

**Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES)**

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# Zoning Code – Sign Requirements

**• FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS •**

**Visit the DDES Web site at  
[www.kingcounty.gov/permits](http://www.kingcounty.gov/permits)  
for more information**

DDES Customer  
Information Bulletin #**20A**

King County DDES has created customer information bulletins to inform the general public about the effect of codes and regulations on their projects. These bulletins are not intended to be complete statements of all laws and rules and should not be used as substitutes for them. If conflicts and questions arise, current codes and regulations are final authority. Because the codes and regulations may be revised or amended at any time, consult King County staff to be sure you understand all requirements before beginning work. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that the project meets all requirements of applicable codes and regulations.

For alternate formats, call 206-296-6600.

This bulletin explains the requirements for acquiring a permit to place signs and billboards in unincorporated King County as provided in Chapter 21A.20 of the King County Code [KCC] and other associated chapters of the Zoning Code (KCC Title 21A). It is not intended to be a substitute for the requirements found in the Zoning Code Chapter on signs (KCC Chapter 21A.20), but rather to serve as an introduction to the regulations.

## What is the purpose of sign regulations?

King County regulates the type, number, location, size, and lighting of signs to ensure a balance in the visual environment of the County. While the County recognizes that the purpose of signs is to identify businesses and/or promote products and services to generate business, King County also knows that traffic safety, economic welfare, and aesthetic harmony must be considered. All applications for sign permits are, therefore, reviewed for compliance with the King County Zoning Code as well as the King County Building Code.

## How does the Zoning Code define a sign?

As defined in KCC 21A.06.1085, a sign is any device, structure, fixture or placard that is visible from a public Right-of-Way or surrounding properties and uses graphics, symbols or written copy for the purpose of advertising or identifying any establishment, product, goods or service.

The following lists the signs that are regulated by the Zoning Code and defined in KCC Chapter 21A.06:

- Awning
- Changing message center
- Community bulletin board
- Directional
- Freestanding
- Fuel price
- Identification
- Incidental
- Indirectly illuminated
- Monument
- Off-premise directional
- On-premise
- Permanent residential development
- Portable
- Projecting
- Wall

### When is a sign permit required?

Permits are required whenever applicants are erecting, altering, or relocating signs, with the exception of those signs listed as exempt in KCC 21A.20.030. Such exempt signs are also referenced below.

### Application requirements for a sign permit?

To apply for a sign permit, come to the Permit Center at the King County Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES). Driving directions are available via the DDES Web site at [www.kingcounty.gov/permits](http://www.kingcounty.gov/permits). As part of the application process, customers must submit materials in addition to the application form. These materials are listed in this bulletin under Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits.

When applying for a sign permit, applicants will have to know the land use zoning for the area where the sign will be posted or built. Each land use zone has different restrictions and regulations regarding wall or freestanding signs and illumination. (Refer to KCC Chapters 21A.04, 21A.12, 21A.14, and 21A.20 for further details.) For example, if a sign is to be located in a residential zone, KCC 21A.20.080 establishes specific requirements for signs in residential zones that applicants will need to review.

When planning any sign, customers will also have to calculate the area required for the sign in order to adhere to sign requirements provided in KCC Chapter 21A.20. Depending on the type of sign (freestanding, wall, etc.), the sign area will be calculated differently. See KCC 21A.20.050 for information on how to calculate the area of a sign.

### What types of signs are exempt from the zoning regulations?

The following signs or displays are exempt from the regulations in KCC Chapter 21A.20:

- Historic site markers or plaques, gravestones, and address numbers
- Signs required by Law, for example:
  - Official or legal notices issued and posted by any public agency or court
  - Traffic directional or warning signs
- Plaques, tablets, or inscriptions indicating the name of a building, date of erection, or other commemorative information, if they meet the following criteria:
  - They are an integral part of the building structure or are attached flat to the face of the building
  - They are non-illuminated
  - They do not exceed four square feet in surface area.
- Incidental signs, if they do not exceed two square feet in surface area (Note: This sign requirement does not apply to signs that provide directions, warnings, or other similar information and that are established and maintained by a public agency.) KCC 21A.06.120 defines an incidental sign as a sign, emblem or decal designated to inform the public of goods, facilities or services available on the premises, and includes, but is not limited to, the following:
 

- Restrooms	- Property ownership or management
- Hours of operation	- Phone booths
- Acceptable credit cards	- Recycling containers
- State or Federal flags
- Religious symbols
- The flag of a commercial institution. No more than one flag is permitted per business premises, and the flag must not exceed 20 square feet in surface area.

