

Guide to

**Iowa**

**Outdoor**

**Advertising**

**Sign**

**Regulations**

## **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 that 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.
- 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 that are not visible from the Primary Highway System.
- Interstate and freeway highways, with exception of private directional signing. For information regarding controls on interstate highways, refer to a separate publication titled "Guide to Iowa Outdoor Advertising Regulations for Interstate Highways."

Also in this guide, there is information about outdoor advertising permits, where to obtain application forms, and additional information concerning these permits.

## **GENERAL PROHIBITIONS**

These general prohibitions apply to all 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 that apply to each type.

### **Political campaign signs**

These signs include any temporary advertising device or sign designed to influence passage or defeat of any measure on the ballot or designed to influence 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 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 Iowa Code 68A.503, unless the sign advocates the passage or defeat of a ballot issue or is exempted.
- Without the permission of the property owner.
- 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 68A.406.

### **Real estate signs**

Real estate signs intended to advertise 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 14), 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.

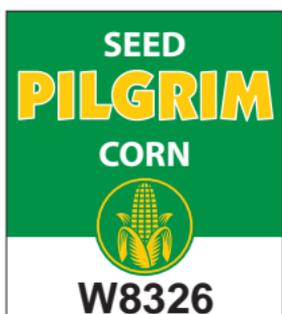
### **Personal opinion signs**

Signs which display an opinion on a matter may be erected provided the following guidelines are met:

1. The sign must be located on the property of the landowner or resident who holds the opinion stated on the sign.
2. The sign must not be located upon the public right of way.

3. The size is not restricted.  
For example, a message - 'I prefer ACME Products' - might convey a personal opinion but it also attempts to convey a commercial message. If ACME Products is not located on the site, the sign will be classified as an off-premise advertising sign, and therefore restricted to the areas where billboards can be permitted.
4. The general prohibitions listed on page 1 apply.
5. The message displayed must not cause the sign to be classified as anything other than an on-premise sign in accordance with Iowa law.

## Crop variety signs (also referred to as seed corn signs)

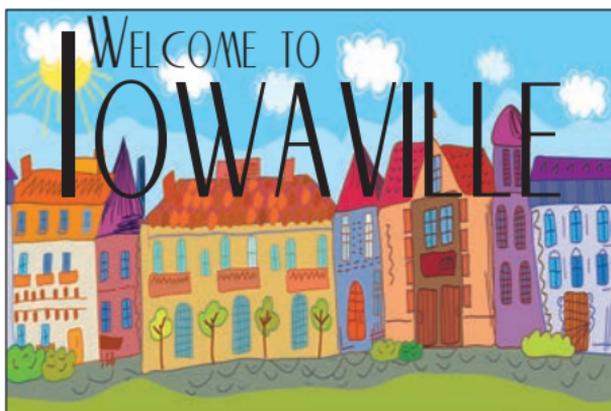


During the growing season, general crop brand (example, "ABC Seeds") signs, and individual crop variety (example, "ABC656") signs are allowed, provided the crop area is indeed growing the products referenced on the signs. The signs must be placed on the private property and not within the public right of way. If a fence is running concurrent with the property line/right of way line, please refrain from posting the sign on the highway side of the fence.

Crop variety signs are not allowed to reference off-site locations where seed products or other goods can be obtained (example, "ABC Distributors, Inc. Cornville, IA"). Signs should be removed following the harvest.

Some exceptions may apply for general main header- type signs in permanently designated research plots leased or owned by agricultural companies. Contact Advertising Management for details.

## Official city, county and public agency signs



Signs which provide general welcome messages at the entrance points of a city, county, or public agency; identify or direct to public facilities (city park, county landfill, post office, etc.); identify or direct to designated areas of a community (business district, historic district, riverfront district, etc.); or which provide other noncommercial information in furtherance of the official duties of the local jurisdiction or public agency may be classified as “official signs”. These signs are exempt from the permitting requirements for outdoor advertising signs, but are subject to the following requirements:

- 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 2 miles outside its corporate limits under extraterritorial zoning.)
- Be erected according to direction or authorization contained in Federal, State, or local law for the purpose of carrying out an official duty or responsibility.

