
**Guide to
Iowa
Outdoor
Advertising
Sign
Regulations**



November 2009

INTRODUCTION

This guide will acquaint you with Iowa laws regulating outdoor advertising signs along the state's primary highways. It defines various types of outdoor signs and presents the general prohibitions and sign controls which apply to them.

The general prohibitions and sign controls discussed in this guide apply to signs along all primary highways, including signs located:

- in cities, if they are visible from the primary highway and located within 660 feet of the highway right-of-way; and
- in rural areas, if they are visible from the highway, regardless of their distance from the highway right-of-way.

The sign controls in this guide do not apply to:

- Signs on city streets and county roads which are not visible from the primary highway system.
- Signs on interstate and freeway highways, with exception of private directional signing. For information regarding controls on interstate highways, refer to a separate publication entitled *Guide to Iowa Outdoor Advertising Regulations for Interstate Highways*.

In this guide you will also find information about outdoor advertising permits, and where to obtain application forms and additional information concerning these permits.



GENERAL PROHIBITIONS

These general prohibitions apply to all types of signs discussed in this brochure.

1. No sign may encroach on or hang over the highway right-of-way.
2. No sign may be lighted so it impairs the vision of any motor vehicle driver.
3. No sign may obstruct the view of any highway or railroad to the extent it makes it dangerous to use the highway.
4. No sign may imitate or resemble an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
5. No sign may obscure or physically interfere with an official traffic control sign, signal or device.

SIGN CONTROLS

The following sections define the common types of signs and discuss the specific sign controls which apply to each type.

Political Campaign Signs

Political campaign signs include any temporary advertising device or sign that is designed to influence the passage or defeat of any measure on the ballot or designed to influence the voters with respect to the nomination, election, defeat or removal of a candidate from public office at any national, state or local general or special election.

There are state, county and municipal laws and ordinances that govern political signs. Iowa law does not restrict the size of the sign or the duration of time regarding its placement. However, political campaign signs are not allowed on any property:

- located within public rights-of-way, or that which is owned by the state or the governing body of a county, city or other political subdivision of the state;
- owned by a prohibited contributor under section 68A.503 of the Iowa Code, unless the sign advocates the passage or defeat of a ballot issue or is exempted;
- without the permission of the property owner; and
- on the premises of any polling place or voting site on election day, or within 300 feet of its entrance, in accordance with Iowa Code Chapter 68A.406.

Real Estate Signs

Real estate signs intended to advertise the financing, development, sale, transfer, lease, exchange or rent of real property should be displayed upon the premises of the advertised property. Placement on property other than the advertised property requires adherence to all outdoor advertising regulations for off-premise signs (see page 9), and an outdoor advertising permit from the Iowa Department of Transportation. The placement of real estate signs within the public right-of-way is prohibited.

Special Event Signs

Chapter 306C of the Iowa Code defines a special event sign as a “temporary advertising device, not larger than 32 square feet in area, erected for the purpose of notifying the public of noncommercial community events, including but not limited to fairs, centennials, festivals and celebrations open to the general public and sponsored or approved by a city, county or school district.”

1. Special event signs may be erected on private property, with the owner’s consent, no more than 60 days prior to the date of the special event.
2. Special event signs must be removed no later than 24 hours after the end of the event.
3. As a general rule, special event signs are prohibited within 660 feet of an interstate highway.
4. Approval by the Iowa Department of Transportation is not required to erect a special event sign that meets the general prohibitions and the criteria listed above.

Official City and County Signs

Official city signs are a viable option to provide destination information along both interstate and primary highways. To qualify as an official city, county or public agency sign, the sign must:

- be erected and maintained by a public officer or agency (A city or county can authorize a group to erect and maintain the sign on its behalf.);
- be erected within the territorial or zoning jurisdiction of the public officer or agency (A city may extend two miles outside its corporate limits under extraterritorial zoning.);
- be erected according to directions or authorizations contained in federal, state or local law (An ordinance, resolution or law authorizing erection of the sign must be passed.);
- be erected for the purpose of carrying out an official duty or responsibility;

- be located beyond the highway right-of-way at a location that will not obstruct the vision of a driver approaching an intersection;
- not imitate or resemble traffic control devices governed by the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD); and
- not contain any commercial message or business name.