Note: Even though the signs identified above may be exempt from the regulations in KCC Chapter 21A.20, they must still comply with King County's Building Code (KCC Title 16) and may require a building permit.

**Which kinds of signs are prohibited?**

The following signs or displays are prohibited, except where indicated otherwise in KCC Chapter 21A.20:

- Portable signs such as sandwich/A-frame signs and mobile readerboard signs;
- Private signs on utility poles;
- Signs that may be confused with traffic control signs or signals because of their size, location, movement, content, coloring, or manner of illumination;
- Signs located in the public right-of-way, except where permitted in KCC Chapter 21A.20;
- Posters, pennants, strings of lights, blinking lights, balloons, search lights, and other displays of a carnival nature, except for signs of an architectural nature, or for a limited duration, such as seasonal decorations or grand opening displays, as provided in KCC 21A.20.120; and
- Changing message center signs, where the message changes more frequently than every three minutes.

**What general requirements pertain to signs?**

All signs must be on-premise signs, except for billboards, community bulletin boards, political signs, real estate signs, and special event signs. If the lot is located in a business, office, or industrial zone and does not have public street frontage, one off-premise directional sign is permitted, if it is no more than 16 square feet.

The location for signs, including setbacks from property lines, is determined by KCC Chapter 21A.12 (Development Standards Density and Dimensions).

Fuel price signs are not included in sign area or number limitations in the Office (O), Neighborhood Business (NB), Community Business (CB), Industrial (I), and Regional Business (RB) zones, if the signs do not exceed 20 square feet per street frontage. Fuel price signs in other zones, including residential zones (R, UR and RA), are included in sign area and number limitations. See KCC 21A.20.060B.

Projecting and awning signs are not permitted for uses in resource and residential zones, except for mixed use developments in the R-12 through R-48 zones. In other zones and for mixed use developments in the R-12 through R-48 zones, however, they may be used instead of wall signs if they meet the requirements of KCC 21A.20.060C and KCC 21A.20.115B.

Changing message center signs and time and temperature signs, whether wall signs or freestanding, must not exceed the size permitted for any wall or freestanding sign. They are permitted only in zones NB, CB, RB, O, and I, and they must not exceed the maximum size height permitted in the specific zone.

Directional signs are not included in the sign area or number limitations found in KCC 21A.20.070-110. They must not exceed six square feet in surface area and are limited to one sign for each entrance or exit to surface parking areas or parking structures.

Sign illumination and glare requirements vary, depending on the zone. See KCC 21A.20.060.

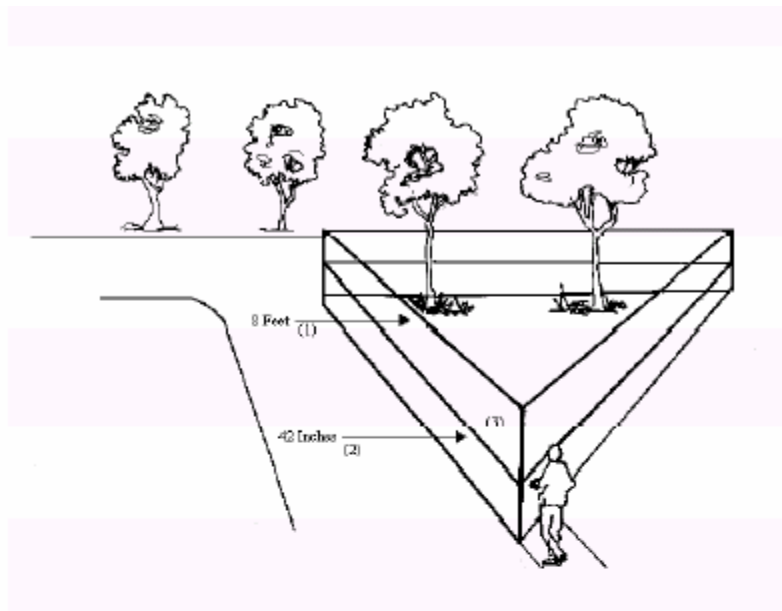
Maximum height for wall signs must not extend above the highest exterior wall upon which the sign is located.

