

Saint Paul Signage Ordinance Comparison

The Saint Paul Downtown Alliance has reviewed signage codes from across the country and found that while many cities strive to balance aesthetics and commercial needs, Saint Paul's ordinance lags behind. Its current approach places businesses at a disadvantage compared to peer cities. Minneapolis offers a model of streamlined, flexible rules that support business visibility and reduce red tape—without sacrificing design standards. Cleveland and a composite “Best Practice Model” further underscore how Saint Paul's outdated rules are holding back activation, investment, and downtown vibrancy.

Key Findings

- Minneapolis and Cleveland permit significantly larger and more flexible projecting signage than Saint Paul—critical for drawing pedestrian attention in dense downtown environments.
- Cleveland uses fixed square footage caps, removing the complexity of frontage math and making requirements far easier for businesses and city staff to interpret.
- Peer cities provide broader and clearer exemptions for small, temporary, or interior signage—reducing permit burdens and freeing up city resources.
- The Best Practice Model highlights how clearer rules, flexible size ranges, and objective standards create a more pro-business, transparent regulatory environment.
- Regulatory challenges in Saint Paul's historic overlay districts, such as Lowertown and Cathedral Hill, further complicate signage approvals—often requiring additional layers of subjective review by the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC). This adds time, uncertainty, and cost for small businesses in key commercial areas.
- Minneapolis, Cleveland, and Portland also regulate signage in historic or design review districts, but they mitigate burdens through clear design standards, codified exemptions, and delegated administrative approvals.
- Saint Paul's use of subjective language (e.g., “visual clutter”) injects inconsistency into reviews and slows down investment.
- Saint Paul's citywide billboard moratorium, while well-intentioned, restricts district-level promotional tools that support wayfinding, local events, and retail growth.



Modernizing Saint Paul’s signage ordinance is not just about catching up to peer cities, it’s a low-cost, high-impact step toward unlocking the full economic potential of its commercial corridors. By adopting clearer standards, expanding exemptions, and increasing signage allowances, the city can immediately help downtown businesses recover, attract foot traffic, and thrive. This comparison outlines specific, actionable changes that would make Saint Paul’s code more transparent, flexible, and aligned with successful models used elsewhere.

Projecting Sign Regulations

Saint Paul - Code §§64.412 & 64.505; Minneapolis - §543.470; Cleveland - Chapter 350.14

	Saint Paul	Minneapolis	Cleveland	Best Practice Model
Max Size	25 sq ft if >18" into ROW	48 sq ft (B4); 80 sq ft (Entertainment)	12 sq ft by-right; 36 sq ft with setbacks	36 sq ft by-right; up to 60 sq ft downtown
Max Projection	4 ft (≥2 ft from curb)	4-8 ft depending on district	4-8 ft based on curb and setback rules	6 ft into ROW if 10 ft sidewalk clearance
Height Clearance	10 ft minimum	~10 ft (per building code)	~10 ft minimum	10-12 ft above pedestrian space
Number Allowed	1 per entrance	No limit within total area	Typically one per frontage	One per 25 ft frontage; more allowed with spacing

For business owners, projecting signs are essential for visibility in pedestrian environments. The ability to use more prominent signage supports foot traffic and customer engagement. Cleveland and Minneapolis consistently allow larger signage than Saint Paul, while the Best Practice Model provides generous, consistent allowances supporting street-level branding.



Sign Size Allocation

Saint Paul - §64.505; Minneapolis - §543.470; Cleveland - Chapter 350.14

	Saint Paul	Minneapolis	Cleveland	Best Practice Model
Formula	4 × lot frontage	2.5-8 sq ft per ft of wall (district-based)	Fixed caps per sign type	2.5-4 sq ft per ft of wall frontage, tiered
Placement Limits	No wall-specific restrictions	Limited to primary wall	Depends on sign type and zoning	Wall-specific allocation, special corner allowances
Max Per Sign	Not separately capped	Up to 120 sq ft normally, 300 sq ft in key zones	Wall + canopy = 100 sq ft	200-300 sq ft per sign, scaled by storefront size

Minneapolis and Cleveland offer clearer, more transparent allowance methods than Saint Paul. The Best Practice Model uses wall-based allocation with sensible caps to align with architectural context while supporting high-impact visibility.

Permit Requirements and Exemptions

Saint Paul - §§64.401, 64.420; Minneapolis - §543.100; Cleveland - Chapters 350.10

	Saint Paul	Minneapolis	Cleveland	Best Practice Model
Permit Required	Yes, for most exterior signs	Yes, but broad exemptions	Yes unless sign is under set thresholds	Only required for signs over 8 sq ft or illuminated/digital
Common Exemptions	≤6 sq ft signs, sidewalk signs	<8 sq ft, portable <12 sq ft, window/interior signs	Portable/projecting <12 sq ft, painted wall signs	<8 sq ft, temp signs ≤12 sq ft & ≤6 ft tall, interior signs

In Saint Paul, signage regulations are further complicated for businesses located in historic overlay districts. These areas, including downtown Lowertown, require Heritage Preservation Commission approval for most signage, which can introduce delays and subjective interpretation. Peer cities such as Minneapolis and Portland manage historic signage with codified design criteria and administrative approval pathways, offering a more predictable and timely process.

Cities like Cleveland and Minneapolis simplify small business compliance by clearly defining exempt signage. Expanding exemptions in Saint Paul would reduce delays and paperwork for low-impact signage, benefiting small businesses and temporary uses.



