



using information from your local sign code. Making the chart helps you get the code straight in your mind, since you need to clearly know what the ordinances say to fill it in. I have one chart for each main business district in a few local towns. (You may even want charts for different zoning districts within certain towns.) When you finish your chart(s), you've got a terrific tool that does several things:

- You have a quick reference tool for the different towns and/or zoning districts in your area—which sometimes differ dramatically. (I recently brought my sign code chart to a meeting with the head of a building department. When questions arose about square foot limits on various signs, I was able to instantly point out the limits on the chart while he was still leafing through the code booklet looking for answers.)
- If you show the chart to customers, it can open a conversation about signs that they weren't thinking about and didn't know were an option for them. The chart can be used in this way even if you have no sign code to comply with.
- It helps you take a better, longer look at the combination of storefront signs and ground signs that will be most effective for the customer.
- Best of all, it helps you and your customer maximize sign advertising by knowing at a glance all the allowable classes of signs to the maximum limits at a glance.

**Make a chart today** You can either draw one of your own or copy the blank drawing shown

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Click on *Features* to read Dan's article:

- **Great sign. But will they see it?**, July/August 2001

here on a photocopier (or scanner). Mark it up with the parameters of the code you're working on. If it's easier for you, enlarge the drawing to 11 by 17 in., fill it in and use it at that size, or reduce it back to 8 1/2 by 11 in. If you scan it into your computer, you can use a font to letter it (I used Blacklight). Or, you can type up the specs for each type of sign, tape them to the blank chart and photocopy that.

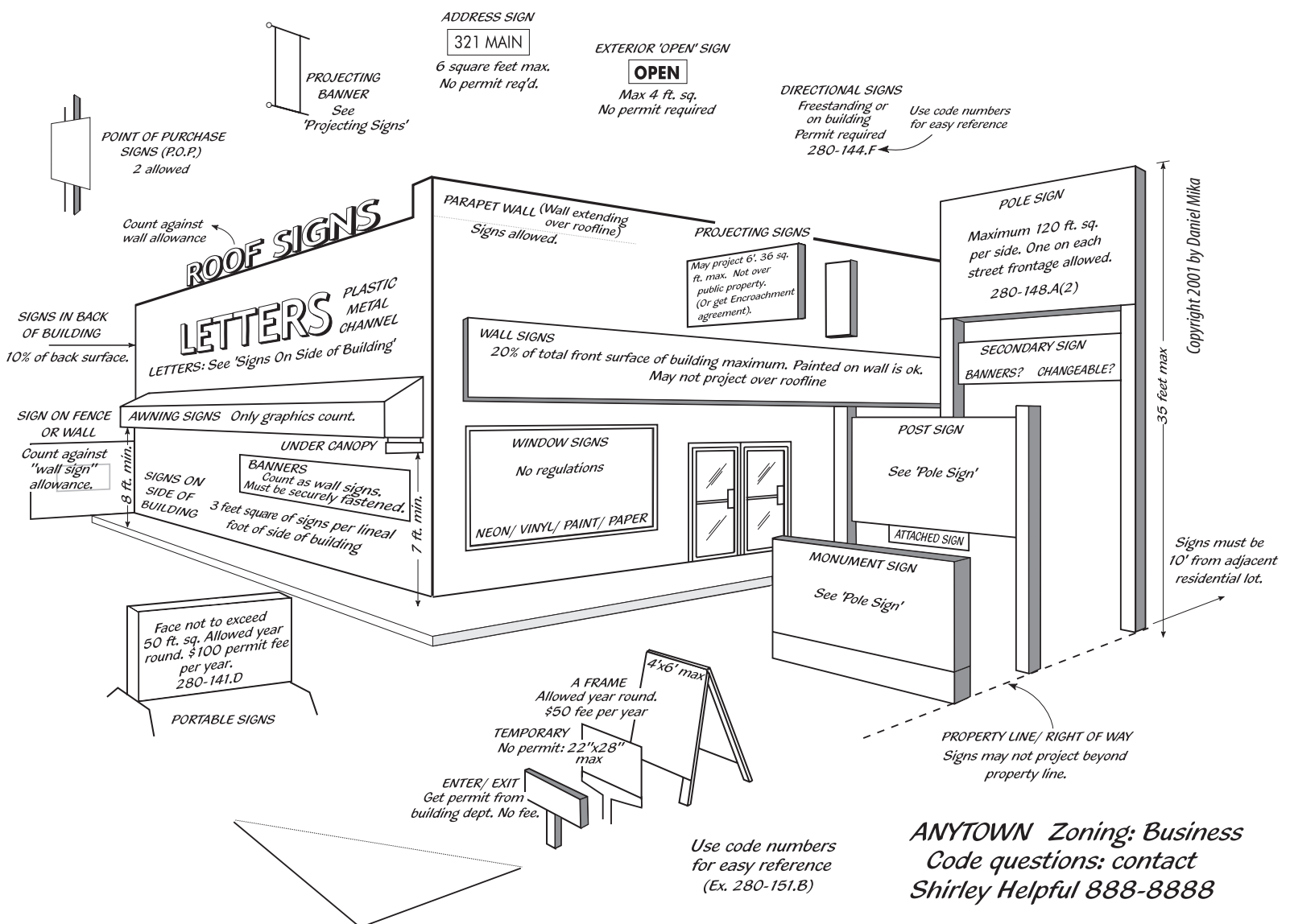
The best way to get the details straight is to read the code yourself, fill in the chart, then ask the chief code official to go over it with you. The business or commercial zoning district in the town where you do most of your work may be the one to start with. Add or delete whatever signs fit into that code. I put the town and zoning type (e.g., business) on the chart, along with the name and phone number of officials, so I can clear up any questions quickly. Indicating the code section numbers and letters on the chart makes a handy reference.

