical memo

NYS James A. Coon Local Government Series: ["Municipal Control of Signs"](#) [4.3 MB]  
["Zoning Board of Appeals"](#)

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