

Gladstone

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS STAFF REPORT

Meeting Date:	Monday, March 23, 2026	Parcel Number:	052-628-003-30
Applicant/Owner:	Memorial United Methodist Church	Parcel Size:	3.3 Acres
Property Address:	1920 Lake Shore Dr Gladstone, MI 49837	Prepared By:	Patricia West Zoning Administrator

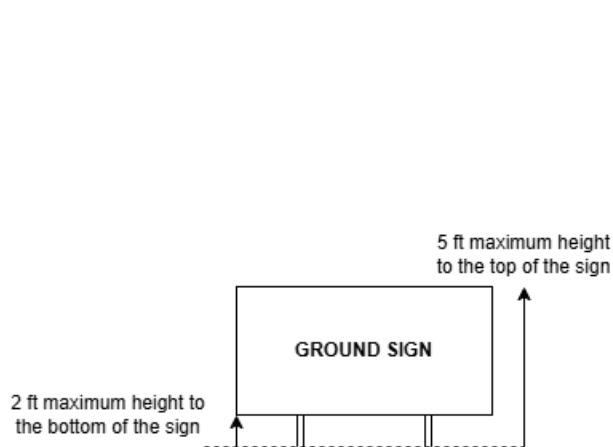


Variance Request

The applicant is requesting a variance to allow for a permanent L.E.D. digital message board sign to replace their existing sign. The height of the proposed sign is too tall to meet the definition of a ground sign, and too short to meet the definition of a freestanding sign. Their request requires relief from the four requirements of the Gladstone Zoning Ordinance, specifically within Division 5 – Signs.

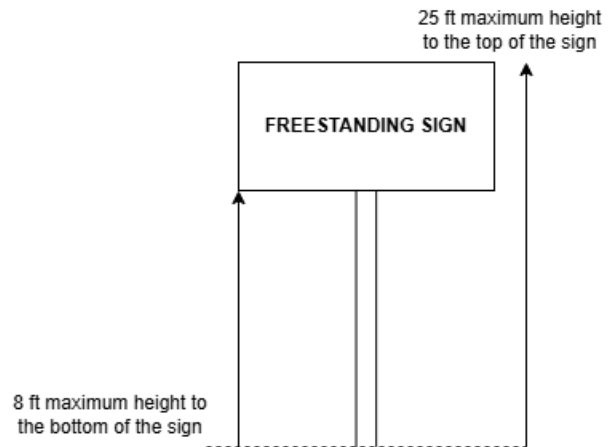
1. **Section 30-603(e):** No sign shall contain any moving or animated parts, nor have the appearance of having any moving or animated parts, except as provided within this division.
2. **Section 30-605(2):** Any sign, including window signs, which have flashing, moving or oscillating lights, excluding time and temperature signs.
3. **Section 30-608(2)a.4:** Height: Not more than five feet above grade for ground signs, or 25 feet for freestanding signs with a minimum of eight feet ground clearance to permit an unobstructed view for motorists and pedestrians.
4. **Section 30-608(2)a.5:** Illumination: No illumination shall be allowed if the property is adjacent to a residential district.

Dimension	Code Allowance	Application Request	Variance Request
Free Standing Sign Height Ground Clearance	Minimum of 8ft	5 ft	3 ft



Ground Sign

A sign, the bottom of which is no more than 24 inches from the ground and not more than five feet above grade, which rests directly on the ground or is supported by short poles or a base and is not attached to a building or a wall.



Freestanding Sign

A sign, not attached to a building or wall, supported on poles or supports, with a minimum ground clearance of eight feet to permit an unobstructed view for motorists and pedestrians.

Property Information

Current Land Use: Churches (Conditional Use)

