

In 2020-21, the Saint Paul Downtown Alliance partnered with the CapitolRiver Council and the U of M Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) on a 2 semester Resilient Communities Project (RCP). Two separate Humphrey School graduate classes evaluated the wayfinding and signage systems and codes in downtown St. Paul and conducted surveys and interviews with residents and business owners.

The final report can be [found here](#), and the section on business owners' experience with signage starts on page 21 and the conclusions are on page 34. The main takeaways are:

- The perception that putting up signs is too cumbersome, either because of previous experience themselves or from hearing from others, is enough reason for many businesses to avoid doing so in the first place.
- Historic districts are especially challenging to work within.
- Saint Paul's signage code is the most restrictive of the cities it was compared to, especially in terms of the smallest/most minor of signs, but also was one of two cities that has a complete ban on advertising signs.

The information below has been taken directly from the study. We encourage you to review the full report to better understand the broader context and perspectives captured through this project. However, the findings highlighted below offer a clear reflection of the barriers businesses face today when navigating Saint Paul's signage policies, and underscore the need for a more accessible, business-friendly approach moving forward.

Barriers to Wayfinding in Downtown St. Paul: An Evaluation

Executive Summary

- The **process of putting up signage is cumbersome for business owners** due to blanket restrictions of certain types of signage, subjective interpretations of the codes and what historic preservation means, and the lack of distinction between commercial and residential districts.
- **The skyway system, in particular, is difficult** for business owners to put up signage, potentially due to gatekeeping by building owners or a lack of information in general.
- Overall, St. Paul has some of the strictest signage codes compared to similar Midwestern cities, due in part to **blanket restrictions and permits** needed for almost all signage types.



Recommendations

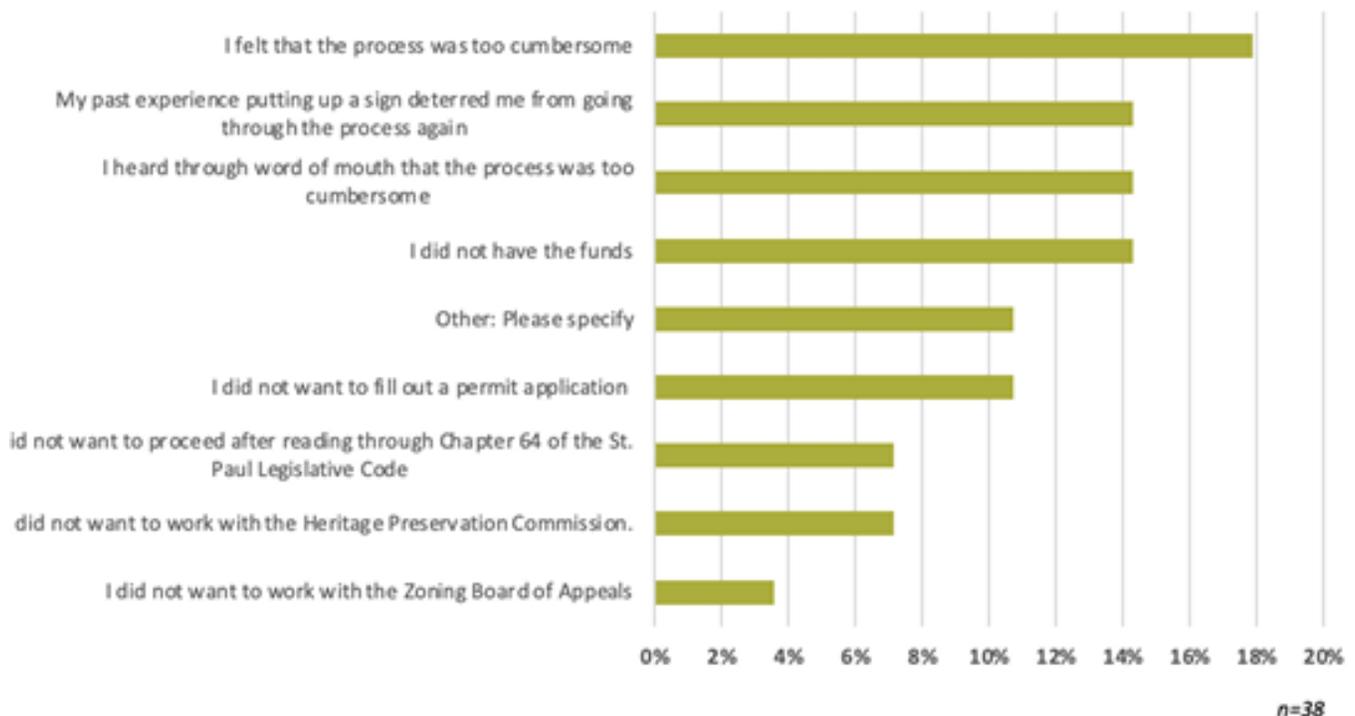
- Work toward **shortening and standardizing the process** through which business owners put up new signage. This can be done through a variety of suggested methods: requiring businesses to work with contractors in order to put up a new sign, working with local organizations to disseminate information, or changing specific codes to allow for more dynamic and exciting signage in business districts.

