

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 23, 2010

TO: Parker-Gray Board of Architectural Review

FROM: BAR Staff

SUBJECT: Amendments to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts*

As you are aware, the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts* (“Criteria”) allows for staff level approval of certain signs in the City’s two locally-designated historic districts. This highly successful program was initiated in December 2009, and after several months of administrative sign approvals, Staff believes that it is appropriate at this time to make a number of minor amendments to the program. Staff presented the proposed amendments at the May 5, 2010 Old and Historic Alexandria District BAR Meeting and the May 26, 2010 Parker-Gray BAR meeting. Staff has attached for your review and approval the proposed amendments to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts* (Attachment 1).

Additional amendments suggested by the OHAD BAR

The OHAD BAR met on June 16, 2010 and suggested some additional modifications to the amended criteria recommended by Staff. The amendments relate to the sign colors, business logos and menu boards and are described in greater detail below. Staff believes that these additional amendments help to simplify the administrative approval process and recommends that the Parker-Gray BAR approve the proposed Criteria.

Status report on the program to date

Since the text amendment allowing BAR Staff sign-off of certain commercial signs was approved on December 14, 2009, Staff has administratively approved 15 sign applications (or over 65% of all sign applications), primarily for hanging and wall signs. By contrast, the BAR has heard just eight sign cases. The success of the program has been two-fold. First, business owners are able to obtain sign approval in a much shorter time frame and at a significantly reduced cost. Second, the amount of time spent by both Staff and Board has been reduced. Another benefit of the program has been applicants’ willingness to modify their original proposal

to meet the criteria for Staff approval, which has resulted in smaller, simpler and more straightforward signs.

Proposed amendments

Below is a summary of the proposed amendments to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts*, including the additional amendments recommended by the OHAD Board. Attachment 2 also includes images of sign types related to the proposed amendments.

Colors

Staff initially proposed expanding the color palette for signs approved under the administrative approval program from three colors plus black and white, to five colors plus black and white. However, the OHAD Board recommended that this section be struck entirely from the Criteria because it was too dictatorial and had the potential to unnecessarily limit creativity. Furthermore, they stated that new technologies now allow for a range of colors which make them difficult to categorize. The Board noted that they felt Staff had the knowledge and experience to determine whether proposed sign colors were appropriate, and acknowledged that the program already allows for Staff to docket a sign on the BAR agenda, regardless of whether it meets the Criteria.

Below is the amended language originally proposed by Staff, but which has since been removed from the proposed Criteria.

In applying the Criteria over the last six months, Staff has found that the number of permitted colors (five, including black and white) is too restrictive and limits creativity. Therefore, the following new language is proposed:

Signs should have no more than five colors, excluding black and white.

Trademarked Logos

Because it is not unusual for applicant's to include their business logo on a sign, Staff originally recommended the following language:

Trademarked logos shall be permitted regardless of the number of colors.

However, the OHAD Board also recommended that this section be struck from the Criteria because it was very broadly written and open to interpretation. For example, an applicant could propose a sign with a large and out-of-scale logo. The Board felt that Staff should determine the appropriateness of including a business's logo on a sign on a case-by-case basis. Where staff is not comfortable with the design of a sign, the administrative criteria allows staff to require approval of the BAR.

Materials

Since the program has been in effect, Staff has continued to research the use of an alternative sign material, High Density Urethane (HDU). HDU is dense foam which can be finished to have the appearance of painted wood. The Board has approved a number of signs with this material

over the years, some which have been in place for up to ten years with little evidence of wear. Staff recommends that this sign material also be permitted – with some limitation – in addition to the materials already approved. The proposed language is:

The following sign materials are permitted:

- *Metal, Wood, MDO (Medium Density Overlay or engineered wood) and HDU (High Density Urethane) are acceptable for flat wall signs and hanging signs. Signs constructed of HDU must have a smooth or wood grain background (not a pebble finish).*
- *Aluminum is acceptable for pin mounted signs.*
- *Vinyl lettering is appropriate for window decal signs.*

Additional sign types

Staff proposes to add the following three sign types for administrative approval – directory sign, menu board, parking identification sign - in addition to the general sign types already permitted under the Criteria. The square footage of the additional signs is counted towards the maximum signage square footage permitted on the building (3/4, or .75, of the linear footage of the building frontage).