Zoning District: B-2

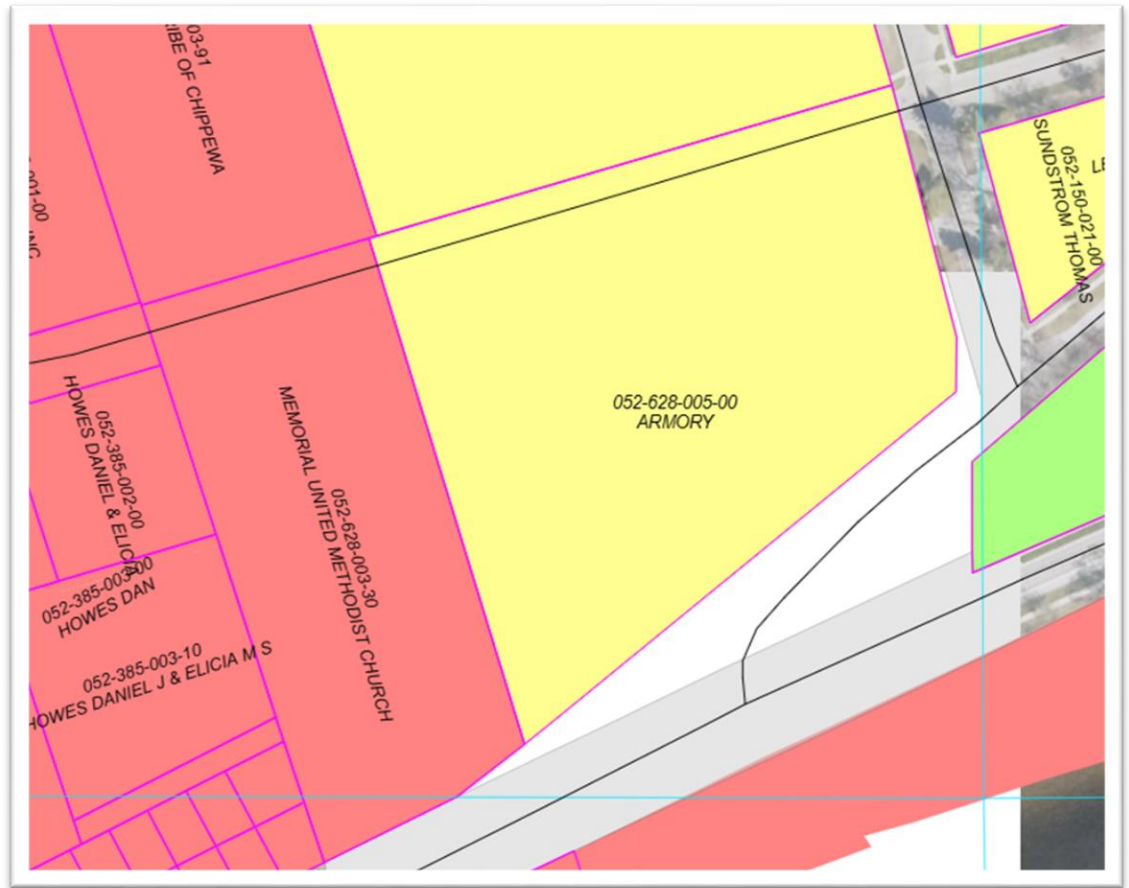
Sec. 30-548. - B-2 district.

- (a) **Scope and intent.** This section applies to the B-2 district. The intent of the B-2 district is to establish and preserve general commercial areas within the city that are convenient and attractive for a wide range of retail uses and business, government and professional offices. The intent of this district is to encourage the concentration of commercial business to the mutual advantage of both the consumers and merchants and thereby promote the best use of land at certain strategic locations.
- (b) **Permitted principal uses.** Permitted principal uses within the B-2 district shall include retail establishments selling gifts, hardware, clothing, drugs, groceries, sporting goods, antiques, baked goods, arts and crafts, studios, beauty shops and barbershops, banks, restaurants, cocktail lounges, offices, clinics, personal service establishments, hotels, motels, funeral homes, theaters (except drive-in), and gas stations. Residential occupancy shall be permitted above the ground floor in the district.
- (c) **Conditional uses.** Conditional uses within the B-2 district shall include open-air business uses, such as sales and rental establishments for trailers, mobile homes, boats, farm equipment, automobile dealers for new or used cars, and the same conditional uses as permitted in the R-3 district.
- (d) **Prohibited uses.** Prohibited uses within the B-2 district shall include junkyards.

Adjacent Zoning District(s): The parcel is adjacent to an R-1 zoning district (see the yellow properties in the image below). The specific R-1 parcel adjacent to the 1920 Lake Shore Dr is the Armory.

Red Parcels:
B-2 Zoning District

Yellow Parcels:
R-1 Zoning District



Background

July 2025: The Memorial United Methodist Church approached the Zoning Administrator regarding a new sign installation with plans for an LED digital message board to replace their existing sign. Upon initial discussions, they were notified that their existing proposal did not meet the criteria of the current Sign Ordinances.

