

**City of Watertown**  
**Sign Ordinance Review Comments and Questions**  
**May 26, 2026**

**General Comments**

**1. Sign code layout and approach.**

- The City's existing code was amended relatively recently (amendment dates listed as 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2021). The layout and overall approach to organizing sign definitions and regulations is similar to the model approach we are proposing.
- The City's existing code is also mostly content neutral and complies with the 2015 Supreme Court Case (Reed v. Gilbert).

**2. Overall reduction in CUPs.**

- In the existing code, multiple sign types either require CUP approval or may use CUPs to obtain approval for certain special situations. Overall, the new approach will be to remove CUPs and instead clarify standard code regulations. The following are examples of CUP situations in the existing code.
  - **Pylon Signs**
    - An exception can be requested to exceed maximum height in the Hwy 26 pylon allowance area
  - **Drive-Thru Signs**
  - **Permanent Plat Signs**
  - **Roof Signs**
  - **Wall Signs**
    - Allows use of CUP when a wall sign exceeds standard height limits, specifically when it projects above the top of the building wall or roofline

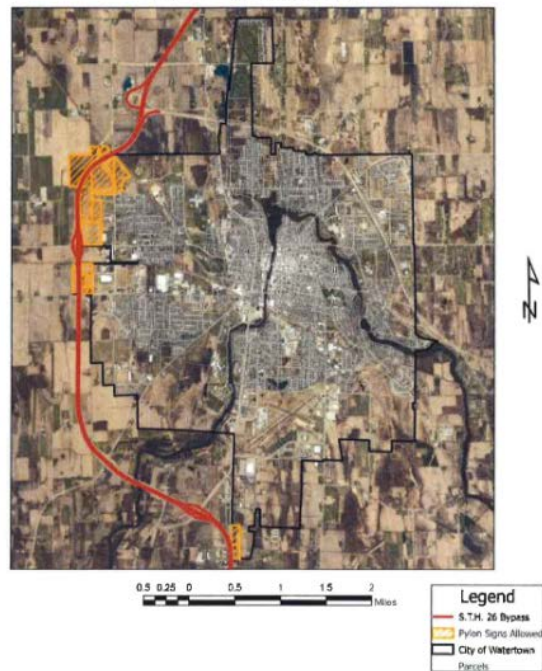
## Sign Type Comments

### 3. Pylon signs:

- Currently prohibited except for in the **Hwy 26 Pylon Sign Allowance Area**. Tall signs in other commercial corridors like Church Street are required to be monument signs and are capped at maximum 15' height. In the Hwy 26 Area, pylons are allowed to be as tall as the building height for the zoning district the sign is located in. That maximum height may also be exceeded with a CUP.
- **Policy question:** If the City wants to continue allowing taller signs in this area, we suggest a flat height for clarity such as 35 feet and remove the ability to exceed with a CUP.

Figure 550-132C: S.T.H. 26 Pylon Sign Allowance Area

### S.T.H. 26 Pylon Sign Allowance Areas City of Watertown, WI



### 4. Billboards (off-premises advertising signs):

- Currently prohibited except that existing billboards may continue. Existing billboards are specifically listed in the code (see below) and may be altered or maintained.
- **Policy question:** Continue prohibiting new billboards? Some communities will do a “cap and replace” program where a new billboard could be added if an existing billboard is removed. Some communities allow billboards to have electronic message faces.

- (8) Off-premises advertising sign. A sign which directs attention to a business, commodity, service, or entertainment that is conducted, sold, or offered elsewhere than upon the site where the sign is displayed. Off-premises advertising signs include billboards.
- (a) Existing legal off-premises advertising signs made nonconforming by this section shall be permitted to continue as legal, nonconforming signs, subject to the requirements of § 550-137. These legal nonconforming signs include the following list:
- [1] Highway 26 north (business), at the approximate address of 1101 North Church Street: one eight-foot-by-fifteen-foot double-faced triangular sign and one eight-foot-by-nine-foot single-faced sign;
  - [2] Highway 26 south (business), located at the approximate address of 38 Stimpson Street: one eight-foot-by-twenty-foot double-faced sign;
  - [3] Highway 26 south (business), located at the approximate address of 1610 South Church Street: one eight-foot-by-ten-foot single-faced sign;
  - [4] Highway 19 west, located at the approximate address of 940 West Main Street: two ten-foot-by-eighteen-foot single-faced side-by-side signs;
  - [5] Highway 19 east, located at the approximate address of 323 Summit Avenue: one eight-foot-by-eight-foot single-faced sign; and
  - [6] Highway 16, located at the approximate address of 804 Hillside Lane: one eight-foot-by-twelve-foot double-faced sign.

## 5. Yard Signs

- Current code allows an unlimited number of yard signs in residential properties (such as stake signs).
- **Policy question:**
  - Do you want to continue this policy? Some communities limit to two yard signs per property with unlimited allowance during campaign periods.
  - Do you want to allow “off-premises advertising signs” to be used in yard sign configurations? Example: roofing company wants to put a yard sign on the property after doing roofing work for advertising purposes. This would typically be considered an off-premises advertising sign.