Off-premise directional signs must not exceed four square feet in sign area, except as otherwise permitted by KCC Chapter 21A.20.

In mixed use developments in the NB, CB, RB, or O zones, one permanent residential identification sign is permitted, as long as it does not exceed 32 feet, and it meets the maximum sign area requirements in the zone where the mixed use development is located.

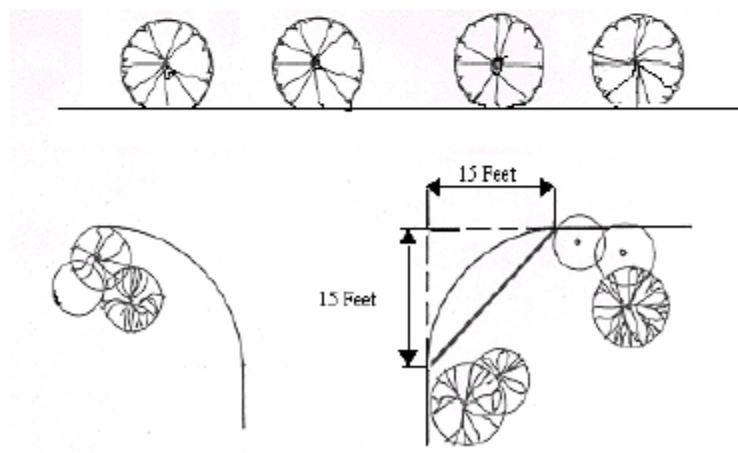
All signs must meet the sight distance requirements of KCC 21A.12.210, except for traffic control signs. A sight distance triangle area must contain no signs between 42 inches and eight feet above the existing street grade.

See the Site Distance Triangle on the following page. The site distance applies to all intersections and site access points and is measured as shown in the Site Distance Triangle (Top View).



- (1) Trees, overhangs, eaves cannot extend below 8 feet
- (2) Hedges, shrubs, retaining walls, fences -- maximum 42 inches high
- (3) Open, unobstructed area

**Site Distance Triangle**



SITE DISTANCE TRIANGLE (TOP VIEW)

**What additional materials are needed to apply for a sign permit?**

To apply for a sign permit, customers must submit materials other than just the permit application form. These additional materials are listed in the following Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits. This checklist should help applicants gather the information needed for a complete permit application package.

**Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits**

The following checklist is for application purposes only and is not intended to replace or duplicate any requirements set forth in King County Codes. All sign permit applications must be accompanied by the following documents:

**A. Affidavit for Application**

The purpose of the Affidavit for Application is to establish the scope of work, who the property owner and/or agent is, and whether the site is in compliance with critical area requirements. The name, address, and telephone number of the owner and the applicant (if different from the owner) are required on the form. It is important to have accurate information recorded so these parties may be contacted when questions arise and the applicant may be notified when the permit is ready to be picked up.

**B. Contractor's registration number**

Washington State Law requires contractors to be licensed with the State. When selecting a contractor, please refer to Bulletin 6, Working with Contractors, for more details.

**C. Property tax account number**

The Property Tax Account Number is an identifying number (commonly known as the "Parcel Number"), which is assigned by the Assessor's Office. DDES uses the number to verify that taxes have been paid. **NO PERMIT MAY BE ISSUED UNLESS TAXES ARE CURRENT.**

**D. Complete legal description of the property**

The complete legal description of the property describes the parcel of land identified by the Property Tax Account Number (or Parcel Number). It should describe what is known as a "Legal Lot" and should be identical to the parcel as found on Assessor's maps and on the required plot plans. See Bulletin 2, Legal Lot, for more information. It is also acceptable to submit a legal description of the parcel as it appears on deeds, real estate contracts, and statutory warranty deeds, or as it appears on the information at the Assessor's Office.