August 2025: The Planning Commission Meeting Minutes from August 5, 2025 reflect the following under “New Business”:

4. Sign Ordinance Review

West provided an overview of the limitations within the City of Gladstone’s current sign ordinance. She initiated a discussion on the possibility of revisiting the ordinance to better align with evolving trends in the sign industry, while still preserving the quaint character and visual appeal of the community. Although no formal motion was made, the Commission expressed collective support for West to pursue professional development opportunities aimed at gathering information and best practices for potential ordinance improvements. Chairperson Haulotte requested that the formation of a sign ordinance subcommittee be added to the agenda for the Planning Commission’s next meeting.

Furthermore, the following was recorded under public comment in the same meeting:

Denise Messina, representing the United Methodist Church of Gladstone, spoke in support of reviewing the City of Gladstone’s sign ordinance.

September 2025: The Planning Commission Meeting Minutes from September 2, 2025 reflect the following under “New Business”:

3. Establishment of Sign Ordinance Subcommittee

Commission Chair, Haulotte, appointed Commission Leonard, Commissioner Hewitt, and Commissioner Kennedy to the sign ordinance subcommittee, with the expectation to participate in training and discussions on best practices, review potential updates to the ordinance, and establish a timeline for pursuing possible amendments.

October 2025: The sign subcommittee met on October 16, 2025 to discuss existing challenges, nonconformities, and training opportunities.

January 2026:

- Denise Messina formally requested the variance form on January 15, 2026.
- The sign subcommittee met on January 27, 2026 to discuss the direction of focused amendments and identified the need for a community survey.

February 2026:

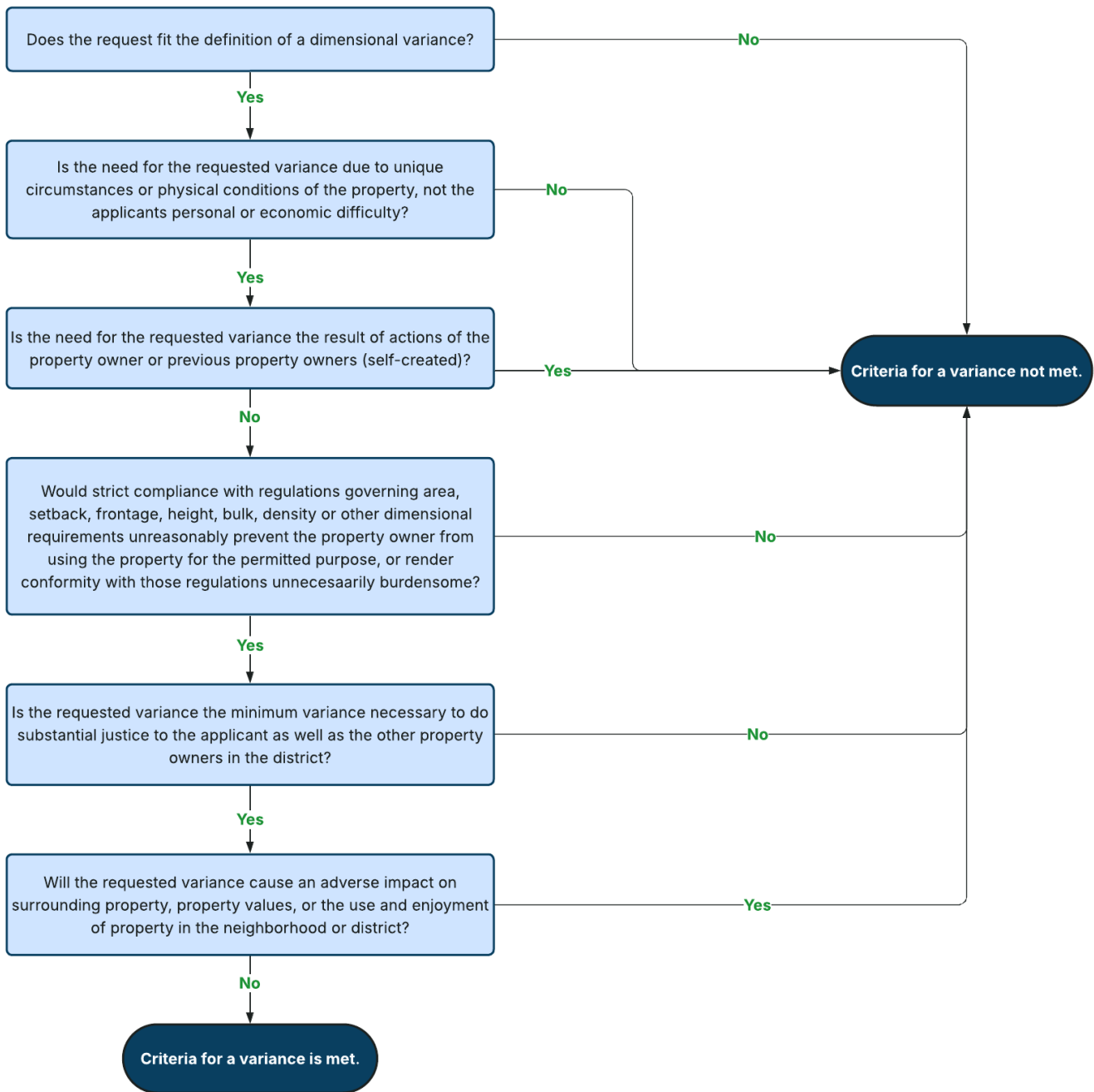
- Variance Request was received on February 11, 2026.
- The Planning Commission conducted an online feedback survey regarding LED signs and digital message boards to collect community input and inform the development of proposed ordinance amendments.

