

INDUSTRY TRENDS

The International Sign Association

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Difference in Sign Code Success Lies in Involvement

Stayton, Oregon, is a small town, 16 miles from the capital city of Salem, separated primarily by farmland. Knoxville, Tennessee, is a college town, on the outskirts of the country's most visited national park, the Great Smoky Mountains.

But far more separates them than miles and size. Both have undergone recent, significant sign code changes. Stayton is example of the positive influence of business involvement while Knoxville shows what can happen when the process moves forward without continual input from businesses and sign companies.

Stayton also shows the influence that ISA and its Affiliated Associations can bring as a community explores sign codes. Knoxville shows just the opposite—how less effective a “hail Mary” pass is as draconian codes near the finish line.

Let's look at how one sign code issue went so horribly wrong, while the business environment in another community was strengthened through better codes.

What Triggered the Sign Code **CHANGES**

Stayton, OR



Some 65 businesses in the community received letters that they were in violation of the sign code and were facing fines. They sought assistance from Kelly Schreiber, the local Chamber of Commerce executive director, who in turn contacted ISA's James Carpentier.

Knoxville, TN



The city council appointed a citizen Sign Ordinance Task Force to review sign regulations. The chair and vice chair were council members. Sign companies were included on the task force, as was a representative from Scenic Knoxville. The task force met multiple times over a three-year period before proposing amendments that would reduce the blanket 50-foot limit on sign heights.

How the **PROCESS** Unfolded

Stayton, OR



While the council was open to amending its sign codes related to temporary and portable signs—which had brought the violation notice—Schreiber and Carpentier pushed for additional changes that would create a stronger business environment. Carpentier studied the existing sign codes and offered expert advice on improvements that could be made. Schreiber took those changes to the task force.

Knoxville, TN



After the task force presented its amendments, the city council forwarded it to the Metropolitan Planning Commission, which made its own changes. The proposal then went to the city council, which made additional changes. Each successive change lowered the sign heights for pole signs. The task force had proposed sign heights of 40 and 30 feet, based on location. The city council had those heights down to 35 feet with some as low as 10. At this point, ISA's James Carpentier was asked to testify before the final city council vote. He was able to successfully argue to increase the 10-foot sign height to 15.



SIGN CODES:

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Between 2013 and 2015, the number of sign company professionals who say the outlook for state and local codes has improved has doubled. The number of those

Business Community INVOLVEMENT

Stayton, OR

 Local sign companies, affected businesses and the Chamber of Commerce were heavily involved each step of the way. Schreiber and three local business leaders served on the sign code committee and argued for the importance of changes to improve the business environment. Temporary signs were vital in a community with only one avenue—the newspaper—in which businesses could advertise sales and specials.

Knoxville, TN

 Business leaders were split; with some seeing the sign changes as negatively affecting any potential competitors while leaving them unharmed since existing signs would be grandfathered in. The local chamber of commerce initially supported the task force changes, but were unhappy with the further reductions in sign height.

The End RESULT

Stayton, OR

 The community not only has better ordinances related to temporary and portable signs; it also now allows electronic message centers to change every 8 seconds. “With James on board, we knew we could bite off the whole thing,” Schreiber said. “There were other things that needed to be changed.”

Knoxville, TN

 Any new business will have to alter its sign heights to meet the new standards—an added expense to remove and replace the poles. This could potentially prevent new businesses from entering the town. Also, Carpentier believes the city may have opened itself up to lawsuits because the code is not in line with the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*. “There are a lot of exceptions created and a lot of things that are problems,” Carpentier said. “I found it interesting that the attorney would recommend it, even though the chances are good that it would be found to be in violation of Reed.”

Lessons

LEARNED:

1

ISA and Affiliated Association involvement early in the process can be the difference in positively influencing sign codes. In Stayton, ISA was involved from the beginning. In Knoxville, Carpentier was asked to come in to testify at the final vote. While he was able to make one small change in Knoxville, he was able to make significant changes in the Stayton code.

2

Broad business involvement—including sign companies—is key. In Stayton, business leaders served on the task force and the local chamber was heavily involved. In Knoxville, business community support was split.

3

Research makes a compelling argument. Publications like the “Economic Value of On-Premise Signs” can help community leaders understand how signs build a strong business environment. That argument won in Stayton. ISA and the Signage Foundation Inc. offer numerous resources to help communities develop better sign codes: www.signs.org/localofficials.



STATS • FACTS

who believe the regulatory environment is worsening has dropped from 39% in 2013 to 24% in 2015, according to the 2015 State of the Industry Report from ISA. •