

**PLANNING COMMISSION
STAFF REPORT**

Date: May 8, 2025

To: Reno City Planning Commission

Subject: Staff Report (For Possible Action – Recommendation to City Council): Case No. TXT23-00002 (Title 18 – Signs) – Ordinance amending the Reno Municipal Code Title 18, “Annexation and Land Development,” specifically in Chapter 18.02 “Zoning Districts,” Section 18.02.602, entitled “General Overlay Districts,” Chapter 18.05 “Signs,” Section 18.05.103, entitled “Location of Permanent On-Premise Signs”, Section 18.05.107, entitled “Permit Required”, Section 18.05.108, entitled “Exempted On-Premises Permanent Signs”, Section 18.05.109, entitled “On-Premises Signs Prohibited”, Section 18.05.112, entitled “Removal of Abandoned of On-Premises Signs”, Section 18.05.113, entitled “Permanent On-Premises Sign Regulations by Zoning District”, Section 18.05.114, entitled “Additional Regulations for Animated Signs”, Section 18.05.115, entitled “Nonconforming On-Premises”, Section 18.05.118, entitled “Alteration, Enlargement, or Relocation of On-Premises Sign”, add a new Section 18.05.123, entitled “Content Neutrality and Substitution”, Chapter 18.08 “Administration and Procedures,” Section 18.08.602, entitled “Minor Site Plan Review”, and Chapter 18.09 “Rules of Construction and Definitions,” Article 4, entitled “All Other Terms Defined”, in order to remove the sign regulations from the Gaming Overlay, amend the on-premise sign regulations and exemptions for more clarity and consistency among allowances, allow for animated signs associated with schools, address content neutrality, address the relocation of signs relating to public projects, and amend and include certain definitions relating to signs; together with matters which pertain to or are necessarily connected therewith.

From: Lauren Knox, Senior Planner

Ward #:	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6
Case No.:	TXT23-00002
Applicant:	City of Reno
APN:	N/A

Request: Amending Reno Municipal Code Title 18, “Annexation and Land Development,” in order to remove the sign regulations from the Gaming Overlay, amend the on-premise sign regulations and exemptions for more clarity and consistency among allowances, allow for animated signs associated with schools, address content neutrality, address the relocation of signs relating to public projects, and amend and include certain definitions relating to signs.

Location: Citywide

Proposed Motion: Based upon compliance with the applicable findings, I move to recommend that City Council approve the text amendment by ordinance.

Summary: In June of 2022, City Council initiated several text amendments to the Title 18 Annexation and Land Development Code, including one to address sign standards. Draft amendments to the sign standards have been developed and reviewed through a technical advisory committee and through a series of stakeholder and public outreach meetings. Review of the proposed changes by the Planning Commission is being requested prior to review by the City Council. The proposed changes, along with annotations describing the change and intent, are identified in redline excerpts from the Development Code document provided as **Exhibit A – Ordinance** to this staff report.

Background: Council adopted a new Title 18 Annexation and Land Development Code (i.e. Zoning Code RENOvation) on January 13, 2021. The key objectives of the update were to implement the Master Plan, make the code more user-friendly, and establish a more predictable and transparent review process. Following adoption of this code, staff has been undertaking several subject-specific text amendments, including an amendment to the sign regulations, at the direction of City Council who initiated the text amendment in June of 2022.

Initially, staff had assumed a full rewrite of the Sign Code would be necessary due to the complexity of regulating signage. After stakeholder meetings and input from the sign community in 2023, it was determined that a full rewrite was unnecessary; however, there are specific amendments and insertions needed, particularly to *Table 5-1 Sign Regulations by Zoning District* in order to create a more clear and consistent code and address new needs that have arisen.

Discussion: In June of 2022, Reno City Council initiated a Sign Code text amendment. Through stakeholder meetings held in the spring of 2023, it was determined that a full code rewrite was unnecessary, but that the sign standards in *Table 5-1* needed to be simplified. Additionally, there were a number of inconsistencies and implementation issues that needed to be addressed. Through this initial feedback, it was also determined that no changes were needed relating to off-premise advertising. Staff developed the first draft of proposed amendments to address the concerns

expressed in the initial meetings, as well as issues with code implementation that planning staff has encountered.

The first draft of proposed redlines to Title 18 was circulated publicly and staff held stakeholder meetings to review the changes in the fall of 2024. This draft was also brought before the Planning Commission and City Council for feedback. Subsequently, a draft incorporating the feedback received from the public, stakeholders, the Planning Commission, and the City Council was developed and circulated for review in January 2025. Staff held additional public stakeholder meetings in February of 2025 to review the latest proposed changes.