The legal description is used to check the dimensions of a parcel, the uses allowed by the current zoning and any underlying restrictions (such as setbacks from property lines or from easements, lot coverage, or height of buildings). The legal description is also used to check for critical areas and other planning controls. (Note: For projects with multiple parcels, please list each Parcel Number with its corresponding legal description.)

**Are there specific requirements for signs in each land use zone?**

Each land use zone has its own requirements and restrictions for the types of signs that are permitted. For example, community bulletin board signs are permitted in several zones, but the requirements vary. The requirements are most restrictive in Zones R, UR, RA; less restrictive in Zones O and NB; and even less so in Zones CB and I; with the least restrictions in Zone RB. [See KCC 21A.20.065.]

Signs in the Agriculture (A), Forest (F), and Mineral (M) zones are limited to one residential identification sign and one additional sign, with specific sign area requirements. Freestanding signs have height restrictions and require setbacks. [See KCC 21A.20.070.]

The requirements and restrictions for signs in other zones vary with regard to limitations in size, locations, setbacks, number of signs allowed on the same property, illuminations, and freestanding versus wall-mounted options.

For the requirements and restrictions placed on signs in the Regional Business (RB) Zone, refer to KCC 21A.20.110.

### **What is required for temporary signs?**

Signs that will be displayed for a limited duration are permitted, with some restrictions. See KCC 21A.20.120 for a list of temporary signs and their restrictions. Temporary signs do not require building permits, unless specified in the King County Building Code or in KCC Chapter 21A.20. The time allowed for display of the sign varies according to the type of sign. Examples of signs that do not require building permits, and the time period allowed for their display, include the following:

- Grand opening displays (such as signs, posters, pennants, strings of lights, blinking lights, balloons, and searchlights) that announce the opening of a new enterprise or the opening of an enterprise under new management are allowed for up to one month.
- Construction signs [See definition, examples, and restrictions in KCC 21A.20.120] must be removed by the date of first occupancy of the premises, or one-year after placement of the sign, whichever comes first.
- Political signs [For promoting candidates or issues for election, see KCC 21A.20.120 for restrictions.] must be removed within 10 days following the election.
- Real estate signs (most) vary in time duration for display and restrictions, depending on the sign. (Note: A permit is required for some types of real estate signs.)
- Community event signs (for nonprofit sponsored community fairs, festivals, or events) may be displayed for the time period specified in the temporary use permit and must be removed by the event sponsor within two weeks following the end of the community event.

### **What special requirements apply to billboards?**

A billboard, as defined in KCC 21A.06.100, is a “Sign used principally for advertising a business activity, use, product, or service unrelated to the primary use or activity of the property on which the billboard is located.” The billboard includes both the supporting structural framework and attached billboard faces. Off-premise directional or temporary real estate signs are excluded from this definition.

Billboards are subject to different regulations and limitations regarding number, location, height, alteration, and general requirements and restrictions. They are prohibited in some zones and restricted in others. See KCC 21A.20.130 through 180 for details.

KCC 21A.20.170 contains special restrictions regarding “View and Vegetative Screening Protections” pertaining to billboards. For example, a billboard is not allowed to block a direct view of Mt. Rainier or the Olympic Mountains. Billboard owners or agents also are prohibited from removing any vegetative screening on public property or private landscaping that is required by code as a condition of a permit.

If applicants still have questions regarding sign permits after reading this bulletin, please refer to the other bulletins listed on the following page or contact the staff at the information desk at King County DDES at 206-296-6600.

**Other bulletins and telephone numbers that may be helpful**

- Bulletin 1 Building and Development Permit Telephone Numbers
- Bulletin 7 Mobile Home Permits
- Bulletin 8 Commercial and Multi-Family Building Permits
- Bulletin 9 Obtaining a Residential Building Permit
- Bulletin 11 Street Addresses and Road Names
- Bulletin 12 Residential Building Permit Process
- Bulletin 17A Zoning Code: Overview and Summary
- Bulletin 18A Zoning Code: Permitted Use Tables

These and other DDES bulletins are available via the department Web site at [www.kingcounty.gov/permits](http://www.kingcounty.gov/permits).

206-296-6600 DDES customer service

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King County complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you require an accommodation to attend a meeting (two weeks' notice) or require this information in Braille, audiocassette, or large print, please call 206-296-6600 or TTY 206-296-7217.