Business Owner Survey & Interviews

68 respondents - mix of small businesses (revenue less than \$2 million) and large businesses (revenue more than \$2 million)

- A combined 32% of respondents reported **they either feel the process is too cumbersome or have heard that the process is too cumbersome** in reasoning for their decisions against putting up a sign.
- Other popular reasons include not wanting to go through the process again due to past experience (14%) and the lack of funds (14%).

Figure 18: Reasoning for Deciding Against Putting Up Signage (%)



The results in figure 18 demonstrate that the process of putting up signage can occasionally outweigh the desire to bring in new customers through new, exciting signage. While the



signage code should act as a helpful guide in telling business owners what they can and cannot do, it can instead serve as a barrier to attracting customers and helping pedestrians and drivers navigate the streets of downtown St. Paul. **The fact that some owners have had negative experiences that deterred them from displaying new signage and that business owners have heard rumors about the cumbersome process shows that the city may not be doing its best in promoting business and helping business owners through the process.**

Conclusions from Business Owner Interviews

1. **Business owners want more flexibility.** During the interviews, all business owners noted the importance of historic preservation, but the need to market their own business often seemed to conflict with tight restrictions
 - a. *"Putting a sign on a historic building [that] allows for people to know there is a business is more important than maintaining some 1920s architectural code."*
 - b. *"[We] need to look forward and look ahead."*
2. **Business owners want different codes based on the location of the business.** Having the same code for residential areas and business districts is not beneficial to many businesses in downtown St. Paul.
 - a. *"If you choose to live in a business corridor, the zoning should cater more towards the business than the residential."*
 - b. *My key thing is balance... [we] have the ability to have both downtown and the residents [area]."*
3. **Business owners have reported trouble getting a clear explanation of signage code restrictions, which have contributed to the sensation of the process being burdensome.** In interviews, business owners noted a lack of clear and precise explanation from organizations within a timely manner as the main causes of negative experiences.
 - a. *"Depending on what day, when you turn it in, and who reviews it, you get a different answer."*
 - b. *"[I] felt like it had a lot more to do with personal preference than the state objective of keeping with the historical preservation of the area."*
4. **38% of business owners in the survey commented that the process of putting up signage is cumbersome, or have heard so from others.** In more detailed interviews, business owners expressed the process of putting up signs as being cumbersome and having to visit different organizations for a code explanation. Although some business owners did not have difficulty understanding specific restrictions, going through all the steps in the process was not a pleasant experience.
 - a. *"No controversy surrounding it but had to go through the process, just the fact that it took yet more effort."*
 - b. *"Process took longer and required more resources than it should have."*
 - c. *"There are a lot of hoops to jump through - building has to approve the signage for the city to approve the signage."*



5. **The skyway system in downtown St. Paul seems to be inadequate in supporting businesses and maintaining city dynamics.** Out of the 3 skyway business owners in the survey sample, all of them mentioned not being able to put up signs in the skyway.

