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Cities ease signage rules to boost business

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By **Charisse Jones**, USA TODAY

When David Gwathmey and his wife opened their coffee and wine bar in Alexandria, Va.'s "Old Town" section, he defied a ban on sidewalk signs to try to steer customers their way. Now that the city has eased its restriction, what Gwathmey did surreptitiously, he can do in the daylight. Already, he has seen the difference.

"It definitely drives foot traffic," says Gwathmey, 38, noting that the sign may have boosted the number of weekend visitors to his shop, Grape + Bean, by 20%. "This is a very strong statement and action that supports (the city's) claim to want to support small businesses."

Alexandria is one of several communities that have lifted or are considering loosening restrictions on sidewalk signs and banners to help shore up businesses struggling to survive a recession that has slowed consumer spending and depleted municipal tax revenue.

"We have definitely been touting the advantage of signs for businesses during this downturn in the economy," says David Hickey, director of government relations for the International Sign Association, adding that several communities have become more lenient. "This is a tool that advertisers can use 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it's often the more cost-effective way to bring in new customers."


Cities that are making or considering changes to sign rules include:

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•**Agoura Hills, Calif.** The City Council decided in October to waive the fee and expedite permitting for businesses wanting to hang temporary banners advertising sales or special events. Businesses can take advantage of the changes until Jan. 22, says Nathan Hamburger, assistant city manager.

•**Boynton Beach, Fla.** The City Commission is likely by early February to give businesses more time to display a banner, extending the period from 14 to 90 days a year. "We're expediting it for the benefit of local business stability," says Michael Rumpf, city planning and zoning director.

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•**Victorville, Calif.** The City Council in June allowed a large commercial center to increase the size of a sign advertising its various businesses by as much as 25%. The council may allow other business strips to do the same by spring, city spokeswoman Yvonne Hester says. "It's helpful for motorists being able to locate things," she says, "and of course it also helps individual businesses during a tough economic time."

Local governments traditionally regulate the size, number and types of business signs in their communities, aiming to preserve aesthetics and minimizing distractions to motorists. Some planning experts say that relaxing restrictions could be detrimental.

"I don't think compromising your standards on aesthetics ... is necessary to address economic hard times," says Lora Lucero, staff attorney at the American Planning Association. "I hope they're cautious ... because once you've made a change like that, it's very hard to roll back in the future."

Last month in San Angelo, Texas, efforts by planning officials to get the City Council to restrict banners and electronic signs were rejected or questioned, a stance planners say was likely influenced by the economic crisis.

"If the city staff's recommendations to tighten the regulations would've been brought to the City Council three years ago, we would have had a much different outcome," says Shawn Lewis, director of the city's planning and development services.

In Alexandria, the charm of the historic district known as Old Town is key to its bustling tourism industry. There is no neon, and signs are regulated by an architectural review board. That's why the ordinance, passed Nov. 25 by the City Council to allow businesses in the district to place signs along the main thoroughfare of King Street, is significant.

"Times have changed," says Mayor William Euille, adding that the provision, which expires March 15, helps businesses on side streets and those on the upper floors of King Street buildings get noticed by potential patrons. "Because the economy is in a downturn and businesses are experiencing a lower sales volume, the City Council felt that we needed to do something immediately to help these small businesses and retailers."

Alexandria officials are projecting a \$10.5 million revenue shortfall for this fiscal year, which ends in June, and sales tax funds are down 3%. The ordinance is part of a larger campaign encouraging locals to patronize businesses in the city where they live or work and may lead to a more permanent change, such as allowing signs on poles.

"I would say it probably is more urgent than ever," Tara Zimnick-Calico, president of the Old Town Business and Professionals Association, says of the ordinance.

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