

Proposed Amendments to Chapter 17.120

Sign Regulations

Draft for Lynn's Review

Purpose

This document consolidates proposed edits to Chapter 17.120 (Sign Regulations). Each edit shows the current code, the proposed change, and a short note on why it matters. The goal is to make the changes easy to review section by section.

Why we're doing this

The streetscape on Healdsburg, Petaluma, and Gravenstein is getting cluttered with feather flags, banners, and portable signs. After reading the code, the surprise is that **most of what we see on the corridors is already illegal**. Banners are limited to 30 days a year. Posting on poles, trees, and fences is prohibited. Signs in the public right-of-way can be removed by the Planning Director without notice.

So the problem is mostly enforcement, not the rules. The edits below do three things: (1) close a few specific loopholes that let the clutter slip through, (2) get ahead of digital signs before one shows up, and (3) build a regular enforcement cadence into the code so it doesn't depend on complaints.

How to use this document

- Each section shows the current code in gray and the proposed change in green.
- Mark up anything you disagree with. Strikethroughs and comments welcome.

17.120.020 — Permits, Fees, and Exceptions

A. Change of Copy — Exclude Digital Signs

Source: 17.120.020(A)(3)(e) — administrative review for change of copy

Current code:

Change of copy only on an existing, approved sign if the same sign structure will be used, the area of lettering is substantially the same as that previously approved, and no change in illumination is proposed. Change of copy requests for signs that previously received sign exception approval are not eligible for administrative review and shall be reviewed by the Design Review Board.

Proposed text:

Add this sentence at the end: "This administrative review allowance does not apply to any Electronic/Digital Sign as defined in SMC 17.120.050."

Why this matters: Today's rule lets staff approve copy changes administratively. We don't want that path used to swap a static sign face for a digital screen without DRB review.

B. Portable Signs in CD Central Core

Source: 17.120.020(A)(3)(d)(i) — portable sign count

Current code:

No more than one (double-faced) sign per parcel of property.

Proposed text:

In the CD Central Core District, no more than one (double-faced) portable sign per storefront/tenant space with a public-facing entrance, or one (double-faced) portable sign per parcel of property, whichever results in fewer signs. In all other districts, no more than one (double-faced) portable sign per parcel of property.

Why this matters: On a multi-tenant downtown parcel, the current rule effectively means one sign for the whole building, which doesn't work for small storefronts. This lets each storefront have one sign but prevents a parcel from putting out five at once.

C. Portable Sign Materials and Design — CD Central Core

Source: 17.120.020(A)(3)(d) — add new criteria

Current code:

The current code regulates portable sign size (max 6 sq ft per face), height (max 3 ft), and location (must not narrow sidewalk to less than 4.5 ft). It does not regulate materials, finish, or hours of display.

Proposed text:

Add a new criterion (vi): "In the CD Central Core District, portable signs shall be constructed of wood, metal, or chalkboard with painted, stenciled, or chalk lettering. Plastic faces, vinyl wraps, internal illumination, fluorescent or day-glo backgrounds, and electronic display elements are prohibited. Signs shall be maintained in good repair and shall be removed from the public right-of-way during non-business hours."

Why this matters: Right now we control the count and size of A-frames but not what they look like. This is the change that actually shifts how the streetscape reads. Quality goes up without banning sandwich boards, which are part of small-town retail character.

17.120.030 — Exempted Signs

A. Manual Changeable Copy Clarification

Source: 17.120.030(A) — exemption for copy changes

Current code:

Changing of the advertising copy or message on an existing approved changeable copy sign.

Proposed text:

Changing of the advertising copy or message on an existing approved manual changeable-copy sign (e.g., readerboard/slot letters), provided the sign is not an Electronic/Digital Sign as defined in SMC 17.120.050.

Why this matters: The current text could be read to exempt electronic message centers from any review when the message changes. This narrows the exemption to manual slot-letter signs (think church marquees), where it was always intended.

17.120.040 — Prohibited Signs

A. Add Electronic/Digital Signs to Prohibited List

Source: 17.120.040(A)(1) — flashing/moving signs

Current code:

Flashing, rotating, animated, blinking and moving signs. However, upon referral from the Planning Director, the Design Review Board may determine that such a sign is necessary in order to portray an appropriate and distinct image in a unique situation.

Proposed text:

Flashing, rotating, animated, blinking and moving signs, including any Electronic/Digital Sign as defined in SMC 17.120.050. However, upon referral from the Planning Director, the Design Review Board may determine that such a sign is necessary in order to portray an appropriate and distinct image in a unique situation.

Why this matters: Gets digital signs explicitly on the prohibited list. The DRB exception path is preserved so we have flexibility for unique situations (e.g., theater marquees).

B. Add Feather Flags to Prohibited List

Source: 17.120.040(A)(4) — banners and pennants

Current code:

Banners, pennants, search lights, balloons or other gas-filled figures except that banners may be permitted, for a period of time not to exceed 30 days in any calendar year, at the opening of a new business, or for special events, with prior written approval of the Planning Director, in accordance with SMC 17.120.030(O).

Proposed text:

Banners, pennants, feather flags (including wind flags, blade flags, and teardrop flags), search lights, balloons or other gas-filled figures except that banners may be permitted, for a period of time not to exceed 30 days in any calendar year, at the opening of a new business, or for special events, with prior written approval of the Planning Director, in accordance with SMC 17.120.030(O).

Why this matters: Feather flags are arguably already prohibited as “pennants,” but the term is vague enough that code enforcement won’t act on it. Naming them explicitly removes the ambiguity.

C. Tighten the Banner Exception

Source: 17.120.040(A)(4) — banner exception language

Current code:

The current exception allows banners for “new business openings” or “special events” up to 30 days a year, with Planning Director approval. “Special event” is not defined, and there’s no aggregate cap across multiple events at the same business.

