

# APPENDIX D

## Stakeholder Interviews: Notes and Observations

**Update to the Town of Dedham Sign Code**  
Harriman  
Steve Cecil Planning and Design

June 4, 2020

**Dedham Signage Code Planning Study**  
 Stakeholder Interviews: Notes and Observations

**Introduction**

The Planning Team reviewed and evaluated issues and practices in administering Dedham’s Signage Code. Part of this review and evaluation process involved interviewing stakeholders. These stakeholders were identified by the Town Planning and Zoning Department staff. Twenty-one of the twenty-five individuals on the list responded or engaged in discussions. Messages, invitations, and follow-up calls have been extended to the other four stakeholders and these individuals will be interviewed if they choose to respond in the future.

The following individuals were either interviewed or submitted written comments:

Anita Andreassi	Resident (Abutting Route 1)
Ken Cimeno	Town of Dedham, Building Commissioner
Heather Dudko	Sign Company Owner/Consultant
Bryce Gibson	Dedham Review Advisory Board, Chair
Amy Haelsen	Executive Director, Dedham Square Circle
John Haven	Dedham Review Advisory Board, Member
Fred Johnson	Town of Dedham, A. Building Commissioner
Jim McGrail	Planning Board, former ZBA Chair
Rich McGuinness	Resident (Abutting Route 1)
Ralph Perelis	Senior V.P. Construction & Development Linear Retail Properties, LLC
Georgio Petruziello	Dedham Developer/Property Owner
Jessica Porter	Planning Board, former ZBA Member
Bruce Rabe	Resident (Abutting Route 1)
Rento Reda	East Dedham Commercial Property Owner
Chris Ryan	Oakdale Square Alliance
Maureen Kelly Sargent	Oakdale Sq. Business Owner
Steven Schwede	Fast Signs of Needham
Peter Springer	Precinct 5 Vice Chair/Oakdale Sq. Alliance
Scott Steeves	Zoning Board of Appeals, Chair
Dave Webster	Federal Realty (Dedham Plaza)
Peter Zhaka	Dedham Lawyer

The interviews were informal discussions, using a list of introductory questions to begin each session. These included:

1. How are you involved in the process of regulating signage in town, including the review and approval process?
2. What do you view as problems or issues with the actual signage in town?

3. Are you aware of any specific issues or problems with the current Sign Code?
4. Are you engaged in the submittal, review and approval process, and how?
5. Do you understand how the review and approval process works, and do you see any problems or things that could be improved?
6. Looking forward, do you anticipate issues in the future with signage?

The following summary and observations have been compiled by reviewing the notes taken and messages received. They represent both repeated and distinct comments that arose, and have been organized as a series of topics. The observations for each topic seek to encapsulate key ideas and issues gleaned from the interviews by the interviewer that should be taken into account in prospective changes in the Signage Code and its implementation procedures.

The topics are addressed in this order:

- Clarity, Completeness and Interpretation of the Code
- Quality of Design and Problematic Signs
- Process of Application, Review and Approval
- Role and Influence of the Design Review Advisory Board (DRAB)
- Role and Influence of the Zoning Board of Appeals Board (ZBA)
- Potential Future Issues
- Sign-Related Issues and Opportunities

## **Topics, Comments and Observations**

### Clarity, Completeness and Interpretation of the Code

#### Comments

- Sandwich Boards - Sandwich boards for civic and non-profit events are common throughout Town, and should probably be explicitly allowed and addressed in the Code.
- Positive experience and assessment of the existing Code - It is a pretty good code, but will benefit from some "tweaks"; a large overhaul is not warranted. Note that this was a consistent comment among many of the interviewees, including those representing a range of stakeholders.
- Relationship among graphics, sign, lighting and graphics - Some businesses have been adept at using graphic and lighting techniques to expand their effective sign area by brand-linked graphics, color schemes, and lighting so that an entire facade becomes a sign. Regulations might address this.
- Public art versus business signage - There have been challenges in interpreting the Sign Code relative to public art, and whether a mural is a business sign. The Oakdale Square neighborhood mural and the Horse Thieves Tavern artwork are cases in point. Additional clarity would be

helpful. A Parks and Recreation initiative for public art encountered issues in the approval process, which was not clear.