Directory signs

Directory signs were initially identified as a sign type which required BAR approval. However, upon further evaluation, Staff believes that these signs are relatively straightforward, will be limited in number and should be allowed under the administrative approval program. A brief field survey (see p.11) indicated that these generally needed to be no larger than 10 sq. ft. with 3” tall plaques to provide adequate pedestrian scale information. Staff recommends the following criteria for directory signs:

Staff may approve the installation of a directory sign for a multi-story building with four or more tenants which meets the following criteria:

- *Only one directory sign may be installed.*
- *The directory sign must be located adjacent to the main entrance of the building.*
- *The overall size may not exceed 10 square feet.*
- *The removable business identification plaques must be the same size for each business and fabricated of the same material. One plaque per business.*
- *The identification plaques may be no more than 3 inches tall.*
- *The directory sign may have subtle external illumination, such as small targeted lights directed at the face of the sign.*

Menu boards

Menu boards are a typical feature associated with restaurants which were not initially considered as a part of the administrative approval program. Staff has surveyed a sample of menu boards (see p.12) and believes that only 4 sq. ft. is needed to display daily specials or specific lunch/dinner menu entrees. Larger sizes tend to become billboards containing extraneous decoration, though they may be appropriate in certain instances with Board review and approval. The OHAD BAR recommended that this section be clarified to include a limitation on the color of the menu board itself, as well as the size of the box relative to the size of the menu.

Staff proposes the following criteria for menu boards. The proposed additional OHAD amendments are shown in ***bold italics***:

Staff may approve the installation of a wall mounted menu board which meets the following criteria:

- *Only one menu board may be installed.*
- ***The menu board must be no larger than necessary and contain only the menu on a single color background.***
- *The menu board may not exceed 4 square feet.*
- *It must be located adjacent to the main entrance of the restaurant.*
- *The menu board must be constructed of either wood or metal ***in a single color.****
- *It must have a glass or clear plastic panel to ensure that the posted menu does not deteriorate from the elements.*
- *It may have subtle external illumination, such as small targeted lights directed at the menu.*

Parking Identity Signs (Freestanding and Building Mounted)

The following criteria are copied from the Staff report on Wayfinding Signs (BAR Case #2010-0147):

- *Only one Parking Identity sign will be permitted at each parking garage or lot entrance per block face.*
- *The sign must conform to the Parking Identity design depicted in the Wayfinding System Design Guidelines Manual.*
- *The sign and bracket (or pole for a freestanding sign) must be fabricated as part of the City's Wayfinding sign order, or otherwise as part of the City's process for fabricating signs.*
- *The sign will be located in the field by BAR Staff and mounted so as not to damage or obscure any architectural features on any building.*
- *Building-mounted signs must be located so that the bottom of the sign is a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by vehicles. Signs cannot project more than 4 feet from the building wall or within 1 foot of the curb line.*
- *Building-mounted signs must be installed through the mortar joints rather than through the masonry units (e.g., brick) on masonry buildings.*
- *Existing parking identity signs that serve the same function must be removed, as appropriate and feasible, prior to installation of the new sign.*

Additional minor amendments

Staff proposes the following additional minor amendments to the document:

- Adding the following section headings: Criteria for General Sign Types; Criteria for Specific Sign Types; and, General Requirements Applying to All Signs.

- Deleting the criteria that says signs submitted by the City of Alexandria must be reviewed and approved by the BAR. The language is both too vague and is in conflict with the zoning ordinance exemption for governmental signs. However, Staff will continue to bring City signage which impacts the historic district to the BAR for review and comment, as was done with the City's Wayfinding Program.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends Board approval of the proposed amendments to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs in the Historic Districts*.