Local jurisdictions and agencies have considerable latitude in the type of messages that can be displayed on the signs. Messages that provide a welcome at entrance points, identify jurisdiction boundary lines, direct motorists to public buildings, parks or recreation areas, or which generally reference motorist services and community attractions are acceptable. Messages that include specific business names, products, commercial messages or promotions for private non-profit groups, however, are not allowed on this type of sign.

The local jurisdiction or public agency would just need to secure a lease or other interest in a site to erect such a sign. **No approval or involvement by the DOT is required.** However, the department would be willing to assist cities, counties and public agencies in meeting the requirements needed to qualify for official signing.

Church and Service Club Signs

Church and service club signs display a message relating to the facilities' locations, services or meetings.

In addition to the general prohibitions (page 1), church and service club signs must conform to the following controls:

1. **Approval:** The Iowa Department of Transportation's approval of the sign's message and proposed location is required **prior** to the sign being erected.
2. **Size:** Individual signs are limited to a maximum of eight square feet of display area.
3. **Message:** The sign's message is restricted to the name of the church or club, location, hours of services or meetings, and an appropriate emblem. (Any advertising is prohibited.)

Logo Signs

Specific information service signing (logo) may be available along interstates and freeway primary highways for qualifying gas, food, lodging, camping and tourist attractions. For information, you may refer to a separate publication, *Logo Business Signs*.

Off-Right-of-Way Private Directional Signs

Directional sign permits are required for directional signs. Off-right-of-way directional signs (located on private property along interstate, freeway primary and primary highways) are intended to inform motorists of public and privately owned natural phenomena, historic, cultural, scientific, educational and religious sites, and areas of natural scenic beauty or which are naturally suited for outdoor recreation that are nationally or regionally known.

Interstate Highways

To qualify for a private directional sign visible from an interstate highway, an individual activity, area or attraction must have an annual visitor count of 15,000 or more.

Freeway Primary and Primary Highways

To qualify for a private directional sign visible from primary and freeway primary highways, an individual activity, area or attraction must:

- a. have an annual visitor count of 10,000 or more; or
- b. be on the federal historic register and have an annual visitor count of 5,000 or more; or
- c. have an annual visitor count of 2,500 or more, of which at least 25 percent of the visitors must reside outside the county in which the activity, attraction or area is located.

In addition to the general prohibitions (page 1), off-right-of-way directional signs must conform to the following controls:

1. **Permit:** An approved permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.
2. **Location:** Interstate highway private directional signs must be located within 75 air miles of the activity, area or attraction. Primary highway private directional signs must be located within 50 air miles of the activity, attraction or area.

No private directional sign may be located in any publicly owned rest area, park land or scenic area. No sign may be located within the adjacent area on either side of the highway within 2,000 feet of such facilities.

No sign may be located adjacent to the highway on either side within 2,000 feet of an interchange along any interstate or freeway primary highway (measured along the freeway from the nearest point of the beginning or ending of pavement widening at the exit from or entrance to the main traveled way.)

3. **Size:** Signs shall not exceed 150 square feet, including border and trim, nor be more than 20 feet in height or length.
4. **Number:** Not more than three directional signs pertaining to the same activity, area or attraction and facing the same direction of travel may be erected along any one interstate, freeway primary or primary highway.
5. **Spacing:** Directional signs facing the same direction of travel shall be spaced a minimum of one mile apart.
6. **Message:** Messages on signs shall be limited to the identification of the activity, area or attraction, and directional information useful to the traveler in locating it. This may include mileage, route numbers or exit numbers. The message shall also include current and sufficient information to inform the motorist of the hours, days and months of operation.
7. **Lights:** In general, flashing, intermittent or moving lights are prohibited.
8. **Special requirements:** In addition to the requirements already listed, the following must be provided with directional signing permit applications:
 - a. proof of required visitor count and visitor addresses, as necessary;
 - b. information concerning when the activity, area or attraction is open to the public; and
 - c. written assurance the attraction, activity or area complies with all applicable laws concerning public accommodations without regard to race, religion, color, sex or national origin.

Qualifying activities, sites and areas may submit a private directional sign permit application to the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Traffic and Safety, 800 Lincoln Way, Ames, IA 50010. The applications are available upon request from the above office. Upon receipt and following review by the Department of Transportation, each application is evaluated by the Tourist Signing Committee and either approved or denied. Initial fees of \$100 per sign are to be submitted with the application. Renewal fees of \$15 per sign due on or before June 30 are then billed to the sign owner annually. (Consult 761 IAC 120 for specific requirements.)

