Drafting notes and decisions

Sebastopol sign regulations • Draft 1 • September 2026

The draft replaces Chapter 17.120 with a simpler structure, more predictable approvals, and clearer limits for each sign type. It also changes several allowances. The main tradeoff is more flexibility for permanent storefront signs and stricter control of portable signs.

Organization and approval

The permit table identifies which signs require approval. Measurement rules appear once, followed by permanent signs, portable and temporary signs, lighting, murals, exceptions, and existing signs. Section numbers have changed subjects.

Staff reviews and approves sign permits that meet the standards, including illuminated signs and signs larger than 25 square feet. Every request for an exception requires a DRB hearing and decision; staff cannot approve an exception. The DRB also reviews retention of historic signs not already identified as historic resources. Design recommendations do not become additional approval requirements.

The draft sets review targets of 10 business days to identify an incomplete application, 15 business days for a complete staff application, and 60 calendar days for a complete DRB application, subject to the stated extensions. Dimensioned photographs or drawings are generally sufficient. A permit allows 12 months for installation, with one 12-month extension.

Permanent sign allowances

Allocation by tenant frontage

Ground-floor tenants receive area based on their own storefront width. Upstairs and interior tenants receive a separate 10-square-foot allowance. This replaces equal division of a building allowance among tenants and avoids reducing storefront signage because offices occupy upper floors.

The primary allowance starts at 25 square feet for a frontage up to 25 feet wide, then adds 1.5 square feet for each additional foot. A tenant may use up to two eligible frontages, with no more than 175 square feet of primary area in total. Signs must remain on the frontage to which their area is allocated.

The formula removes the existing table's abrupt increases. It does not produce the same allowance at every frontage width.

Frontage	Existing table	Draft primary formula
25 feet	25 sq. ft.	25 sq. ft.
50 feet	62.5 sq. ft.	62.5 sq. ft.
75 feet	100 sq. ft.	100 sq. ft.
76 feet	125 sq. ft.	101.5 sq. ft.
100 feet	125 sq. ft.	137.5 sq. ft.
125 feet	150 sq. ft.	175 sq. ft.

The existing table generally applies to the building before tenant allocation, with separate treatment for shopping centers and OLI uses. The draft applies the formula to tenant frontages. This comparison excludes additional sign allowances.

Separate allowances

Projecting signs, entrance signs, directories, freestanding signs, and window signs have separate limits and do not reduce primary wall, fascia, or awning sign area. This increases the total signage a business may display.

A 20-foot storefront, for example, receives 25 square feet of primary area plus the applicable projecting and window allowances. It may also use the building's single portable sign if the owner designates it and placement requirements can be met.

Projecting and freestanding signs

A flat projecting sign with two parallel, back-to-back faces counts once, using the larger face. The six-square-foot allowance therefore permits two six-square-foot faces. Signs with three or more faces count every face. Maximum projection is three feet; minimum overhead clearance is 7.5 feet. The existing 18-inch vertical limit is removed.

The same single-face measurement applies to other parallel, back-to-back signs and qualifying A-frames. This affects freestanding signs as well as projecting signs.

Freestanding site signs are limited to 32 square feet for a single-tenant site. Multi-tenant sites receive 10 square feet per tenant, with a minimum of 32 and maximum of 100 square feet. One sign is allowed per street frontage, up to two per site. Maximum height is eight feet. Separate limits apply in residential and special settings.

Portable and window signs

Portable signs

The draft allows one portable sign per building, including all tenants, entrances, frontages, and private-property placements. Tenants within a building may share it; separate buildings may not. The property owner designates the responsible operator.

The principal limits are:

- Six square feet per face, three feet high, and a footprint no larger than three by two feet.
- Wood frames and wood or chalkboard faces. Metal hardware and specified decorative details are allowed; plastic frames, faces, and lettering, and vinyl lettering, decals, and wraps are prohibited.
- Ten feet between portable signs along the same pedestrian route. If spacing cannot be maintained, placement is limited to private property outside the route.
- At least 4.5 feet of clear walking space, or more where required.
- Separate permission for placement in the public right-of-way. The sign must be removed when all businesses it serves are closed.

The standard allowance is intentionally restrictive, particularly for buildings with several storefronts. The DRB may grant an exception to portable-sign number, size, height, materials, location, or spacing when the required findings are met. Required pedestrian access and safety standards still apply.

Window signs

Nonresidential window signs may cover up to 25 percent of the glazing on each elevation, including glazed doors. Permanent and temporary signs count together. There is no separate limit on the number of ordinary window signs or their display period.

