

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

August 2, 2016

Texas Main Street Center Design Report

Re: LED signage in Historic Downtown District
City: La Grange, Texas
By: Texas Main Street Design Staff

Not for regulatory approval, permitting, or construction

Prior to making any improvements to the building façade(s), the building owner should perform a thorough review of the major structural components of the building, including the roof, walls, and foundation. All mechanical and electrical systems should be well maintained in conformity with applicable codes and ordinances. Building uses and interior arrangements of program spaces should also be in conformity with applicable codes and ordinances.

Design Request

Kim Newton, La Grange Assistant Main Street Manager, contacted the Texas Main Street Design Staff on July 28, 2016. The Main Street Board and staff is questioning the compatibility of LED scrolling signs in their historic downtown district and would like THC feedback regarding this issue.

Recommendations

The Texas Main Street Program does not recommend LED signage as an appropriate choice for a historic downtown. Generally, LED signs are too bright, especially at night, and many have a pixelated appearance that detracts from the historic context of the downtown district. Similarly, pole signs and billboards create visual clutter that removes the focus from historic buildings, which is also inappropriate for a downtown.

Examples of Inappropriate Signage



LED signs can also become a safety issue. The bright and/or flashing lights can distract drivers, which can in turn increase accidents and the safety of the district. The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration states that even a two second distraction “significantly increases individual crash risk.” For this reason, the Texas Department of Transportation does not allow certain types of electronic signs in TxDOT Right-of-Way according to the Texas Administrative Code Title 43, Part 1, Chapter 21, which states:

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Texas Administrative Code

TITLE 43	TRANSPORTATION
PART 1	TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
CHAPTER 21	RIGHT OF WAY
SUBCHAPTER I	REGULATION OF SIGNS ALONG INTERSTATE AND PRIMARY HIGHWAYS
DIVISION 2	ELECTRONIC SIGNS
RULE §21.254	Prohibitions

An electronic sign may not:

- (1) be illuminated by flashing, intermittent, or moving lights;
- (2) contain or display animated, moving video, or scrolling advertising;
- (3) consist of a static image projected on a stationary object; or
- (4) be a mobile sign located on a truck or trailer.

Source Note: The provisions of this §21.254 adopted to be effective July 1, 2011, 36 TexReg 2418

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Texas Administrative Code

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CHAPTER 21	RIGHT OF WAY
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DIVISION 2	ELECTRONIC SIGNS
RULE §21.257	Requirements

(a) Each message on an electronic sign must be displayed for at least eight seconds. A change of message must be accomplished within two seconds and must occur simultaneously on the entire sign face.

(b) An electronic sign must:

- (1) contain a default mechanism that freezes the sign in one position if a malfunction occurs; and
- (2) automatically adjust the intensity of its display according to natural ambient light conditions.

(c) If the department finds that an electronic sign causes glare or otherwise impairs the vision of the driver of a motor vehicle or otherwise interferes with the operation of a motor vehicle, the owner of the sign, within 12 hours of a request by the department, shall reduce the intensity of the sign to a level acceptable to the department.

Source Note: The provisions of this §21.257 adopted to be effective July 1, 2011, 36 TexReg 2418

Source: Texas Administrative Code -

[https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac\\$ext.ViewTAC?tac_view=5&ti=43&pt=1&ch=21&sch=I&div=2&rl=Y](https://texreg.sos.state.tx.us/public/readtac$ext.ViewTAC?tac_view=5&ti=43&pt=1&ch=21&sch=I&div=2&rl=Y)

Unregulated, LED signs can contribute to visual clutter and light pollution, which can be detrimental to not only the appearance of an historic downtown, but also the efficiency and sustainability of the community. The International Dark Sky Association claims that “excessive use of artificial light – known as light pollution – can have serious environmental consequences for humans, wildlife, and our climate.” Alone, one sign or light post is not harmful, but multiple installations can be the catalyst for larger problems. For more information on light pollution, please visit: <http://darksky.org/light-pollution/>.

Technology is constantly improving and some signage manufacturers have been able to reduce the intensity of their signs. Several historic theaters have actually used LEDs in the restoration of their marquees. This was done by reducing the brightness and increasing the resolution of the LED panel. See the example below. Therefore, Design Staff does not recommend prohibiting all types of LED signs and instead suggests signage regulations that can prevent inappropriate signage, while providing guidance for successful signage design.

