

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA TOPIC

Proposed Bellevue City Code Amendment to update the sign code consistent with legal requirements and contemporary sign design techniques.

Rebecca Horner, Director
Nick Whipple, Code and Policy Director
Charlie Engel, Senior Planner
Development Services Department

Robbie Sepler, Assistant City Attorney
City Attorney's Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**DIRECTION**

Staff will introduce the proposed Sign Code Bellevue City Code Amendment (BCCA). Following discussion, staff is seeking Council direction to prepare the Ordinance for final action at a future meeting.

RECOMMENDATION

Direct staff to finalize the Sign Code BCCA Ordinance for final action at a future meeting.

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS**Background**

In 2015, the Supreme Court decided in *Reed v. Town of Gilbert et al.* that all sign regulations must be content neutral. The court has dictated that the content of the sign generally may not be regulated and, importantly, that signs of the same type generally may not be regulated differently based on the content of the sign. For example, the City may not regulate a temporary directional sign differently than a temporary political sign or regulate a freestanding church sign differently than a freestanding festival sign. Both temporary signs and freestanding signs are examples of sign types, while the other distinctions noted are examples of content which generally cannot be regulated or variations within one sign type which must generally be treated the same.

In addition to the legal requirements, the sign code update provides the City an opportunity to ensure the provisions of the code meet the needs of the community and allow for contemporary sign design, technology, and construction methods. Both the public and city staff have identified difficulties interpreting and administering the sign code and the update will look to simplify and streamline the sign code while ensuring the design desires of the community are upheld.

On November 25, 2025, the Council held a study session which served as a mid-point project check-in and briefing on phase one of outreach. During this meeting, staff shared the key themes and priorities that were developed based on feedback from engagement. The first key theme identified was aesthetics and preferences, the community identified that maintaining Bellevue's existing aesthetics and ensuring that signs don't become visually cluttered was an important priority and should be reflected in the update. The next key theme was temporary signs and enforcement, staff received the most feedback surrounding the proliferation of temporary signs and the desire to limit these signs,

ensure that they are placed thoughtfully in limited numbers, and are retrieved in a timely manner. Alternatively, the community also emphasized the need for temporary signs to advertise community events and small businesses which indicated the update should strive to find the balance between these interests. The last key theme identified was the community's desire to streamline regulations and increase flexibility, where appropriate, so that the updated sign code is easier to understand, use, and apply. These key themes and priorities identified by the community also reflected a few of the Council priorities that were identified during initiation including a desire for simplicity and flexibility in the sign code as well as ensuring consistency across the sign code and in our processes.

Project Goals

Taking the priorities identified by Council and the community, along with feedback from internal and external stakeholders, the following project goals were identified:

1. Ensure that the updated sign code strikes the balance between business needs and community aesthetic desires.
2. Encourage contemporary sign design and technology to support a forward-looking sign code.
3. Simplify and streamline regulations and ensure there's consistency.
4. Align with key court decisions and ensure the updated sign code complies with applicable case law.

Components of the Proposed LUCA

The proposed Sign Code BCCA is a complete rewrite of the existing sign code to ensure that standards are reorganized in a manner that is easy to understand and apply. Many aspects, policies, and standards from the existing sign code have been carried over, when appropriate, into the draft. Key elements of the draft have been highlighted and summarized below; a complete draft showing the proposed amendments is provided as attachment A.

Standards for Permanent Signs

For permanent signs in residential districts, the main difference between the existing sign code and the proposed draft is reorganization, formatting, and compliance with applicable case law. The existing code limits the number and type of permanent signage allowed currently which is also reflected in the draft to support signs for things like neighborhood identification, churches, and schools. Similarly, the existing code sets additional restrictions on sign size, placement, and type in certain areas, like Old Bellevue for example, and these restrictions have also been reflected in the draft. The existing policies and standards regarding highrise signage in commercial and mixed-use land use districts have also been reflected in the draft and updated only to comply with the applicable content-neutral case law.

During phase one of outreach, stakeholders identified concern with the existing code standard that limited the number of signs allowed per each primary entrance of a multiple occupancy building. In these cases, there were often tenants located internal to buildings that were not granted sign allocation that would provide business visibility. In an effort to increase flexibility, the primary entrance allotment requirement was removed in the draft, and other standards, such as maximum sign allowance per facade remained to balance the aesthetic desires and limit visual clutter. Additional allowances to support unique signage needs, such as with Dick's Drive-In and their iconic signage, have also been included in the draft.

New standards and allowances for noncommercial freestanding digital signage in the Grand

Connection and the BelRed Arts District Intensive Area have been added to ensure a forward-looking sign code that supports contemporary sign design and technology. The purpose and intent of these signs is to support mobility, wayfinding, and tourism in the city.