Applicable Ordinance Standards

This variance request should be broken into two separate reviews:

Allowance of an LED/Digital Message Board	Height Variance
<p>1. Section 30-603(e): No sign shall contain any moving or animated parts, nor have the appearance of having any moving or animated parts, except as provided within this division.</p> <p>2. Section 30-605(2): Any sign, including window signs, which have flashing, moving or oscillating lights, excluding time and temperature signs.</p> <p>3. Section 30-608(2)a.5: Illumination: No illumination shall be allowed if the property is adjacent to a residential district.</p>	<p>1. Section 30-608(2)a.4: Height: Not more than five feet above grade for ground signs, or 25 feet for freestanding signs with a minimum of eight feet ground clearance to permit an unobstructed view for motorists and pedestrians.</p>

Variance Review Criteria



Does the request fit the definition of a dimensional variance?

Dimensional Variance Definition	Use Variance Definition
<p>These requests typically pertain to buildings and structures that cannot be constructed in the location required by the zoning ordinances or that other certain requirements of the ordinance cannot be met. To obtain a dimensional variance, the applicant must demonstrate that a practical difficulty exists on the property.</p>	<p>A use variance permits a use of land that is otherwise not allowed in that district either as a permitted use or as a special land use.</p> <p>Sec. 30-512(2) states, "Under no circumstances shall the appeals board grant a variance to allow a use not permissible under the terms of this Code in the district involved, or any use expressly or by implication prohibited by the terms of this Code in said district."</p>

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

LED/Digital Message Board: The applicant is requesting approval for a sign type that is not permitted in the B-2 district when the property is adjacent to a residential district. The request does not involve relief from dimensional standards such as sign area, placement, or setback. Because the request seeks permission for a prohibited sign type rather than a deviation from dimensional requirements, staff interpret the request as a use variance. Under Section 30-512 of the zoning ordinance, the Zoning Board of Appeals may only grant dimensional variances and is not authorized to grant variances that allow uses not permitted by the ordinance. Therefore, staff find that this request does not meet the criteria for a variance review.

Sign Height: Height deviations are common dimensional variance requests.

Is the need for the requested variance due to unique circumstances or physical conditions of the property, not the applicant’s personal or economic difficulty?

Applicant Statement:

Memorial United Methodist Church is located on a developed parcel in the B-2 district, with adjacent Residential and Commercial properties on either side. Dimensions of the replacement sign are not in question.

Priority is requesting the new replacement LED video sign for ordering and installation and before prices increase. While we are not formally requesting a variance for the ground-to-height adjustment, we would appreciate consideration for a lower height.

This modest adjustment does not increase sign area or intensity but instead compensates for the elevation differential while preserving a low-profile, monument-style appearance consistent with a welcoming community church rather than a commercial business structure.