The iterative process has included multiple points of feedback; all of which were used to develop and refine draft changes to sign related regulations in Title 18. The proposed changes, along with annotations describing the change and intent, are identified in redline excerpts from the Development Code document provided as **Exhibit A –Ordinance** to this staff report.

The following includes a general summary of the proposed changes:

- Removed allowance for all parcels within the Gaming Overlay to have virtually unlimited signage and limited this allowance to nonrestricted gaming facilities.
- Included an exemption for on-premises signs related to government/official signs that are in furtherance of the official duties of the City of Reno or Washoe County.
- Updated triggers for entitlement review to be consistent and were changed to a Major Site Plan Review (MSPR), as this entitlement type is more applicable to signage compared to a Conditional Use Permit (CUP). The usage of a MSPR is also intended to help ensure that site specific characteristics relating to the sign, such as height, size, and illumination are reviewed for impacts to neighboring developments, which attempts to better ensure content neutrality in the signage review. The MSPR process still requires public noticing, a public hearing, and review by the Planning Commission in the same manner as a CUP. In some instances, MSPR requirements were amended to a MSRP for consistency in signage review types.
- The Table on Sign Regulations by Zoning District was amended for overall clarity, as well as consistency in measurement types and standards, generally as follows:
 - Provided clearer regulations
 - Created more simplified and consistent standards including how the allowance of sign size is determined. For example, many of the different districts had different items that were regulated as part of the standards, like letter height, copy area, sign length, linear frontage, etc. Many of these were removed, in favor of more consistent standards throughout each district.
 - Regulations were simplified where there were multiple standards or ambiguity, such as different size allowances for arterial street adjacency, nearby roadway speed, or parcel size.

- Certain zoning district standards were made consistent if they were similar in terms of intensity, such as Neighborhood Commercial and Professional Office, or the Employment Districts (Industrial, Industrial Commercial, Mixed Employment and Mixed-Use Airport).
- The Mixed-Use Airport (MA), Parks, Greenways, and Open Space (PGOS), and Unincorporated Transition (UT-) districts did not have sign standards, which were added to the table.
- Incorporated footnotes directly into the table where possible
- Added sign requirements districts that had been inadvertently left out.
- Included clear verbiage that allows for legally established nonrestricted gaming facilities to have unlimited signage.
- Included verbiage regarding the number of freestanding signs allowed to be based on parcel or commercial center, which memorializes an existing process.
- Amended illumination standards for the residential and UT zoning districts to allow for indirect illumination only.
- Provided the allowance for schools to have digital signs, including additional requirements to mitigate impacts to neighboring properties.
- Verbiage included to address the relocation of on-premises signs as it relates to for public projects,
- Add a statement on "content neutrality" to address federal laws relating to freedom of speech as it relates to signage.
- Modified/added sign definitions, including a definition for "Monument Sign," clarification for "Freestanding Sign," and including public property in the "Directional Sign" definition.
- General clarifying language where necessary for more consistent and clearer implementation

Public/Stakeholder Feedback

Public stakeholder meetings were held throughout the Sign Code review process. Stakeholder meetings with the public included the following:

- March 15, 2023 1:00 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.
- March 15, 2023 3:00 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.
- September 23, 2024 12:00 p.m. -1:00 p.m.
- September 24, 2024 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.
- September 24, 2024 6:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m.
- September 27, 2024 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.
- September 27, 2024 12:00-1:00 p.m.
- November 18, 2024 12 p.m. – 1 p.m. – Downtown Business Stakeholders
- November 19, 2024 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. – Downtown Business Stakeholders
- February 10, 2025 from 9 a.m. – 10 a.m.

- February 10, 2025 from 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.
- February 13, 2025 from 12 p.m. – 1 p.m.
- Meetings were also held with the WCSD and Scenic Nevada on the topic of digital/animated signs for schools

Written public feedback received by April 22, 2025, from the various draft redlines throughout the process can be found at **Exhibit B** to this staff report. Most of the proposed changes were either supported by feedback received from stakeholders, elicited no expressed concerns, or minor amendments were offered, aside from two key issues: the virtually unlimited sign allowance currently associated with the Gaming Overlay and the proposed allowance of digital signage for schools.

Below is a general summary of issues/concerns raised and how the issues/concerns were reviewed or addressed. Additionally, a brief discussion of the key issues follows the generally written feedback summary.

General written feedback summary:

Issue/concern	How the issue/concern was addressed
The allowance of virtually unlimited signage. <i>(Key issue discussed in more detail in the staff report body below)</i>	While staff's initial proposed draft attempted to reduce the area that virtually unlimited signage was allowed, concerns were expressed regarding the proposed allowance in the Mixed-Downtown Entertainment District (MD-ED) zoning district. The proposed redlines remove this allowance from the full Gaming Overlay, and only allow for virtually unlimited signage for Casino uses only.
Proposed allowance of digital/animated signs for schools. <i>(Key issue discussed in more detail in the staff report body below)</i>	The Washoe County School District (WCSD) requested the allowance of digital/animated signs for schools. Council provided direction to work with the WCSD staff to develop regulations that would allow for this type of signage. WCSD and City of Reno staff worked together to allow for the signage with specific requirements to mitigate the impacts to nearby residents. Public feedback indicates that restrictions above what staff has proposed.