- 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.
- Not contain any commercial message, business name, reference to a private nonprofit organization, or product identification.

Although approval from the Iowa Department of Transportation is not required, local authorities are encouraged to contact Department staff for assistance in meeting the above requirements.

### **Church, service club, and cemetery signs**

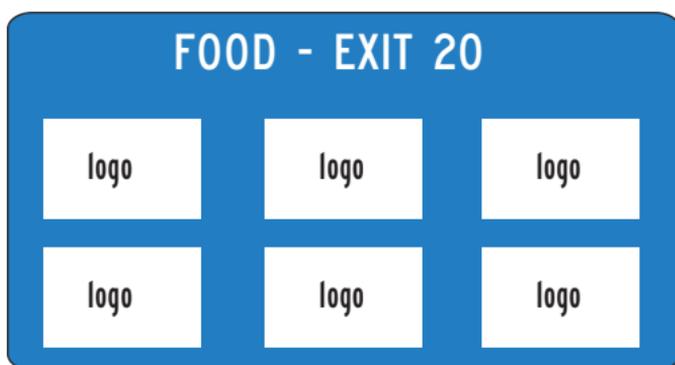


Signs which identify or direct to churches, nonprofit service club organizations, and cemeteries, may be erected provided the following criteria are met, as well as the general prohibitions listed on page 1:

1. The location placement must not be within the public right of way.

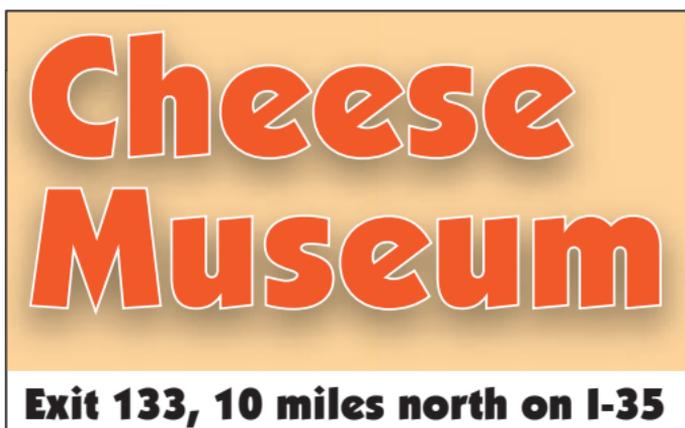
2. The size of the sign must not exceed eight square feet. If multiple signs are combined on a single structure, the overall size must not exceed the number of entities identified multiplied by a factor of eight.
3. Messages are limited to identification of the entity, directional information, service hours, an appropriate emblem, or similar information.

### 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."

## Private directional signs



Private directional signs (located on private property along interstate, freeway primary, and primary highways) are intended to inform motorists of public and privately owned sites of natural phenomena, historic, cultural, scientific, educational, religious sites, and areas of natural scenic beauty or 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 **meet one of the following conditions.**

- a. Have an annual visitor count of **10,000** or more.
- b. Be on the National Register of Historic Places **and** have an annual visitor count of 5,000 or more.

- 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), 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:** Signs located along interstate highways must be located within 75 air miles of the activity, area, or attraction. Signs along primary highways must be located within 50 air miles of the activity, attraction, or area.
  - No sign may be located in any publicly owned rest area, parkland, 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 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:** Signs facing the same direction of travel shall be spaced a minimum of 1 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.
  - 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.

**Additional Details:** Qualifying activities, sites, and areas may submit a private directional sign permit application to: Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Traffic and Safety, 800 Lincoln Way, Ames, Iowa 50010.

The applications are available upon request from the above office. Upon receipt and following review by the Iowa DOT, each application is evaluated by the Tourist Signing Committee and either approved or denied. Application fees of \$100 per advertising face 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 are official signs located upon the right of way in accordance with the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. These signs are intended to identify activities and sites of significant interest to the traveling public in non-urban areas and from road systems accessed by intersections, not interchanges. There are fees and requirements associated with participation in this program. For information, please refer to a separate publication – “Tourist Oriented Directional Signs”.