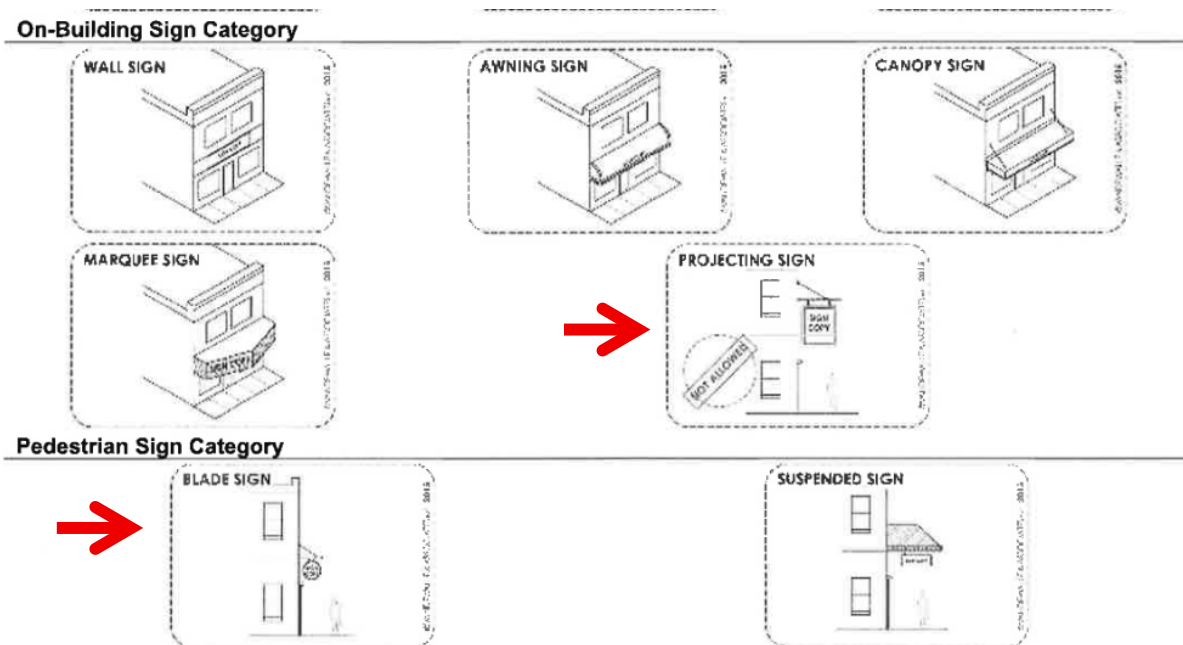
## 6. Electronic Message Center (EMC) Signs

- Current code has standards such as:
  - No EMS within 100 feet of residentially zoned property
  - Allows an existing internally illuminated sign to be changed to an EMC. Example: existing single family property has an allowed use such as a school or church with an internally illuminated sign which could be converted to an EMC. EMC would otherwise be prohibited in single family zoned property. This will be resolved in the new code with a new zoning district (see below).
- Policy question:
  - Do you want to limit the size of the electronic content to a certain limit? For example, some communities will limit to 50% of the overall sign allowance as electronic message center.
  - Do you want to keep the 100-foot distance from residentially zoned property?
  - Instead of using the carve out for existing illuminated signs to be converted, we could permit EMC or illuminated signs to be used in the new institutional zoning district for where land uses like schools and churches are typically located.

## 7. Projecting signs

- Current code prohibits projecting signs (per Figure 550-132A, though it is omitted from the list of prohibited signs in 550-131(E). Current code does allow “blade” signs and “suspending signs.”
- Policy question:
  - Is this working well for the City now? There have been newer projecting style signs installed in the downtown recently, for example, that have probably utilized the “blade” sign definition. Are any changes needed to better match character goals or requests for similar signage?

Images from current code



## 8. Monument signs

- Existing code limits to 15 feet – stay with current policy?

## 9. Marquee signs

- Existing code appears to allow Marquee signs in commercial districts and the downtown. There is also a section on signs in “historic and special districts” that says marquee signs shall be permitted on a historic site or contributing property with evidence, historic photos and any other documentation of a prior marquee sign. Marquee signs on a noncontributing property may be allowed with a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historic Preservation Commission.
- **Policy questions:**
  - Some clarification in the existing sign table is probably needed to confirm whether marquee signs are intended to be allowed by right up to 200 sf or if they are only intended to be allowed in circumstances where there was a historic marquee sign.
  - Thoughts on preferred approach? Do you want to allow these only where they existing previously or as a permitted sign in the downtown, or other districts?

## 10. Window signs

- Appears to be omitted from existing code
- **Policy question:** Limit window signage to 25% of window area?

## 11. Community sign

- Current approach: government or institutional signs appear to be exempt from the sign code
- Proposed approach: regulate such signs like other signs in the community and adopt standards that work for community goals.

## 12. Sandwich board

- Currently allowed only in downtown
- Continue approach?

## 13. Procedures

- Most signs would be allowed by right with a permit from staff
- Review time currently 10 days – change to 14
- Permit validity currently valid for 180 - keep or change to 365?