



CITY OF SAINT PAUL OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL

Rebecca Noecker
Council President

Megan Jekot
Legislative Aide

Downtown Saint Paul Sign Ordinance Re-Engagement: Sequenced Reform Options for 2026

PURPOSE

This memo supports re-engagement on the Saint Paul sign ordinance as a 2026 priority by identifying low-hanging fruit that can move quickly, align with Council President Noecker's guidance, and address long-standing concerns from the Downtown Alliance and Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce. It also draws on Minneapolis's current sign code reforms as a peer-city reference, helping distinguish near-term actions from more complex or controversial changes that require deliberate sequencing.

BACKGROUND

City leadership, downtown business partners, and peer cities broadly agree on several realities: Saint Paul's sign code is structurally confusing, not merely inconsistently applied, and this has real economic consequences — businesses often abandon signage efforts due to uncertainty, delay, and cost. Signage is also recognized as a tool for downtown vitality and business visibility, particularly amid post-pandemic recovery and evolving land use.

While a full overhaul or direct parity with Minneapolis's code is neither simple nor fast, Minneapolis's ongoing reforms show that early, targeted steps can materially improve business conditions while longer-term changes are developed. Minneapolis thus provides both a policy benchmark and a model for pragmatic, incremental progress.

SEQUENCED REFORM APPROACH

Council President Noecker proposes that sign ordinance work be rolled out as sequenced reform rather than marginal tinkering. Early actions should be deliberate first steps — informed by Minneapolis' experience — rather than substitutes for deeper, long-term change. This framing will emphasize that Saint Paul is learning from Minneapolis, not copying wholesale, setting realistic expectations and reinforcing credibility.

The initial phase should focus on enabling businesses to “hang out their shingles”: reducing confusion, shortening timelines, lowering costs, and allowing common-sense signage that supports street-level visibility and activation. More complex, revenue-oriented, or aesthetically sensitive issues — such as off-premise advertising or historic district design standards — can be addressed later as part of a longer-term roadmap, avoiding front-loaded conflict or risk of stalling early progress.

BOTTOM LINE

By pairing immediate administrative improvements with targeted legislative exemptions — closely mirroring Minneapolis's early steps — Saint Paul can make real, visible progress in 2026, respond to partner input, align with Council leadership priorities, and sequence more controversial reforms to maintain momentum.

City Hall
Email: ward2@ci.stpaul.mn.us

Suite 310B

Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102-1615


651-266-8620
www.stpaul.gov/ward2

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON TABLE

| Topic | Saint Paul, Current | Downtown Alliance & Chamber Asks | Minneapolis' Direction | Our Proposal |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Small sign permits | Many small signs require permits; unclear exemptions | Exempt signs under 8 sq ft | Broadly loosening restrictions; more permissive baseline | Phase 1 (Early 2026) |
| Temporary signs | 14-day limit; permits often required | Exempt temp signs up to 12 sq ft / 6 ft tall | Allow temp signs for longer periods (up to ~3 months) | Phase 1 (Early 2026) |
| Interior / window signs | Often treated as regulated | Exempt all interior/window signs | Largely deregulated | Phase 1 (Early 2026) |
| Plain-language guidance | Fragmented, inconsistent interpretation | Publish clear, plain-language guidance | Emphasis on clarity and predictability | Phase 1 (Early 2026) |
| Review timelines | Unpredictable, especially with HPC | Set service-level goals (10 / 30 days) | Process and fee predictability emphasized | Phase 1 (Early 2026) |
| Projecting signs | Limited size and projection | Expand to 48 sq ft by-right, 8 ft projection | Expanding size, placement, and creativity | Phase 2 (By end of 2026) |
| Subjective standards | Code relies on aesthetic judgments | Remove subjective language | Shift toward objective standards | Phase 2 (By end of 2026) |
| Historic districts | HPC review is slow and discretionary | Codified standards and staff approval | Staff-led approvals where standards are met | Phase 2 (By end of 2026) |
| Murals / directories | Heavily regulated | Not explicitly addressed | Murals and tenant directories largely deregulated | Phase 2 (By end of 2026) |
| Off-premise advertising | Moratorium / restrictions | Remove moratorium; allow in business districts | Controversial; revisiting stalled replacement program | Phase 3 (2027) |

RECOMMENDED SEQUENCING

Phase 1: Immediate, Low-Risk Actions (2026 Early)

High alignment, low controversy, tangible business impact.

Administrative (parallel track)

- Publish plain-language guidance on what signs are exempt and when permits are required.
- Standardize interpretation across departments.
- Establish clear service-level timelines for sign permits (e.g., simple permits vs. HPC review).

Legislative (targeted amendments)

- Exempt small signs, temporary signs, and interior/window signs from permitting.
- Extend duration for temporary signs.

These steps directly address confusion, cost, and delay — the primary reasons businesses abandon signage efforts.

Phase 2: Targeted Code Improvements (Mid-Term – complete zoning study by end of 2026)

Initiate a zoning study to explore the following ideas:

- Expand projecting sign size and projection limits downtown.
- Replace subjective language with clear, objective standards.
- Shift to simpler square-footage caps rather than frontage-based formulas.
- Develop codified design standards for historic districts with staff-level approval when compliant.

Phase 3: Complex / Controversial Issues (Long-Term)

Should be acknowledged but not front-loaded.

- Off-premise advertising / billboards.
 - High stakeholder disagreement.
 - Minneapolis treats this as controversial and secondary.
 - Risk of derailing early consensus if introduced too soon.