Outward-facing interior signs count as window signs if any part of the face is within two feet of the glass and visible outside. The whole face counts when any part falls within that distance.

One fixed illuminated window sign of up to two square feet is allowed per public entrance and counts toward window coverage. It is not limited to an "open" message. Electronic screens follow the separate display rules.

Banners and other temporary signs

Business banners are limited to one per tenant, 32 square feet, and 30 display days per calendar year. Registration takes effect upon submission of a complete form identifying a compliant banner. New businesses receive the same allowance; a pending permanent-sign application does not extend it. Noncommercial banners retain their separate exemption from registration and calendar limits.

Temporary events may have two on-site signs of up to six square feet each and four off-site directional signs of up to four square feet each. Display may begin 14 days before the event, or two days before an event lasting two days or less. Signs must be removed within two days afterward. Portable signs and banners must also satisfy their own limits.

Small removable signs on private property are limited to six square feet per face and four feet in height. Commercial signs in this category are limited to two per site and are unavailable to home-based businesses. Noncommercial signs have no numerical or calendar limit.

Ordinary flags receive a separate allowance of two per dwelling or tenant, up to 15 square feet each. The definition covers rectangular fabric flags hanging freely; business-information flags and feather flags do not qualify.

Construction signs retain a combined 50-square-foot allowance, with a two-sign limit and eight-foot maximum height. Real estate signs retain a separate allowance without a prescribed hanging-post form.

Lighting and electronic displays

Static neon, illuminated individual letters, halo lighting, and shielded external lighting may receive staff approval. Internally illuminated panels must have opaque backgrounds. Nonresidential sign lighting operates from one hour before opening until one hour after closing. Light must be controlled to protect dwelling windows and traffic visibility.

New outdoor electronic displays are prohibited, with limited equipment and required-information exceptions. Visible interior displays are also prohibited when any part of the face is within two feet of exterior glass. Displays entirely beyond two feet are outside the chapter, regardless of size or orientation. For projection, distance is measured to the receiving surface.

This provides a measurable boundary but allows a large outward-facing screen more than two feet inside a storefront. The DRB may approve a new electronic display, including an outdoor theater marquee, through the exception process when the required findings are met. Brightness, operating hours, and prohibitions on flashing, scrolling, and animation still apply.

Murals and sculptural signs

Mural images have no area limit. Words, numerals, names, logos, and trademarks count toward the primary sign allowance; an artist's signature and date do not. A poem counts in the same way as a business name. Depicting a product or occupation does not make the image count as sign area.

Murals may use external lighting that meets the lighting standards. Internal illumination and electronic displays are excluded.

Sculptural signs are measured by their largest projected outline. Ordinary brackets and decorative supports do not count as sign area, but remain subject to projection and clearance limits. An enlarged product image, such as a coffee cup, counts as part of the sign.

Exceptions and existing signs

Exceptions must address a specific physical condition, such as an obstructed view, unusual entrance location, or building feature. The departure must be limited to what that condition requires. Counted mural components and sculptural signs may qualify; artistic merit alone does not establish an exception.

Sign programs are optional unless needed to redistribute primary area among tenants on the same frontage. Existing programs remain effective until amended, so some changes will still require owner participation.

Previously approved signs may remain. A change in tenant, business name, or message does not by itself require replacement or a new sign permit. Enlargements, relocations, and changes in lighting or display technology are reviewed separately. For abandoned displays, obsolete copy may be removed or covered while a safe, reusable support remains.

Enforcement uses the City's general process. Each sign is treated as one violation regardless of its letters, panels, or faces.

Main decisions for discussion

1. **Total sign area.** Separate allowances and single-face counting increase the amount of signage available. Compare the combined result on small storefronts, multi-tenant buildings, and corner sites.
2. **Portable signs.** Confirm the one-per-building limit, material restrictions, and ten-foot spacing, including their effect on buildings with several businesses.
3. **Window coverage.** Test the 25 percent limit on narrow windows, restaurant menus, and heavily glazed storefronts.
4. **Electronic displays.** Confirm that screens wholly beyond two feet should remain unrestricted by this chapter and whether any new electronic marquee allowance is wanted.
5. **Mural lettering.** Confirm that all words and marks should use primary sign area, including noncommercial text, with only the signature and date excluded.
6. **Banner duration.** Confirm that new businesses should receive the same 30-day annual allowance as established tenants, including while permanent signs are being approved or fabricated.