Tourist-Oriented Directional Signs (TODS)

Tourist-oriented directional signs (official signs located on the right-of-way of nonfreeway primary highways) are intended to provide the motorist with specific information about activities or sites of significant interest to the traveling public.

General Requirements: An activity or site must meet the following:

1. The activity or site shall comply with all applicable laws concerning public accommodations without regard to race, religion, color, age, sex or national origin.
2. It is open to the general public during regular and reasonable hours; not by appointment, reservation or membership only.
3. The activity or site is not conducted in a building principally used as a residence unless a separate, convenient, well-marked entrance is provided.
4. It is located in a rural area or within the corporate limits of a city with a population of 2,500 or less.
5. The activity, site or any on-premise sign advertising the activity cannot be located adjacent to or be visible from the primary highway. However, an activity or site may be eligible for signing if the activity, site or its on premise sign is not readily recognizable to a motorist who is within 300 feet of the access, driveway or intersection leading to the activity or site.
6. Tourist-oriented directional signs may be placed within the maximum travel distance on a higher classified highway to direct motorists onto a lower classified highway, or on a greater traveled highway to direct motorists onto a lesser traveled highway.

7. A seasonal activity or site shall be required to have closed panels or masking on the TODS when they are closed for a period of time or if their hours of operation decrease below the minimum requirements.

Special Requirements: In addition to the general requirements, the following must also be met to qualify for tourist oriented directional signing:

1. **Motorist Service:** An activity or site that provides a motorist service such as gas, food, lodging or passenger vehicle service or repair must:
 - a. be open a minimum of eight hours a day, six days a week;
 - b. be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period; and
 - c. be located within five miles of the primary highway.
2. **Tourist Attraction:** An activity or site that is of significant interest to tourists as historic, cultural, scientific, or religious, or a site of natural scenic beauty, or an area naturally suited for outdoor recreation must:
 - a. be open a minimum of 40 hours a week, five days a week;
 - b. be open a minimum of three consecutive months each year; and
 - c. be located within five miles of the primary highway, or within 10 miles if open a minimum of eight hours a day, seven days a week.
3. **Agricultural Activity:** An activity or site of significant interest to the tourist must:
 - a. be open an minimum of 40 hours a week, five days a week;
 - b. be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period; and
 - c. be located within 10 miles of the primary highway. (Many agricultural activities may be required to provide guided tours, have a tourist brochure and include the word "tours" on their signs.)

- 4. Other Commercial Activities:** A commercial activity or site of significant interest to tourists must:
- a. be open 40 hours a week, five days a week;
 - b. be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period (minimum four consecutive weeks); and
 - c. be located within five miles of the primary highway.

Authorized representatives of qualifying activities, sites and areas may submit a tourist-oriented directional signing application to the address listed at the back of this guide.

Following a review by the Iowa Department of Transportation, each application is evaluated by the Tourist Signing Committee and either approved or denied.

The cost of the two (2) official signs is \$700, which covers the administrative fees, design, fabrication and installation of the signs. An annual renewal fee, due on or before June 30 each year, is \$50 for each sign. If needed, official trailblazing signs shall be required along county roads or city streets to guide motorists to the activity once they have left the primary route. The signs are fabricated by the Department of Transportation, at a cost of \$26 each. Installation costs are established by and are paid to the appropriate city or county office. Closed panel or masking fees will be \$40 per sign per year. All fees are subject to change to cover the actual costs of maintaining the program.

TODS are considered official signs and remain the property of the Iowa Department of Transportation. (Consult 761 IAC 119 for specific requirements.)

On-Premise Signs

On-premise signs advertise the principal product sold or activity conducted on the property where the sign is located. They may concern the sale or lease of the property on which the sign is located. "For Sale" or "For Lease" signs displaying the legend "Sold" or "Leased" are not legal on-premise signs.

The general prohibitions (page 1), apply to on-premise signs.

Permit: Signs may require local city or county permit or approval. However, they do not require state permit or approval if they conform to the following criteria:

1. **Location:** Signs must be located on the same property as the advertised activity.

NOTE: Signs cannot be located on narrow strips of land that cannot be put to any reasonable use directly related to the advertised activity other than signing.

2. **Message:** Messages on signs are limited to advertising only those products sold or activities conducted at the sign site.

When a sign consists principally of brand name or trade name advertising and the product or service advertised is only incidental to the principal activity, or if it brings rental income to the property owner, it shall be considered outdoor advertising and not an on-premise sign.