Billboard and Advertising Restrictions

Saint Paul - §64.400; Minneapolis - §543.470; Cleveland - Chapter 350.16

	Saint Paul	Minneapolis	Cleveland	Best Practice Model
Billboard Policy	Citywide moratorium on off-premise advertising	Regulated with exemptions	District-specific regulation	Limited use in designated districts

Saint Paul maintains a longstanding moratorium on new off-premise advertising signs, including billboards. While this approach supports stated aesthetic goals, it can also limit options for promotional signage that might support local events, retail initiatives, or wayfinding efforts. Other cities allow targeted advertising in controlled contexts that support economic and cultural vitality.

Subjective Language in Saint Paul's Sign Code

These challenges are amplified in Saint Paul's historic districts, where signage proposals often undergo additional review by the Heritage Preservation Commission. The lack of specific, codified design standards leaves business owners navigating an opaque process driven by subjective interpretations of what is 'compatible with historic character.' In contrast, cities like Minneapolis, Portland, and Cleveland codify more predictable guidelines and delegate approval authority to staff where appropriate—reducing friction while still preserving district integrity.

Saint Paul's sign ordinance includes several instances of language that reflect value-based reasoning or allow for subjective interpretation. This contrasts with Minneapolis's zone-based formulas, Cleveland's use of fixed numeric caps, and best-practice models that emphasize objectivity.

Examples of Subjective or Value-Laden Language:

- "Preserve and promote the visual environment"
- "Protect the scenic views and natural beauty of the city"
- "Reduce visual clutter caused by excessive or poorly placed signs"
- "Compatible with the character of the area"
- "Reflect the nature and scale of surrounding development"

Subjectivity in code enforcement can delay signage approvals and increase unpredictability for businesses. Cities like Cleveland and Portland avoid this by relying on fixed criteria, measurable size limits, and predictable administrative permitting processes.



Appendix: Ordinance Language & Citations by Topic

Projecting Sign Regulations

	Source
Saint Paul - Max size: 25 sq ft if projecting more than 18" into ROW	Saint Paul Code §64.412(a)
Saint Paul - Max projection: 4 ft, ≥2 ft from curb	Saint Paul Code §64.412(b)
Saint Paul - Height clearance: 10 ft minimum	Saint Paul Code §64.412(b)
Saint Paul - One sign per entrance	Saint Paul Code §64.505(2)
Minneapolis - Max size: 48 sq ft (B4), 80 sq ft (Entertainment Area)	Minneapolis Code §543.470(c)
Minneapolis - Max projection: 4 ft (standard), 8 ft (Entertainment Area)	Minneapolis Code §543.470(d)
Minneapolis - Height clearance: building code requirement	Minneapolis Code §543.470(e); Minnesota Building Code §1009.5
Cleveland - Max size: 12 sq ft standard, 36 sq ft with Planning Commission approval	Cleveland Code Chapter 350.14(e)(3)
Cleveland - Max projection and setback rules	Cleveland Code Chapter 350.14(e)(3)
Cleveland - Height clearance: minimum 10 ft	Cleveland Code Chapter 350.14(e)(3)
Best Practice Model - Based on Portland and Austin projecting sign standards	Portland Code §32.32.030; Austin Code §25-10-133; §25-10-152



Sign Size Allocation

Saint Paul - Total signage: 4× lot frontage

Minneapolis - 2.5-8 sq ft per ft of building wall (zone-based)

Minneapolis - Max sign size: 120-300 sq ft

Cleveland - Fixed max: 100 sq ft for wall + canopy signs

Best Practice - Model approach: derived from Minneapolis + Portland allocations

Source

Saint Paul Code §64.505(1)

Minneapolis Code §543.470(a)(2)

Minneapolis Code §543.470(b)(2)

Cleveland Code Chapter 350.14(c)

Minneapolis Code §543.470; Portland Code §32.32.020(B)(1); Austin Code §25-10-100 et seq.

Permit Requirements and Exemptions

Saint Paul - Permit required for all exterior signs

Saint Paul - Exemptions for ≤6 sq ft, sidewalk signs, political signs

Minneapolis - Permit required unless exempt

Minneapolis - Exemptions for <8 sq ft, <12 sq ft portable signs, window signs

Cleveland - Permit required unless sign is exempt

Cleveland - Exemptions: <12 sq ft portable, incidental, wall-painted signs

Best Practice Model - Based on Portland and Austin exemptions

Source

Saint Paul Code §64.401

Saint Paul Code §64.420

Minneapolis Code §543.100

Minneapolis Code §543.110

Cleveland Code Chapter 350.10

Cleveland Code Chapter 350.12

Portland Code §32.32.020; Austin Code §25-10-3 to §25-10-6



Subjective Language

Source

“Preserve and promote the visual environment”	Saint Paul Code §64.400
“Protect the scenic views and natural beauty”	Saint Paul Code §64.400
“Visual clutter,” “character of the area” language	Saint Paul Code §64.400 and §64.501

Billboard and Advertising Restrictions

Source

Saint Paul - Citywide moratorium	Saint Paul Code §64.400; confirmed in City policy and planning documents
Minneapolis - Regulated by district; some exemptions	Minneapolis Code §543.470(f)
Cleveland - District-specific regulation, subject to Design Review	Cleveland Code Chapter 350.16
Best Practice - Model includes event-based or arts-focused allowances	Portland Code §32.32.030(B); Austin Code §25-10-153, §25-10-152(C)