STAFF:

Stephanie Sample, Historic Preservation Planner, Planning & Zoning
Al Cox, FAIA, Historic Preservation Manager

ATTACHMENT 1

Proposed amendments to the *Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts*. New language is shown in *italics*.

Criteria & Standards for Administrative Approval of Signs within the Historic Districts

The following signs may be approved administratively pursuant to sections 10-113 and 10-213 of the Zoning Ordinance.

SECTION I: CRITERIA FOR GENERAL SIGN TYPES

1. Administrative Approval of One Sign

One sign may be administratively approved for a commercial business, one per elevation if the building is located on a corner. The applicant may choose from one of the following three sign types listed below (see the attached images for an example of each sign type):

Wall sign

- A flat wall sign affixed to the building façade.
- An individual letter pin mounted wall sign installed on a wood frieze board or sign band, not a masonry façade, which may damage masonry.
- A painted wall sign, provided that it is painted on a frieze board or on an already painted building.

Hanging sign

- A one-piece double-sided hanging sign (with a maximum square footage of 7 square feet). All hanging signs must be hung from an approved sign bracket and placed so that the bottom of the sign is a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by vehicles. The hanging sign cannot project more than 4 feet from the building wall or within 1 foot of the curb line and cannot project from the corner of a building. The sign bracket must be constructed of metal with a black finish. Decorative scroll brackets are typical; however, other appropriate designs may be acceptable. If the bracket is being affixed to a brick building, the bracket must be installed into the mortar joints and not the masonry.

Window sign

- A window decal sign may also be permitted (the Zoning Ordinance states that the total signage may not exceed 20% of the window). The window sign may be located on a door or window and may not contain repetitive language (e.g. shoes, shoes, shoes) or special advertising (e.g. coffee, tea, latte).

2. Second Sign Option

An applicant may select a second sign with the following limitations:

- Wall signs can be paired with a hanging sign or a window decal sign only.
- Hanging signs can be paired with a wall sign or window decal sign only.
- Window signs can be paired with a wall sign or hanging sign.

Corner businesses may elect to add a second sign on only one of the building's two elevations.

3. Size

The overall signage square footage for one sign may not exceed 1/2 (.5) of the linear footage of the building frontage. For example, the maximum amount of signage permitted for a 20 foot wide building is 10 square feet. If a second sign is proposed, the aggregate signage square footage may not exceed 3/4 (.75) of the linear footage of the building frontage (15 square feet for a 20 foot wide building).

4. Material

~~The sign material must be compatible with the building (wood or wood composite signs are generally acceptable for flat wall signs and hanging signs, aluminum is generally acceptable for pin mounted signs and vinyl lettering is appropriate for window decal signs).~~

The following sign materials are permitted:

- *Metal, Wood, MDO (Medium Density Overlay or engineered wood) and HDU (High Density Urethane) are acceptable for flat wall signs and hanging signs. Signs constructed of HDU must have a smooth or wood grain background (not a pebble finish).*
- *Aluminum is acceptable for pin mounted signs.*
- *Vinyl lettering is appropriate for window decal signs.*

5. Content

Only the business name or identity, and logo or design flourish, is permitted on the sign (no special advertising, phone numbers, addresses or web sites).

6. Lighting

Staff may approve the installation of targeted illumination (e.g. mini-spot lights) which are small in size, illuminate only the proposed sign(s), and do not damage the building in installation. Gooseneck lighting must be reviewed and approved by the BAR, as well as all signs which are internally illuminated, halo lit or neon.

SECTION II: CRITERIA FOR SPECIFIC SIGN TYPES

The following sign types may be installed in addition to the signs permitted under Section I. However, the aggregate signage square footage on the building may not exceed 3/4 (.75) of the linear footage of the building frontage (15 square feet for a 20 foot wide building).