Standards for Temporary Signs

The temporary sign standards section has received the largest number of updates when compared to the existing code to increase simplicity and comply with content-neutral case law requirements. The draft clearly outlines the different sign types that are permitted depending on if they are located on private property or in the public right-of-way. The draft sets clear standards for elements such as number, location, size, and duration based on the sign type and location. Additional standards for a-frame and pole banner signs have been included in the draft to support visibility for businesses and community events.

To balance the need to better track and manage temporary yard signs with the need for these types of signs in our community, the draft proposes a new temporary sign registration program for yard signs. Under this proposed program, temporary yard sign applicants will be required to submit an online registration form that would be issued instantly with no requirement for staff review. The temporary registration for would then be attached to the sign face by the applicant before a sign can be placed in the community. The registration would include the applicant's contact information along with an issued and expiration date for the temporary sign based on the allowed duration set forth in the sign code.

With the registration attached to the sign face, members of the community can identify if a yard sign has received proper registration, and if so, whether the sign has reached its expiration date. The contact information on the registration would allow community members to reach out to the sign owner directly if there are concerns or once the registration has expired. Staff will continue to develop the details and implementation requirements needed for the new proposed program.

Nonconforming Signs, Prohibited Signs, and Variances

The standards for nonconforming signs, prohibited signs, and variances have been simplified and streamlined to accurately reflect current practice and policies as well as modified to ensure compliance with applicable case law. Signs that mimic traffic signs, present a safety hazard, or rotate continue to be prohibited along with billboards. Additional standards to further clarify the limits of nonconformity, as well as clear standards that apply to alterations to nonconforming signs, have also been included in the draft.

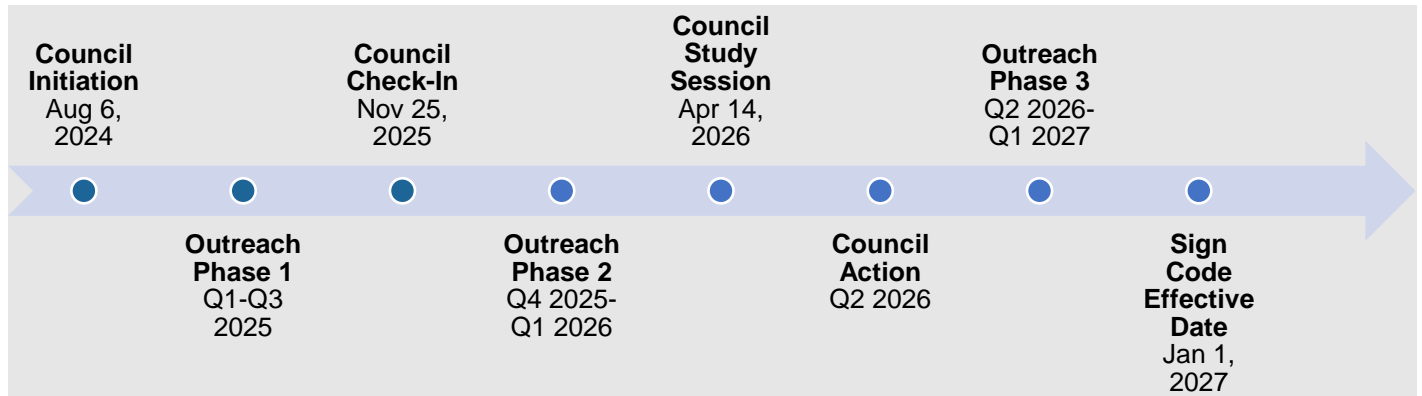
Public Engagement

The sign code update project includes three main phases of outreach. Phase one focused on expanding project awareness, sharing project objectives, and gathering community perspectives on project priorities. Phase one engagement activities included launching the project webpage, distributing a questionnaire that was available in Bellevue's top seven most commonly spoken languages, holding stakeholder listening sessions with sign industry professionals, neighborhood associations, and the business and development community, along with direct engagement with folks interested in the update, and city newsletter updates.

Following the November 25 Council study session, staff began phase two which included sharing the public sign code draft, hosting an information session, and following up with stakeholders from phase one.

Looking ahead, phase three of outreach will be focused on community education and awareness to ensure that the community is aware of the updates. This time during phase three will also be used to develop and implement the necessary programs and processes, such as the temporary sign registration program, required for the updated. As part of phase three, a delayed effective date for the new sign code ordinance is proposed to allow time for education, outreach, and awareness before the new regulations take effect.

Project Timeline



POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

The BCCA will amend the Bellevue City Code. The amendments will be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, specifically the Urban Design element and the completed Retail Study.

Fiscal Impact

There is no fiscal impact associated with implementing this BCCA.

OPTIONS

1. Direct staff to finalize the Sign Code BCCA Ordinance for final action at a future meeting.
2. Provide alternative direction to staff

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Sign Code Update Draft

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

N/A