Off-Premise Signs

Off-premise signs display general advertising about products or services available at locations other than at the sign site. Off-premise signs are also known as billboards.

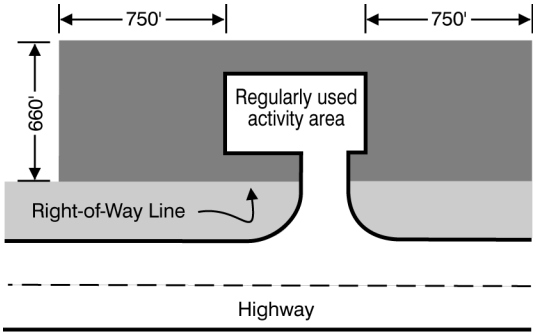
In addition to the general prohibitions (page1), the following controls apply to off-premise signs:

1. **Permit:** A permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.
2. **Scenic Byways:** New signs may not be erected along highways that have been designated as scenic byways. Information about Iowa's scenic byways is available at www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways/scenic_byways.pdf or by contacting the Iowa DOT Office of Systems Planning at 515-239-1369.
3. **Zoning Restrictions:** In cities and counties where local zoning has been established, new signs may be erected only in areas zoned commercial or industrial in accordance with 761 IAC 117.3(4).

In unzoned cities and counties, new signs may be erected only in areas classified as "unzoned commercial or industrial." These are areas occupied by at least one activity generally accepted as commercial or industrial by zoning authorities in the state of Iowa and the area surrounding it for a distance of 750 feet , but not extending across the highway, as measured from the "regularly used" portion of the

activity (see Figure 1). The “regularly used” portion is that portion which is open for business and staffed for at least 20 hours a week, on property assessed as commercial or industrial. The hours of operation must be visibly posted on the premises.

Figure 1
Unzoned Commercial or Industrial Area



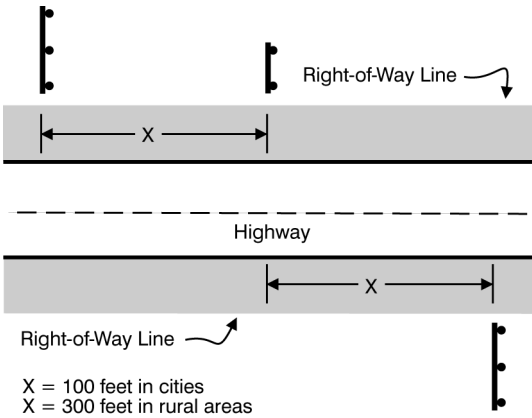
- 4. Size:** The display area of a single face sign is limited to a maximum of 1,200 square feet.

For signs facing more than one direction, the display areas are limited to a maximum of 750 square feet per direction.

- 5. Lights:** In general, flashing, intermittent or moving lights are prohibited.
- 6. Spacing:** In cities, a new sign must be a minimum of 100 feet from any other off-premise sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2 Sign Spacing

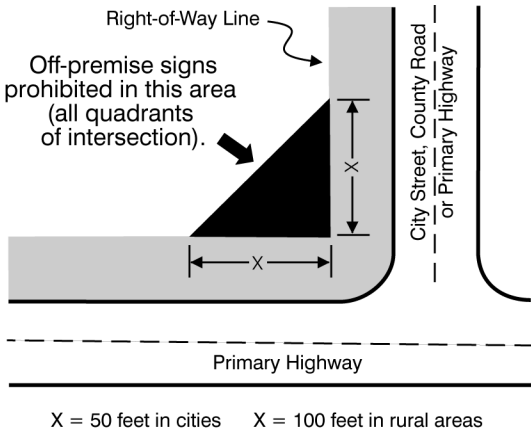
All measurements are along the center line of the highway between signs facing the same direction.



In rural areas, a new sign must be a minimum of 300 feet from any other off-premise sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located. (See Figure 2.) Where two routes intersect, the sign must meet the spacing requirements from both routes.