Example - Riviera Theatre Buffalo, NY



Original Marquee



New LED Marquee

Signage Regulation

Signage guidelines in partnership with a local preservation ordinance or specific signage ordinance for the downtown district can prevent the installation of inappropriate signs. The following communities regulate signage in their local historic districts. This includes how the signs are illuminated.

- San Antonio - http://www.sanantonio.gov/portals/0/Files/HistoricPreservation/6_Signage.pdf
- Waxahachie - http://www.waxahachie.com/images/City2/files/downtown_waxahachie_guidelines_08-19-2011.pdf
- Paris - <https://www.paristexas.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/1087>

A city government cannot regulate content, however the components that can cause visual clutter can be. Those include:

- lumens (brightness/intensity)
- flashing
- the number of times the copy can change in a minute
- how the copy changes (eliminate scrolling and encourage fading in/out or 5 seconds of nothing between copy changes).
- You might also require that the LED signage is used as a percentage of the signage, instead of being the business only signage.

The National Park Service also provides suggestions when considering signage regulation:

Sign controls offer communities the chance to reduce visual blight. They can also assist in producing both a new visibility and a new viability for historic commercial districts. Yet sign ordinances are not without problems. Sign controls satisfy contemporary ideas of "good taste." But "bad taste" has ample historic precedent. And in any case, tastes change. What is tasteful today may be dated tomorrow. Sign controls can impose a uniformity that falsifies history. Most historic districts contain buildings constructed over a long period of time, by different owners for different purposes; the buildings reflect different architectural styles and personal tastes. By requiring a standard sign "image" in such matters as size, material, typeface and other qualities, sign controls can mute the diversity of historic districts. Such controls can also sacrifice signs of some age and distinction that have not yet come back into fashion.⁷ Neon serves as an instructive example in this regard: once "in," then "out," then "in" again. Unfortunately,

a great number of notable signs were lost because sign controls were drafted in many communities when neon was "out." Increasingly, however, communities are enacting ordinances that recognize older and historic signs and permit them to be kept. The National Park Service encourages this trend.

Source: NPS Preservation Brief #25: The Preservation of Historic Signs - <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/25-signs.htm>

Alternative Signage Styles

Main Street Design Staff would prefer to see alternative signage and lighting options investigated and utilized in a historic downtown. Some alternative options include the following:

Panel Sign



Blade Sign



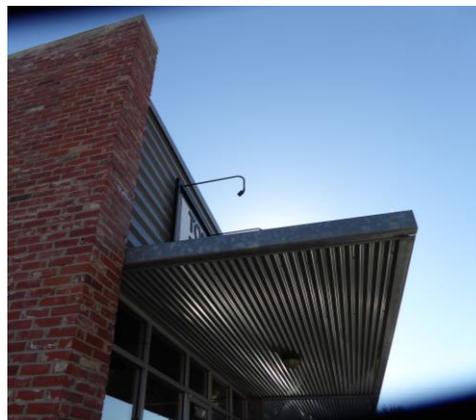
Three Dimensional Letters



Painted Sign

**Note – Painted signs should only be considered in certain situations. Unpainted brick should never be painted. Brick with existing paint, stucco, and other types of wall material can be considered for a painted sign.*

Lighting should be coordinated with the installation of signage to make the business visible at night. Panel or perpendicular signs can be illuminated from any angle using spotlights. Spotlights can be mounted on the top surface of the canopy or attached to the metal arm of the perpendicular sign. The spotlights depicted are small and have a simple profile, which decreases their visual impact on the façade.



Three dimensional letters can have light integrated into the signage or illuminated with spotlights. Other methods can also be used to highlight signage. Halcyon Coffee Bar uses hidden trough lights to light the three dimensional letters from the bottom in combination with spotlights on the façade. Neon signs should also be considered depending on the style of the building.

Trough / Up-lighting



Neon



Reverse Halo Lights



After the owner has had a chance to review the recommended concept, the Texas Main Street Design Center Staff will work with the owner(s) to help develop their rehabilitation plan for this particular building. It is also requested that TMSDC be notified when clarification of design elements might prove helpful or when an alternate scheme is contemplated. Please contact Sarah Blankenship (512) 463-9129 / sarah.blankenship@thc.state.tx.us, or Marie Oehlerking-Read (512) 463-3345 / marie.oehlerking@thc.state.tx.us.