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

The application materials do not describe any unique physical characteristics of the property that would necessitate the requested variances.

Is the need for the requested variance the result of actions of the property owner or previous property owners (self-created)?

Applicant Statement:

Memorial United Methodist Church has maintained a ground sign on this property for approximately 30 years. The existing sign was lawfully installed under prior regulations and is now considered legally non-conforming due to subsequent ordinance updates. The church did not create the non-conformity; it resulted from changes to the sign ordinance over time.

The current need for a variance arises from two primary factors: (1) the aging condition of the existing sign structure, and (2) the evolution of sign technology, specifically LED message centers, which were not contemplated when the ordinance language regulating "moving," "animated," or illuminated signs was adopted. The church is not seeking to intensify or expand a use, but rather to replace an older, internally illuminated ground sign with a smaller, modern freestanding LED sign located in substantially the same setback area.

The physical placement of the sign—set back approximately 25 feet from the top of the drainage ditch—has existed for decades and is dictated by the site's layout and roadway conditions.

Further, the ordinance's prohibition language regarding animated or flashing signs predates current LED technology. The requested variance is therefore the result of regulatory language that does not reflect modern sign systems, not the result of any deliberate action to circumvent zoning requirements.

In summary, the circumstances necessitating the variance stem from ordinance changes over time, and advancements in sign technology. They were not created by the church or any prior property owner and are not the result of personal, financial, or economic decisions. The request is solely to allow reasonable modernization of an existing sign serving a permitted institutional use.

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

The application materials do not indicate that the need for the variance is the result of circumstances beyond the control of the property owner. The request appears to be related to the desired installation of a digital message sign and height adjustment, rather than a condition created by the property itself.

Would strict compliance with regulations governing area, setback, frontage, height, bulk, density or other dimensional requirements unreasonably prevent the property owner from using the property for the permitted purpose, or render conformity with those regulations unnecessarily burdensome?

Applicant Statement:

Memorial United Methodist Church is a permitted institutional use within the B-2 zoning district. As a place of worship and community gathering facility, the church relies on on-site signage to communicate service times, community outreach programs, seasonal events, and notices to the public. This function is directly tied to its permitted use and operational viability.

Strict compliance with the current zoning ordinance—specifically the provisions prohibiting moving or animated signs and illuminated signage adjacent to residential districts—would effectively prevent the church from installing a modern, legible replacement sign. While a static ground sign may technically be permitted, it would not provide reasonable functionality given current technology communication needs.

The existing sign is 30 years old, internally illuminated, and legally non-conforming. It is significantly larger in overall dimensions than the proposed replacement. The new LED sign is substantially smaller in sign-face area, maintains the same setback, and is designed to improve clarity and safety through controlled brightness and timed message transitions. However, because LED technology involves digital message changes, it falls within ordinance language that predates this technology and broadly categorizes such signs as "moving" or "animated."

Therefore, strict application of the ordinance would impose an unnecessary burden by preventing reasonable modernization of an existing sign serving a permitted institutional use. The requested variances represent the minimum relief necessary to allow continued, reasonable use of the property without expanding intensity, footprint, or non-conformity.

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

Strict compliance with the existing regulations would not prevent the property owner from using the property for the permitted conditional use of church services.

Is the requested variance the minimum variance necessary to do substantial justice to the applicant as well as the other property owners in the district?

Applicant Statement:

The variance requested represents the minimum relief necessary to allow the replacement of an aging, legally non-conforming sign while maintaining compatibility with the surrounding area and adhering as closely as possible to the ordinance standards.

First, the proposed sign is substantially smaller in sign-face area than the existing structure. The current sign measures 144 inches by 48 inches (48 square feet per face), while the proposed LED display measures 66 inches by 40 inches (approximately 18.3 square feet per face). This represents a significant reduction in visual mass. The setback from the top of the ditch remains the same at approximately 25 feet, and the sign is not being relocated closer to the roadway or residential properties. In this respect, the request does not intensify the use but instead reduces overall scale.

Second, the variance is limited specifically to allowing LED message display technology and illumination in a controlled manner. The church is not requesting additional height beyond district allowances, additional sign area beyond what is permitted for freestanding signs, or multiple additional signs beyond what is otherwise allowed. The relief sought is narrowly tailored to address ordinance language that predates modern digital sign technology.