Proposed text:

Add to the end of (A)(4): “No business or property shall be granted special-event banner approvals exceeding an aggregate of 30 days in any calendar year, inclusive of new-business openings. Banners installed in landscaping, on fencing, on vehicles, on roofs, or projecting above the parapet remain prohibited under SMC 17.120.070(E)(1).”

Why this matters: This is the most-abused part of the code. A business can claim back-to-back “special events” and keep a banner up year-round. The cap closes that loop and the location language reinforces what 17.120.070(E)(1) already says.

17.120.050 — General Sign Standards

A. Add Definition — Electronic/Digital Sign [Blake]

Source: 17.120.050 — add new definition subsection

Current code:

No current definition of Electronic/Digital Sign.

Proposed text:

Add new subsection defining “Electronic/Digital Sign”: “Any sign, or portion of a sign, that displays copy, images, graphics, symbols, or illumination that is electronically or digitally controlled and capable of change through electronic means, including but not limited to LED panels, LCD/OLED/plasma screens, electronic message centers, electronically controlled changeable-copy, and projection (front or rear) onto a sign face, wall, window, or other surface visible from a public right-of-way.”

Why this matters: The definition that the other edits hang on. Written broadly enough to cover screens we haven’t thought of yet (e.g., projection).

B. Visibility from Public Right-of-Way [Blake]

Source: 17.120.050 — add new subsection

Current code:

The chapter generally regulates exterior signs and doesn't address screens placed inside windows facing the street.

Proposed text:

Add new subsection: "Any Electronic/Digital Sign, as defined in this chapter, that is visible from a public street, sidewalk, alley, or other public right-of-way shall be subject to all applicable provisions of this chapter, regardless of whether such sign is located inside a building or mounted on the exterior of a structure."

Why this matters: Closes the "it's indoors" loophole. A 65-inch LED display pointed at the sidewalk from inside a window is functionally outdoor signage and should be treated that way.

17.120.060 — Permitted Signs (Monument / Integrated Sign Programs)

Prohibit Digital Faces on Monument Signs [Blake]

Source: 17.120.060(B) — integrated sign programs / monument signs

Current code:

The current language allows monument signs as part of an integrated sign program for multi-tenant buildings and shopping centers, capped at 50 or 100 sq ft. Nothing prohibits an electronic face.

Proposed text:

Add this sentence to (B): "Monument signs shall not include any Electronic/Digital Sign face or electronically controlled display surface."

Why this matters: Monument signs are the most common place a digital reader board gets installed. This is the cleanest single sentence to prevent that outcome.

17.120.070 — Temporary Signs

Feather Flag Clarification [Blake]

Source: 17.120.070(E)(1) — banner provisions

Current code:

Banners. Banners for new businesses or for special events may be approved by the Planning Director for a period not to exceed 30 days... Banner signs may be installed on the building only, and are not permitted to be installed in the landscaping, on fencing, or on vehicles.

Proposed text:

Add to (E)(1): “Feather flags (including wind/blade/teardrop flags) are not considered ‘banners’ for purposes of this subsection and remain prohibited under SMC 17.120.040(A)(4).”

Why this matters: Belt-and-suspenders. Even with feather flags added to the prohibited list, this prevents anyone from arguing they qualify as a permitted “banner.”

17.120.080 — Nonconforming Signs

Digital Sign Approvals Expire on Tenant Change [Blake]

Source: 17.120.080 — nonconforming signs

Current code:

Except for multiple-tenant signs, existing, legally erected signs which do not conform to the provisions of this chapter may remain in place until such time as a change in name, use, or sign face occurs, at which time all signing shall be made to conform to the provisions of this chapter.

Proposed text:

Add this paragraph: “Notwithstanding the above, any Electronic/Digital Sign approved pursuant to an exception under SMC 17.120.020(B) shall be deemed specific to the approved tenant and use. Upon a change in tenant, business name, or primary use of the premises, such Electronic/Digital Sign shall lose its approved status and shall be removed or brought into full compliance with the provisions of this chapter.”

Why this matters: If we ever grant a digital sign exception, this prevents the approval from transferring to a new tenant who would never have qualified. Each digital sign approval is one-tenant-at-a-time.

17.120.110 — Violations

Per-Sign Daily Violation Counting [New]

Source: 17.120.110 — violations

Current code:

Each day that a violation is continued shall be considered a separate violation for the purposes of applying the penalty portion of this chapter.

Proposed text:

Add: “A separate violation shall be deemed to occur for each day the violation continues, and each unpermitted feather flag, banner, or portable sign shall constitute a separate violation.”

Why this matters: A property with five feather flags currently counts as one violation per day. Per-sign counting raises the stakes and gives staff a real deterrent. Important for enforcement to actually have teeth.

17.120.120 — Appeals and Enforcement

Quarterly Corridor Sweeps and Annual Report [New]

Source: 17.120.120 — administration and enforcement

Current code:

Current code authorizes the Planning Director to enforce, send violation notices, and summarily remove ROW signs without notice (17.120.120(C)(5)). There is no requirement that staff proactively sweep corridors or report back to DRB.

Proposed text:

Add new subsection: “The Planning Director shall conduct quarterly proactive sweeps of designated commercial corridors, including but not limited to Healdsburg Avenue, Petaluma Avenue, Main Street, Gravenstein Highway North, and Gravenstein Highway South, and shall report annually to the Design Review Board on the number of signs removed and the number of sign permits issued by category.”

Why this matters: The legal authority to clean this up already exists. What’s missing is a workflow. Putting the sweep cadence and the annual report into the code creates a feedback loop and makes the enforcement obligation visible to council at budget time.