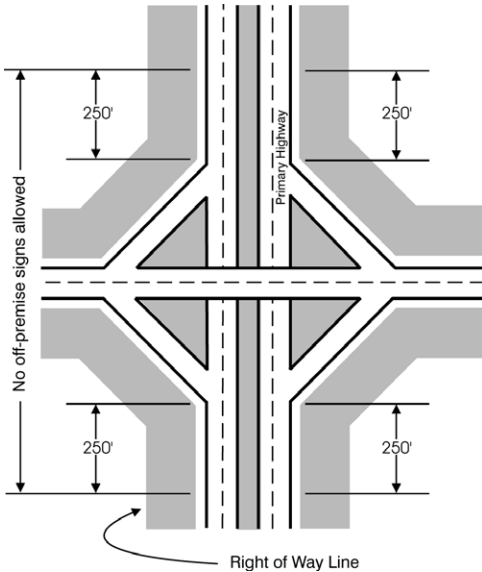
7. **Placement:** At the intersection of a primary highway and a city street, alley, county road or another primary highway, off-premise signs are prohibited in an area at the corner of private property to maintain adequate sight distance for motorist safety. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3 Sight Distance at Intersections (Daylight Area)



Off-premise signs cannot be located within an interchange area. The first eligible locations are 250 feet beyond the nearest widening used for acceleration or deceleration of traffic to and from the main traveled way. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4
Off-Premise Signs Within an Interchange Area



If two interchanges are close in proximity to one another in such a way that a continuous on/off ramp does not require traffic to join the main traveled way between them, the entire area between the interchanges cannot be used for off-premise signs.

- 8. Light emitting diode (LED) displays:** LED displays are permitted under the following conditions.
- Adding this type of technology for an existing billboard constitutes billboard “modification” under Iowa law. Therefore, a new permit application is required.
 - Each change of message must be accomplished in one second or less.
 - Each message must remain in a fixed position for at least eight seconds.
 - No traveling messages (e.g., moving messages, animated messages, full-motion video, scrolling text messages) or segmented messages are presented.
 - The intensity of the illumination does not cause glare or impair the vision of the driver of any motor vehicle or otherwise interferes with any driver’s operation of a motor vehicle.

- LED displays must be located a minimum of 500 feet from any other LED display facing the same direction within cities. LED displays must be located a minimum of 1,000 feet from any other LED display facing the same direction in rural areas.

The following information will help you complete the permit application correctly.

1. A permit is required for each direction a sign is facing. However, only one permit is required for a back-to-back sign advertising the same business or service on each face, and no larger than eight feet in width or height and 32 feet in square area.
2. Permit fees are set by statute as follows:

The initial fee (non-refundable), payable at the time of application, is \$100.

The annual renewal fee, due on or before June 30 each year, is based on size of the face and is as follows:

SIZE (sq.ft.)	FEE
1-375	\$15
376-999	\$25
Over 1,000	\$50

3. The following items must accompany each permit application:
 - a. a check for the fee or fees due, made payable to the Iowa Department of Transportation; and
 - b. a copy of the sign owner's site lease with the landowner. (In the case of a verbal lease, a statement of the terms of the lease signed by the sign owner will be accepted.)
4. In cities or counties **where zoning has been established**, the respective zoning official must complete the portion of the permit application titled "Zoning Information." (Local sign regulations and zoning information may normally be obtained at city halls or county courthouses.)

In cities or counties **where zoning has not been established**, the qualifying activity must be identified in the appropriate space on the permit application. (See page 9)

5. The permit application will ask you to do the following:
 - a. Use the milepost nearest the sign as a reference point for the sign location. (In areas where mileposts are not in place, locate from a major intersection.)

Measure the distance from the nearest milepost to the sign, and record the distance as indicated on the application.

- b. Identify highways and intersecting city streets or county roads on the sign location map. Indicate the distance from the sign to the pavement. (Measure from the back of the curb or nearest edge of pavement, not from the road shoulder.)

NOTE: You will help us process your permit more quickly if you reference your sign site to identifiable landmarks.

For specific requirements consult 306C, Code of Iowa, and 761 IAC 117.

WHERE TO OBTAIN APPLICATION FORMS AND INFORMATION

**Advertising Management
Office of Traffic and Safety**
Iowa Department of Transportation
Ames, IA 50010
515-239-1296

or
www.iowadot.gov/iowaroadsigns

Federal and state laws prohibit employment and/or public accommodation discrimination on the basis of age, color, creed, disability, gender identity, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or veteran's status. If you believe you have been discriminated against, please contact the Iowa Civil Rights Commission at 800-457-4416 or Iowa Department of Transportation's affirmative action officer. If you need accommodations because of a disability to access the Iowa Department of Transportation's services, contact the agency's affirmative action officer at 800-262-0003.