Recommendations

1. **Work towards shortening and standardizing the process for putting up signage.** 38% of business owners feel that the entire process is too cumbersome, or have heard rumors from others that the process is too difficult. Therefore, the city or partner organizations can look for ways to simplify it for business owners. For example, in the City of Minneapolis, sign permits are only issued to sign contractors licensed by the City. Given the complex nature of the permitting process in St. Paul and the responses of business owners, St. Paul could also require businesses to work with licensed sign contractors rather than try to navigate the system themselves.
2. **Use a zoning study to look into updating the signage code to provide more nuance in business districts.** Business owners are struggling with marketing their businesses using signage that is quite restrictive for a downtown area. Interviewees in particular noted that the blanket code does not differentiate between residential areas and business districts for the most part, which greatly hinders the ability for business owners to display dynamic and exciting signage. For example, Chapter 64 of the Legislative Code bans all flashing signage of any kind, regardless of where the business is located. **Whereas Minneapolis allows for flashing signage in particular business corridors, St. Paul bans flashing signage outright.** Numerous interviewees noted that the lack of distinction between what can be done in business corridors and residential areas makes the code seem overly restrictive and more resident-friendly, even in what should be business-friendly areas. The outright ban on flashing signage and the strict rules regarding dynamic signage could be two specific codes to target when arguing for looser regulations in business districts that set them apart from residential areas.

Signage Codes Comparison (St. Paul, MN; Minneapolis, MN; Madison, WI; Cincinnati, OH; St. Louis, MO)

Although St. Paul, Minneapolis, Madison, Cincinnati, and St. Louis all require permits for canopy signs, electric signs, marquees, projecting signs, and business signs, **St. Paul's signage codes are stricter than other cities for window signs and advertisements.** St. Paul is the only city that requires a permit without exceptions for window signs, and they also have strict laws about advertising within the City limits. Without being easily able to put up a sign, businesses in St. Paul are harder to find than in other similar Midwestern cities.

St. Paul was the only city that required permits for all window signs, regardless of type or size. Although Cincinnati only allowed 'for sale' signs, Minneapolis and St. Louis allowed any size of sign in the window of a business. Many businesses are struggling to let customers know they are open during the current pandemic and the strict regulations regarding



window signs in St. Paul may hinder businesses from attracting customers. In particular, new regulations regarding business operations and pickup and delivery options for restaurants can be difficult to display in St. Paul in particular because of the strict codes. By allowing businesses to place signs without taking time to apply for a permit, St. Paul will allow businesses to continue to help customers quickly find ways to continue to patronize businesses easily.

St. Paul and St. Louis were the only cities to prohibit advertising. St. Paul defined advertising as, “a sign which directs attention to a business, profession, commodity, service or entertainment which is conducted, sold or manufactured elsewhere than on the premises upon which the sign is placed,” which unfortunately may include directional signs. This rule, coupled with St. Paul’s signage code stating that all signs need to match current signs and all business signs need permits, means that businesses in St. Paul are likely harder to find than those in other cities. This difficulty may result in fewer customers for current businesses and may also act as a barrier to businesses trying to open in the downtown area.

Informational Interview

In conducting research for our evaluation, we interviewed David Eide, a zoning inspector for the St. Paul Department of Safety and Inspections. While the interview was intended to be informational to contextualize our evaluation, a few of David’s observations as an Inspector of the codes we compared above are worth discussing as preliminary results.

To Eide, the most significant barrier to creating a cohesive wayfinding system in St. Paul was not the zoning codes, but rather the process of getting permits for signage.

Currently, there are three separate permits that business owners may need to obtain to put signage on their business: a business sign permit, a sign variance, and a temporary sign permit. Eide noted that the complex permitting system can be difficult to navigate, particularly for small business owners who cannot afford to hire outside help to get their permits. Whereas larger businesses often hire permitting companies to fill out permits for them, small business owners and those with smaller budgets are often unable to hire outside help. The complex system can be difficult to navigate for a first-time user, so some business owners may struggle to get a permit or give up trying altogether.

Recommendations

Include more “blanket” exemptions to needing permits for a variety of signage types, similar to that of other Midwestern cities. Whereas many cities provide exemptions in all districts for a variety of signage types, St. Paul’s code is explicit in listing exemptions for certain areas and not others, leading to an incredibly long chapter of the code. Therefore, we recommend that St. Paul creates more exemptions for permits across all districts, or at least in business districts.