Removal or modification of signage to conform to current code should be required when a business stops operating or a building is demolished at a location.	Current code contains verbiage regarding the removal of abandoned on-premise signs, as well as the right to maintain and continue the use of a nonconforming on-premise sign. If a business leaves a location, the signage would no longer be considered on-premise signage, and would be addressed through current regulations in terms of whether the structure itself is able to be maintained and the sign copy altered. The proposed amendments do not alter verbiage related to this concern, as staff believes what is in place is adequate.
Casino unlimited signage allowance clarifying language.	In the most recent draft, the unlimited signage allowance is proposed to only be allowed in conjunction with a nonrestricted gaming facility. Proposed amendments address this by created a use-specific sign standard for nonrestricted gaming facilities. Representatives from the gaming industry requested additional language to ensure that it was clear that the use-specific standards supersede the regular zoning district standards for this use type. A footnote was included in Table 5-1 to address this concern.
Comments related to banked receipts for off-premise advertising.	The proposed amendments do not alter Chapter 18.05 Article 2, which contains regulations regarding off-premise advertising. The concern is not addressed in this amendment, as staff is not amending off-premise (billboard) advertising at this time.
Temporary sign regulations do not allow for realty signs to remain for longer than 95 days.	In the 2021 RENOvation code update standards related to temporary signage were amended to address recent case law related to the Reed et al. v. Town of Gilbert, Arizona case. Essentially, regulations related to signage cannot be treated differently based on messaging, thus we are not able to call out realty sign standards separate from other temporary signs. However, staff believes realty signs would fall under existing signage allowances for on-premise advertising. Section 18.05.108 exempts certain signage in residential zones which should satisfy the concern for residential realty signs. Each commercial business is also allowed a certain amount of signage, which should accommodate realty signs for commercial businesses as well.

Key Issue: Unlimited signage allowance

Title 18 currently allows for virtually unlimited signage in the entire Gaming Overlay District, which consists of approximately 2,000 acres, with both gaming and non-gaming related uses. In

the first public draft of the proposed changes, staff proposed to amend the standards to remove the unlimited allowance from the full Gaming Overlay and align the allowance with the initial intent which was to be as similar to the previous code (prior to 2021) as possible. This meant that unlimited signage was proposed to only be allowed in the Mixed-Use Downtown Entertainment District (MD-ED) and for nonrestricted gaming uses (casinos).

Staff received a significant amount of negative feedback over the unlimited signage in Downtown. Planning Commission requested that staff engage with Downtown businesses to understand if this allowance was utilized and needed. Staff engaged with the Downtown business community and undertook an internal review of existing signage, which indicated that the unlimited allowance was not used often, if at all.

In the most recent draft of proposed changes, the allowance for unlimited signage for every parcel in the Gaming Overlay was removed and replaced with only allowing unlimited signage for nonrestricted gaming uses.

Key Issue: Digital/animated signs for schools

During the stakeholder review process, the Washoe County School District (WCSD) indicated that they desired to be allowed digital/animated signage at their school campuses. During the December 2024 meeting, Council provided feedback to staff to work with the WCSD to draft verbiage that would allow for digital signage for schools.

The draft proposed changes include the allowance for schools to have digital/animated signage and includes specific requirements to attempt to mitigate the impact to neighboring properties. The specific requirements, along with the intent and reasoning behind the requirement, include the following:

Proposed School Sign Regulation	Intent and Reasoning
Sign operating hours	The proposed redlines limit the operating hours of the sign from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. This timeframe would accommodate the typical timeframe that people would be viewing the sign while commuting, during drop-off or pick-up of students, or generally outside. This timeframe also attempts to accommodate typical events that may be held at school facilities. Furthermore, the sign brightness is greatly limited between sunset and sunrise, which will further reduce impacts from the evening hour sign operation.
Sign brightness	Sign brightness is proposed to be limited to 150 nits between sunset and sunrise. This is similar to existing nit allowances for gas station electronic displays. It has been stated by industry professionals that this is a conservative brightness level.