## On-premise signs

On-premise signs advertise the principal product sold or activity conducted on the property where the sign is located, including the sale or lease of the property.

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

1. **Permit:** Signs may require approval from the local authority but do not require approval from the Department. However, consulting with the Department is recommended if there are any questions as to whether a sign will be classified as an on-premise sign.
2. **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.

3. **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 (page 1), the following controls apply to off-premise signs.

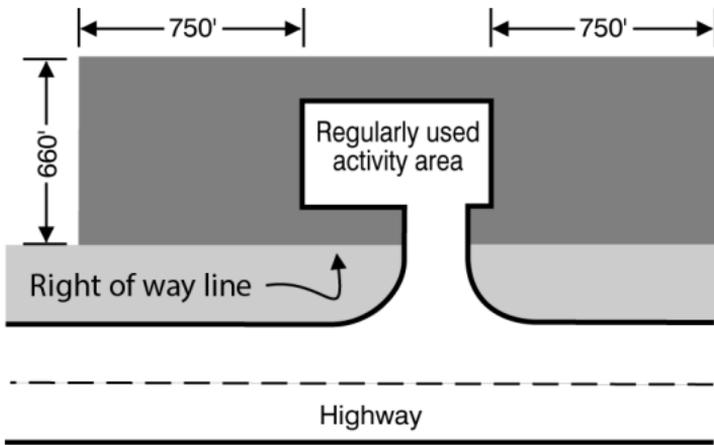
1. **Permit:** A permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.
2. **Iowa Byways:** New signs may not be erected along highways that have been designated as an Iowa Byway. Information about Iowa's byways is available at the Iowa DOT's website at [www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways](http://www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways) or by contacting the Iowa DOT's 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 the portion that 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.

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.

**Figure 1**  
**Unzoned commercial or industrial area**

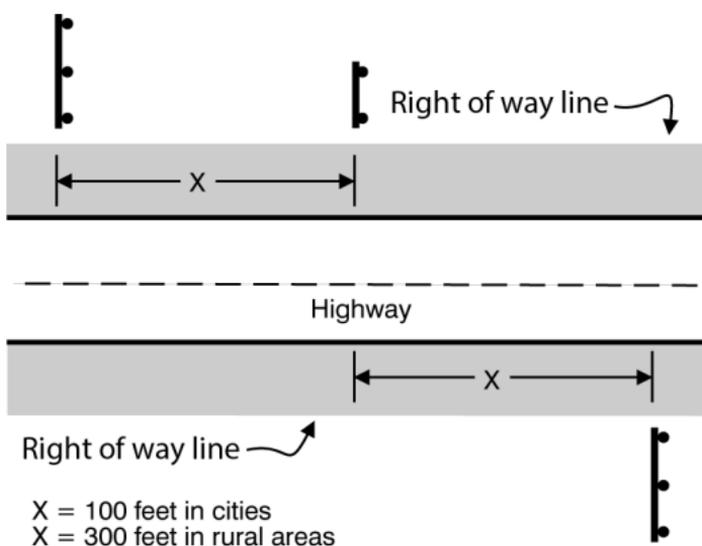


5. **Lights:** In general, flashing, intermittent, or moving lights are prohibited.
6. **Spacing:** In cities, a new sign must

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).