Third, the proposed LED sign will incorporate controlled brightness settings and timed message transitions, not flashing or rapidly oscillating effects. This operational approach minimizes potential impacts on adjacent residential properties while allowing the church to communicate effectively. The replacement will result in a cleaner, more compact, and better-maintained structure than the existing 30-year-old internally lit sign.

By reducing sign size, maintaining the established setback, and limiting the request solely to the functional aspects necessary for digital messaging, the church balances fairness to itself as a permitted institutional user while protecting neighboring property owners from increased scale, intrusion, or intensity. The request does not expand the footprint, increase non-conformity, or alter traffic patterns. It simply allows reasonable modernization within the smallest scope of relief necessary to continue effective use of the property.

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

The subject property is located adjacent to a residential district, where the zoning ordinance places limitations on illuminated and digital signs to minimize potential impacts on nearby residential properties. The applicant states that the proposed LED sign will incorporate controlled brightness settings, timed message transitions, and will not include flashing or rapidly oscillating effects. These measures appear intended to reduce potential impacts associated with digital display signage. However, the property currently contains a sign that staff understand to be a legal nonconforming internally illuminated message board, and the zoning ordinance limits the alteration, expansion, enlargement, or extension of nonconforming signs. The ZBA may wish to consider whether the proposed modification to a digital display format could introduce new visual characteristics or impacts on adjacent residential properties.

Will the requested variance cause an adverse impact on surrounding property, property values, or the use and enjoyment of property in the neighborhood or district?

Applicant Statement:

The requested variance will not negatively impact surrounding properties, property values, or the use and enjoyment of nearby properties for several objective reasons related to scale, placement, operation, and overall site conditions.

The proposed LED sign is substantially smaller than the existing 30-year-old ground sign. The current sign measures 144 inches by 48 inches (48 square feet per face), while the proposed display measures 66 inches by 40 inches (approximately 18.3 square feet per face). This represents a significant reduction in overall sign mass and visual footprint. The new structure will be more compact, modern, and visually orderly compared to the aging, internally illuminated sign it replaces.

The sign will remain in substantially the same location, approximately 25 feet from the top of the roadside drainage ditch. It is not being moved closer to the roadway or toward residential properties. The established drainage patterns, right-of-way boundaries, and traffic sight lines will remain unchanged. No alterations to grading or drainage infrastructure are proposed.

Although the ordinance language predates LED technology, the proposed display will utilize controlled brightness settings and automatic dimming features to adjust light levels based on ambient conditions. The LED display will not use flashing, oscillating, or rapidly changing effects. The existing sign has been internally illuminated for decades without documented adverse impact.

The proposed sign produces no sound. There are no speakers, moving mechanical components, or audio features associated with the display. As such, the variance presents no risk of noise impacts to surrounding properties.

The sign remains in an established location that has served the property for 30 years. The reduced size and improved legibility may enhance driver comprehension without increasing distraction, particularly since the display will avoid flashing or rapid animation.

The sign will not introduce additional, bulk, or encroachment toward neighboring residential properties. Its orientation is toward the roadway for identification and informational purposes, consistent with its long-standing function. Controlled illumination and reduced face area further limit any potential spillover effect.

Replacing an aging, non-conforming sign with a smaller, modern, well-maintained structure is more likely to enhance visual appearance than diminish it. The improvement reduces visual clutter and updates the aesthetic character of the frontage without increasing commercial intensity.

In summary, the proposed variance does not expand the scale, intensity, or footprint of signage on the property. It replaces an existing illuminated sign with a significantly smaller, technologically updated structure in the same location, with controlled operation and no noise or drainage impacts. For these reasons, the requested variance will not adversely affect surrounding properties, property values, or the use and enjoyment of nearby properties within the district.

Zoning Administrator Feedback:

The subject property is located adjacent to a residential district, where the zoning ordinance places limitations on illuminated and digital signs to reduce potential impacts on nearby residential properties. The applicant indicates that the proposed LED sign will include controlled brightness settings, timed message transitions, and will not incorporate flashing or rapidly oscillating effects. These features appear intended to mitigate potential visual impacts associated with digital display signage. However, the ZBA may wish to consider the long-term compatibility of a digital display sign adjacent to residential uses, including whether operational

conditions such as brightness and message transitions could be reasonably monitored and maintained over time to avoid adverse impacts on nearby properties.