Sign size limitation	Proposed redlines allow for a maximum size of 32 square feet for the animated portion of a sign. This would limit the potential impacts to neighborhoods. Additionally, this size is consistent with other local jurisdiction size allowances. Consistency between jurisdictions is beneficial for the WCSD in their administration of internal regulations. Sign height, total square footage allowance, and total number of signs would be subject to the underlying zoning district. Many schools are located in residential zoning districts which will limit the total height to six feet tall, and monument style only.
Content display	Content display is proposed to remain for no less than eight seconds before the content changes, and no video display, flashing, or blinking is allowed. The eight second timeframe is also consistent with both Washoe County and the City of Sparks, which will provide the WCSD with needed consistency.

The additional requirements also specify that animated signs must follow the existing animated signs standards in code, aside from the requirement of a MSPR when within 750 feet of residentially zoned parcels, as this would be applicable to most schools. Staff believes the additional discretionary review is unwarranted with the inclusion of specific requirements that would typically be conditioned with a MSPR.

Even with the requirements for schools related to digital/animated signs, concerns were raised during the engagement process. Scenic Nevada provided specific feedback regarding the digital school sign allowances and many suggestions were included in the requirements. Concerns expressed included requiring stricter hours of sign operation, more time between message changes, signs to be turned off when school is not in session, further limiting the number of digital signs, the potential for additional businesses to want the same type of signage in residential areas, general concerns over compatibility, public safety with regards to distracted drivers, sign brightness, public health impacts from the brightness, and viewsheds.

During the most recent public engagement, there was also general support for the allowance of digital signs for schools, particularly with the additional requirements. Overall, staff attempted to balance the WCSD's needs with public concerns.

Analysis: This staff report provides a general overview of the proposed changes to the standards specific to the Gaming Overlay in Section 18.02, the on-premise sign standards in Section 18.05, and the MSPR requirements related to signs within 150 feet of the Truckee River in Section 18.06 of the Development Code. Specific redlines with annotations explaining the changes in more detail are provided in **Exhibit A – Ordinance**.

Findings:

General Review Criteria: The decision-making body shall review all development applications for compliance with the applicable general review criteria stated below.

- 1) Consistency with the Reno Master Plan: The proposed development shall be consistent with the Reno Master Plan. The decision-making authority:
 - a. Shall weigh competing plan goals, policies, and strategies; and
 - b. May approve an application that provides a public benefit even if the development is contrary to some of the goals, policies, or strategies in the Reno Master Plan.
- 2) Compliance with Title 18: The proposed development shall comply with all applicable standards in this Title, unless the standard is lawfully modified or varied. Compliance with these standards is applied at the level of detail required for the subject submittal.
- 3) Mitigates Traffic Impacts: The project mitigates traffic impacts based on applicable standards of the City of Reno and the Regional Transportation Commission.
- 4) Provides Safe Environment: The project provides a safe environment for pedestrians and people on bicycles.
- 5) Rational Phasing Plan. If the application involves phases, each phase of the proposed development contains all of the required streets, utilities, landscaping, open space, and other improvements that are required to serve or otherwise accompany the completed project, and shall not depend on subsequent phases for those improvements.

Amendments to Text of Title 18: Text amendments shall be in substantial conformance with the statement of purpose and intent for this Title, as set forth in Chapter 18.01 Article 2, *Purpose*, and the Master Plan:

The general purpose of this Title is to promote the public health, safety, and welfare by providing appropriate and reasonable controls for the development and use of lands in Reno, while also protecting the rights of property owners. This Title also is intended to:

- (a) Implement the policies, goals, and strategies adopted by the City of Reno, including those set forth in the Reno Master Plan and other adopted plans;
- (b) Promote, preserve, and protect environmental quality as a critical element in Reno's quality of life and encourage the wise use of natural resources;
- (c) Conserve and enhance the architecture, history, pedestrian-orientation, mixed-use, and urban character of Downtown Reno, and promote its role as regional government, civic, entertainment, and tourist center;
- (d) Promote economic development and the improvement of property, with priority given to adaptive reuse and redevelopment projects in Downtown Reno and urban mixed-use areas;

- (e) Conserve and enhance the character of Reno's established residential neighborhoods through mitigation of adverse factors, promotion of a balanced mix of housing types, and through appropriately scaled and planned infill development;
- (f) Encourage innovative, affordable, and quality residential development so that growing demand for housing may be met by greater variety in type, design, and layout of dwellings, and by conservation and more efficient use of open space ancillary to such dwellings;
- (g) Encourage quality, nonresidential development that preserves and protects the character of the community, including its natural landscape, and that minimizes objectionable noise, glare, odor, traffic, and other impacts of such development, especially when adjacent to residential uses;
- (h) Facilitate adequate provision of transportation, water, wastewater, electricity, gas, communications, schools, parks, trails, stormwater management, and other public requirements; and
- (i) Provide the economic and social advantages gained from a comprehensively planned use of land resources.

Attachments:

Exhibit A – Ordinance

Exhibit B – Written Public Feedback Received by April 22, 2025