1. Directory Signs

Staff may approve the installation of a directory sign for a building with four or more tenants which meets the following criteria:

- *Only one directory sign may be installed.*
- *The directory sign must be located adjacent to the main entrance of the building.*
- *The overall size may not exceed 10 square feet.*
- *The removable business identification plaques must be the same size for each business and fabricated of the same material. One plaque per business.*
- *The identification plaques may be no more than 3 inches tall.*
- *The directory sign may have subtle external illumination, such as small targeted lights directed at the face of the sign.*

2. Menu Boards

Staff may approve the installation of a wall mounted menu board which meets the following criteria:

- *Only one menu board may be installed.*
- *The menu board must be no larger than necessary and contain only the menu on a single color background.*
- *The menu board may not exceed 4 square feet.*
- *It must be located adjacent to the main entrance of the restaurant.*
- *The menu board must be constructed of either wood or metal in a single color.*
- *It must have a glass or clear plastic panel to ensure that the posted menu does not deteriorate from the elements.*
- *It may have subtle external illumination, such as small targeted lights directed at the menu.*

3. Parking Identity Signs (Freestanding and Building Mounted)

Staff may approve the installation of a Parking Identity sign which meets the following criteria:

- *Only one Parking Identity sign will be permitted at each parking garage or lot entrance per block face.*
- *The sign must conform to the Parking Identity design depicted in the Wayfinding System Design Guidelines Manual.*
- *The sign and bracket (or pole for a freestanding sign) must be fabricated as part of the City's Wayfinding sign order, or otherwise as part of the City's process for fabricating signs.*
- *The sign will be located in the field by BAR Staff and mounted so as not to damage or obscure any architectural features on any building.*
- *Building-mounted signs must be located so that the bottom of the sign is a minimum of 8 feet above a public sidewalk and 14.5 feet above an alley used by*

vehicles. Signs cannot project more than 4 feet from the building wall or within 1 foot of the curb line.

- *Building-mounted signs must be installed through the mortar joints rather than through the masonry units (e.g., brick) on masonry buildings.*
- *Existing parking identity signs that serve the same function must be removed, as appropriate and feasible, prior to installation of the new sign.*

SECTION III: GENERAL REQUIREMENTS APPLYING TO ALL SIGNS

- Signs must be professionally made.
- A sign which meets the requirements of a coordinated sign plan previously approved by the Board can be administratively approved by Staff, regardless of whether the sign meets the requirement for administrative approval.
- All administratively approved sign(s) must be consistent with the *Design Guidelines* recommendation that “Signs should be designed in styles, materials, type faces, colors and lettering that are appropriate and sympathetic to the historic style of the building.”
- Prior to receiving an administrative approval for signage, BAR Staff will conduct research and visit the site to evaluate the subject property, as well as its context, to determine if the proposed signage is appropriate. Signs which are out of proportion or scale with contiguous signs on the block will be referred to the BAR for their review and approval.
- ~~Directory signs, Freestanding signs (with the exception of Parking Identity Signs) and signs installed without BAR or Staff approval (after-the-fact signs) and sign applications submitted by the City of Alexandria~~ must be reviewed and approved by the BAR.
- Applicant must obtain a sign permit (and/or building permit) through Code Administration.
- Regardless of whether the sign meets the above Criteria, Staff may determine that the sign(s) must be approved by the BAR.

Amended by:
Old and Historic BAR June 16, 2010

Approved by:
Parker-Gray BAR September 23, 2009
Old and Historic BAR October 7, 2009

ATTACHMENT 2

Examples of Sign with More than Five Colors



Figure 1: BAR approved sign with more than 5 colors.