You may want to put a note on the chart

about any other types of signs that are used or "let go" in your community. As you know, there's sometimes a difference between what the code seems to say and what is enforced. Many towns have a gray area involving certain types of signs that they seem to accept in common practice because of long-standing precedents or other reasons.

On the back of the chart, I put other useful information that doesn't fit on the illustration—things having to do with the procedure to get a permit, variance application procedure and encroachment agreements. I also have a place there for signs with their own rules, like real estate signs, political signs and signs for nonprofit groups.

You can cover or delete the signs on the chart that you don't supply. But, rather than doing that, you may want to develop relationships with other shops or sign wholesalers to provide the types of signs that you don't produce in-house.



## Use the back of the chart for additional information

On the back of the chart or on a separate sheet I list the cost and procedures for getting permits, along with the code restrictions for types of signs not covered on the chart. It rounds out the information you need to answer code questions quickly. Here are the headings I use:

### Sign permits

Fee:

Procedure:

### Variations

Fee:

Procedure:

### Encroachment agreements

Fee:

Procedure:

### Code for signs not pictured

Real Estate (for sale, lease, rent, sold):

Real estate developer:

Nonprofit organization:

Political:

Project signs:

Contractor signs:

### Plazas, mini malls, malls

Is there a coordinated sign plan?

Regulations:

Pole signs:

### General notes:

**Checking the zoning and lease** The first thing to do when using the chart with customers is to be sure you've got their zoning right. As you know, permissible signs often vary with the zoning category of the property. If the customer isn't absolutely sure of their zoning, a call to the building department should resolve that. Remember, too, that some plazas and commercial parks have their own sign restrictions. Ask the customer if sign requirements were spelled out in their lease.

**Decoding the code** I recently asked the same question about sign face area on pole signs of three sign-code officials in the same building department. The comment from the official front person in the code department was, "You can have a taller pole sign and more face area only if the frontage on any one street meets the minimum requirement. It doesn't

count if two sides of the building face the street."

"But, in the code it says to use the total street frontage from all streets," I said.

"Sorry," was the reply, "but our official interpretation is to count any one street with an entrance."

So I asked a second official who gave me the same response. The third person I asked was the department head. He was able to give me the correct interpretation, which was the one that made sense to me and was the one I wanted.

The moral is to closely read the code and if it looks plain enough to you, but they haven't been allowing a certain type of sign, they may be the ones who have the interpretation wrong. Hang in there. More than once I've seen code officials, including a department head, change their minds about code interpretation as we spoke (while never admitting they ever believed any other way!). Generally, heads of departments are the best sources for information. They may even have had a part in writing the code, and if so, they know the intent of it. They may also sit in on variance meetings and can help you determine what is doable in that area. For these reasons, they're the best ones to go over the chart with you.

One ordinance restriction seen frequently, but subject to interpretation, is "no fluttering banners." This wording probably allows for firmly anchored banners. Informational signs, sometimes including exterior *Open* signs, may also be exempted from restrictions.

By the way, "one sign per side of building" usually doesn't mean that literally, in my experience. It could mean one "grouping" of signs or one balanced layout of "dimensional" words. Ask your sign code official to be sure. But, be prepared with observations about what's already been approved for other businesses. This, and a close reading of the code, will give you an edge when asking questions about any type of sign. If a class of sign is not permitted in the code, you may want to ask if variances are often granted for that type of sign.

Some towns regularly grant variances for certain classes of permanent signs and also for setbacks, size and height restrictions. While the percentages of variances granted in some towns is close to zero, in others it may be 80 percent or more. •SC



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