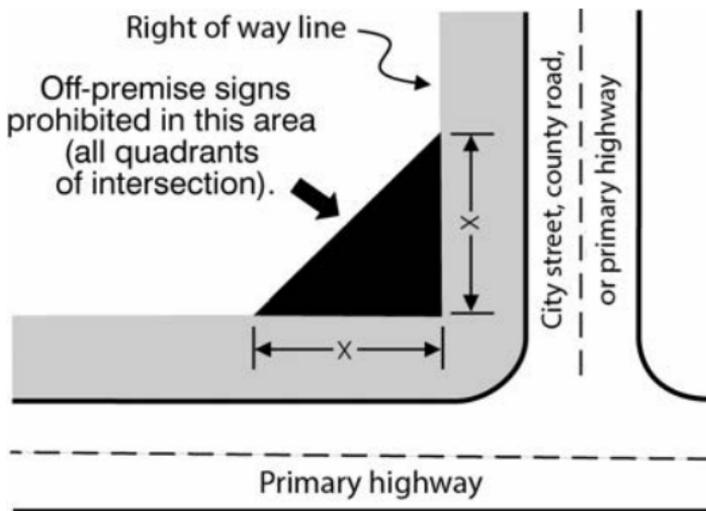
In rural areas, a new sign must be a minimum of 300 feet from any other off-premise sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located (see Figure 2). Where two routes intersect, the sign must meet the spacing requirements from both routes.

**Figure 2**  
**Sign spacing**  
**All measurements are along the centerline of the highway between signs facing the same direction.**



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).

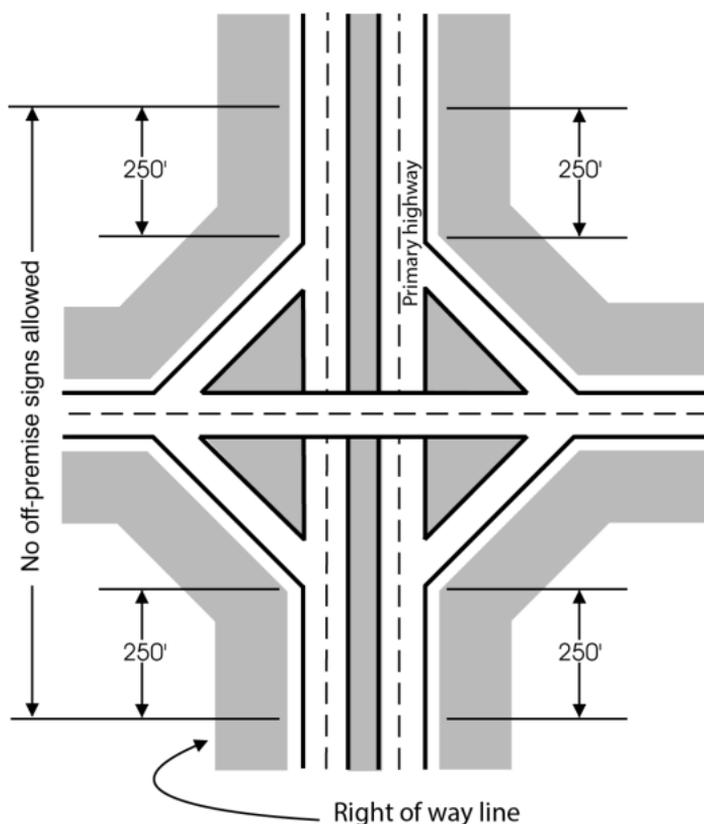
**Figure 3**  
**Sight distance at intersections**  
**(daylight area)**



X = 50 feet in cities    X = 100 feet in rural areas

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**



**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 8 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.

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

1. **A permit is required for each direction a sign is facing.**
2. **Permit fees are set by statute as follows.**

The application fee (nonrefundable), payable at the time of application, is \$100 per advertising face. However if the sign is 32 square feet or less, there is no fee.

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

<b>SIZE (sq. feet)</b>	<b>FEE</b>
0-32	\$0
33-375	\$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.
  - 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 11).

5. **The permit application will require 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.

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 white paint line, not from the road shoulder.)

**NOTE:** To help process your permit more quickly, reference your sign site to identifiable landmarks, and stake the location.

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

### **Illegal signs**

We strive to keep our highways safe and beautiful. If you believe there is a sign illegally erected on private property, please contact us at the phone number listed below. We value public input and will investigate all reports.



## **WHERE TO OBTAIN APPLICATION FORMS AND INFORMATION**

Advertising Management  
Office of Traffic and Safety  
Iowa Department of Transportation  
800 Lincoln Way  
Ames, IA 50010  
Phone: 515-239-1296  
Website: [www.iowadot.gov/iowaroadsigns](http://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.