

REVISED LEGISLATIVE DIGEST
(Amended in Committee: 6/20/2011)

[Planning Code - Vintage Signs]

Ordinance amending Section 608.14 of the San Francisco Planning Code to 1) authorize vintage signs; and 2) making environmental findings, Planning Code Section 302 findings, and findings of consistency with the General Plan and Planning Code Section 101.1.

Existing Law

Planning Code Section 608.14 provides that the Planning Commission may authorize the restoration, reconstruction, maintenance, and technological improvement of a historic sign through the Conditional Use procedure. A historic sign is defined as one which depicts, in text or graphic form, a particular residential, business, cultural, economic, recreational, or other valued resource that the Commission finds to be of historic value and contributes to the visual identity and historic character of the City. The sign must (1) depict a use, person, place, thing, cultural icon, or other valued character or characteristic of the City, (2) be located within a historic sign district, (2) be at least 40 years old, (3) not visually obstruct or significantly detract from a City landmark or public vista, (4) not be larger than or appear to be more visually prominent than the sign that previously existed, and (5) is maintained in good condition, repair and working order.

Amendments to Current Law

This legislation would amend Section 608.14 to redefine a sign subject to this section as a "vintage" sign and delete the requirement that a vintage sign be located within a historic sign district. Unless the application for the sign is required to be referred to the Historic Preservation Commission by the Charter or the Planning Code, it need not be referred.

Once authorized by the Planning Commission as a vintage sign, the sign would not be subject to the other requirements of Article 6. Any change of copy from the vintage copy approved by the Planning Commission, or any enlargement or alteration, would be considered an abandonment of the vintage sign authorization and the sign would then be considered a new sign subject to all the requirements of Article 6. The addition of a frame to a painted wall sign would not be considered an enlargement or alteration.

Removal of a vintage sign would require Conditional Use authorization. A three-dimensional vintage sign may be relocated with Conditional Use authorization. However, relocation of a general advertising sign may not use Section 608.14, but rather is subject to the relocation provisions of Section 2.21 of the San Francisco Administrative Code.

Background Information

The look and style of signs have evolved over time. For that reason, a sign that has existed in a particular place for years gives continuity to the public space and becomes part of the community memory. In an era where signs are mostly uniform, a historic sign can add some individuality to the neighborhood in which it exists and also to the City as a whole. Michael J. Auer, in his article "The Preservation of Historic Signs," notes:

Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners – or from many vantage points across the city – for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.

This legislation would allow a vintage neighborhood sign that the Planning Commission considers a cultural artifact to be restored and maintained whether or not it is located in a historic district. The Conditional Use process would allow neighborhood residents and other members of the public to provide input on the designation and removal of a vintage sign.