With respect to the requested height variance, industry guidance from organizations such as the United States Sign Council (USSC) Foundation suggests that freestanding signs are often designed with a minimum clearance of approximately seven feet between the ground and the bottom of the sign panel to support visibility, safety, and aesthetics. Sign height and clearance can also influence visibility for motorists and the ability to maintain clear sightlines near roadways and driveways. The ZBA may wish to consider whether the proposed sign height could affect sightlines or visibility for drivers, pedestrians, or adjacent properties, and whether the requested modification remains consistent with the intent of the city's sign regulations.

Conclusion

Applicant Summary:

In evaluating this request, it is important to note that LED video signs are already located within and around the City of Gladstone, including at least one installation within or adjacent to a residentially zoned area. These signs appear to operate with digital message capabilities similar to what Memorial United Methodist Church is proposing. To our knowledge, those installations did not undergo the same variance process currently being required for this application and may have been approved through exception language or administrative interpretation.

We raise this point not to challenge prior approvals, but to demonstrate that LED technology has already been recognized within the community as compatible with surrounding land uses when appropriately regulated. The existence of comparable signs supports the conclusion that controlled LED displays can function without adverse impacts on neighboring properties. Granting this variance would therefore be consistent with precedent within the City and would promote equitable treatment of similarly situated properties, while still allowing the Zoning Board to apply reasonable operational conditions to ensure neighborhood compatibility.

Variance Approval – Summary

The requested variances meet all required standards:

- The ordinance does not address modern LED technology and applies outdated standards to current communication needs.
- The need arises from replacing a long-standing non-conforming sign.
- Strict compliance prevents effective use of signage for a permitted institutional purpose.
- The proposed sign is smaller, controlled, and visually appealing.
- Reduced sign area, controlled illumination, and unchanged setback protect does not adversely effect neighboring properties or character.

1. Variance from Sec. 30-603(e):

Prohibition on moving or animated parts

Request: Approval for an LED video sign that contains digital message changes.

The need for this variance is due to **unique and evolving communication standards** not addressed when the ordinance was written. The church relies on its sign for **community outreach, service times, event notices, and uplifting messaging**, which static signage no longer adequately supports.

The proposed LED sign does **not contain mechanical movement** and will utilize **slow message transitions**, not flashing or animated effects. This minimizes visual impact while allowing the church to use its property for a **permitted institutional purpose**.

Strict compliance with the ordinance would **unreasonably limit effective communication**, especially given the sign replaces an already illuminated, non-conforming structure.

2. Variance from Sec. 30-605(2):

Prohibition on flashing, moving, or oscillating lights

Request: Approval for LED illumination with controlled message changes.

The proposed LED sign will **not use flashing, oscillating, or rapidly changing lights**. Message changes will be **timed video or static displays**, consistent with modern best practices and comparable LED signs in institutional settings.

The variance is **not self-created**, as the church is replacing an aging sign that predates current standards and is already internally illuminated. The requested relief is the **minimum necessary** to allow safe, legible, and effective signage without introducing negative impacts.

3. Variance from Sec. 30-608(2)(a)(5):

Illumination prohibited when adjacent to a residential district

Request: Approval for illuminated signage adjacent to residential zoning.

The existing sign has been **internally illuminated for decades** without documented adverse impact on neighboring residential properties. The residential property in question in the Armory. The proposed LED sign will incorporate **brightness controls and automatic dimming**.

Additionally:

- The **sign face area is substantially reduced**
The **setback remains unchanged**
The sign footprint is **more compact and visually controlled**

Zoning Administrator Summary:

Based on the information provided in the application materials and staff's review of the variance standards outlined in Section 30-512 of the zoning ordinance, staff did not identify evidence demonstrating that the request is necessitated by unique physical conditions of the property or that strict compliance with the ordinance would prevent the property from being used for its permitted conditional use of church services. The request primarily relates to the installation of a digital sign type rather than relief from dimensional requirements. The Planning Commission has recently appointed a subcommittee to review the existing sign ordinance and evaluate whether updates may be appropriate to address evolving signage technologies and community standards. As such, the ZBA may wish to consider whether the requested relief is best addressed through the variance process or through potential future amendments to the sign ordinance.