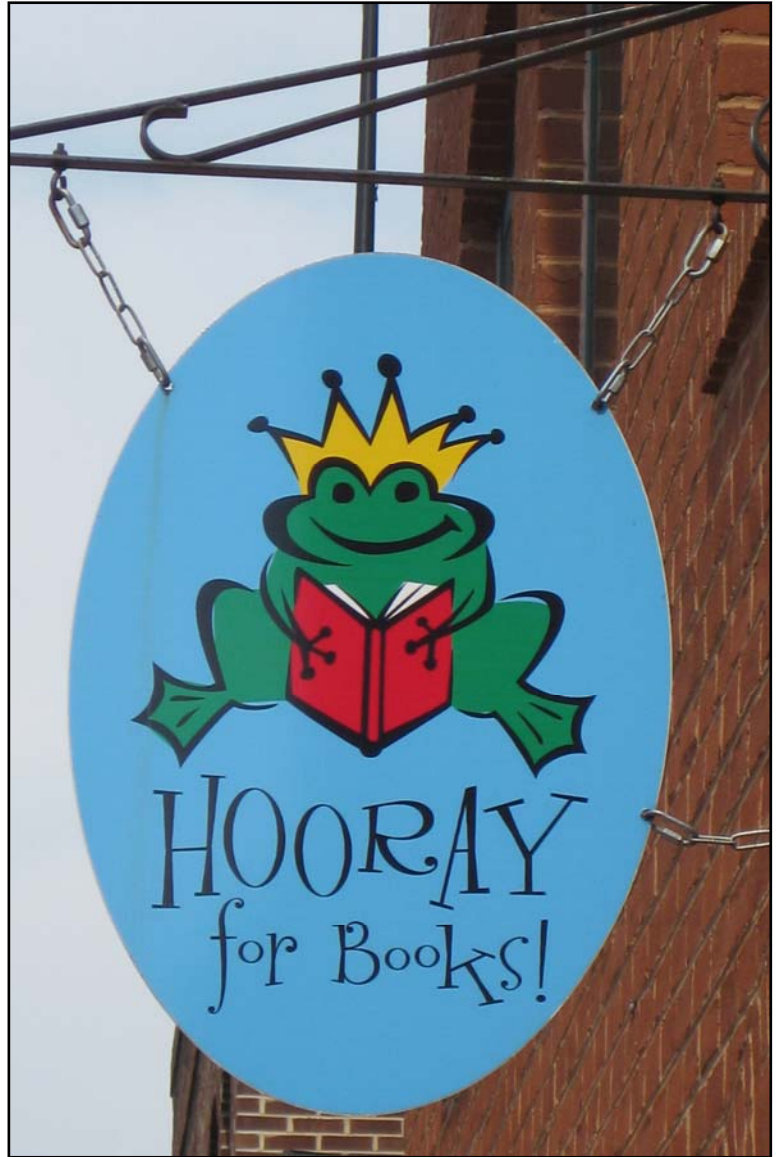


Figure 2: BAR approved sign with more than 5 colors.



Figure 3: BAR approved sign with more than 5 colors.

Examples of High Density Urethane (HDU) Signs



Figure 5: BAR approved HDU sign.



Figure 4: BAR approved HDU sign.



Figure 6: Existing HDU sign installed 10 years ago in excellent condition.

Examples of Directory Signs



Figure 7: This directory sign would require BAR approval due to its 17.3 sq. ft. overall size and 4.5" tall plaques.



Figure 8: Example of an appropriate directory sign 8.75 sq. ft overall with 3" tall plaques.



Figure 9: Example of a 6 sq. ft. directory sign with 2" tall plaques.

Examples of Menu Boards



Figure 12: BAR approved menu board at Columbia Firehouse which, due to its 6.5 sq. ft. size, would not meet the criteria for Staff approval under the program.



Figure 11: Appropriate 3.5 sq. ft. menu board at Tasca.



Figure 10: This 5 sq. ft. menu board at Lighhorse would not meet the criteria for Staff approval under the program.

Menu Boards Not Pictured	
Bumblebee:	5 sq. ft.
Le Quotidien:	6.75 sq. ft.
Zorkafors:	3 sq. ft.
Murphey's	1.8 sq. ft.
La Bergerie:	4.4 sq. ft.
Pica Deli:	7.3 sq. ft.