- Signs not requiring DRAB review - Where the sign standards are already clear or are in an approved Sign Plan, the permitting and approval process is very effective.
- Some business signs are appropriate for 24-hour lighting, many not - The Code could be more specific about illumination time limits and enforcement. Some uses, such as ATM machines, are appropriate for 24-hour signs, but most are not. The brand identity of chain stores, for example, will not suffer if they are not visible when the establishment is not open.
- Too many referrals to the ZBA - If the signage code were more clear and comprehensive about acceptable signs, few applicants would need to appeal to the ZBA for waivers.
- Changeable message signs - The approach to changeable message signs and integration of LED and digital technology is not clear and needs to be updated.
- Graphic design and fabricators - Some of the low-quality signs are related to products and designs provided by poor quality sign companies.
- Sign location standards - The current restrictions on sign location often don't work well, due to the configuration and interpretation of building shapes, and the like. There should be a better way to adapt the sign standards to odd shape lots and building configurations.
- Sign mounting height - The limitation on some signs to 25 feet maximum seems arbitrary and results in some impractical outcomes and cause for waivers, in some instances.
- Roof height - Restrictions on signs relative to roof heights create interpretation issues for buildings with multiple roofs.
- Proportions and allowable sign areas relative to frontage - Actual site configurations make interpretation of these rules challenging for buildings with multiple frontages.
- Definitions and tables - The definitions are not thoroughly coordinated with the Tables.
- Modifications and clarity - The incremental modifications have made the Code organization and flow of ideas more difficult to discern.
- Uniformity versus variation - The intent to limit ranges of colors and font sizes on awning is understandable, but variety is an important aspect of commercial districts.
- Subdistricts - The idea of tailoring sign requirements to different subdistricts and neighborhoods is a positive aspect of the Code.
- Commercial/residential boundary areas - Areas where commercial uses and residential uses are in close proximity need special regulations or consideration to provide for compatible signage and illumination solutions.
- Businesses with rear parking lots - Some businesses have parking lots entered off of side streets, behind the principal entrances, such as the bank along Washington Street and the Elm Street parking entrance. Dedham Mall has similar issues This could be addressed by the Code, rather than waivers or non-compliant, non-permitted signs.
- Limitation on colors - One type of sign is limited to 4 colors, not including black and white. The purpose and benefit of this is not clear.

- Neon signs - There doesn't seem to be a good reason to exclude neon signs.
- Appendix and Table footnotes - some of the footnotes are unclear.
- Signage, zoning and the RDO - The basic signage approach seems reasonable, but the purpose and alignment of the RDO versus Highway Business doesn't seem useful at this point.
- Completeness and coherence, Table 1 and Table 2 - These tables don't have all of the applicable sign types and some important information that could be better presented.
- Corner lots and signage area - Some corner lots may need an additional allocation of signage area because of their scale and visibility, as was presented on behalf of the Walgreen's site at Route 1 and Elm Street.
- Headings and content - The headings and regulations under Section 237-18 don't seem logical.
- Generic "waiver" for certain pre-existing signs - The relevance and benefit of the formula for reduction in area of replacement of some pre-existing signs does not seem consistent with the purposes of the Code, and should be re-examined.
- Access from frontage and from back parking lots - The Code inadequately addresses the need for some establishments to have both "front" and "back" signage that is adequately large and visible.

#### *Observations*

*The current effort should be considered as a targeted refinement focused on making the Code (and the process of implementing it) clearer and more consistent. This is particularly in regards to Definitions, Tables, standards for sign area allocations and sign sizes, and consideration of multi-tenant and multi-frontages or buildings that have multiple entrances. Some methods are being used to controvert signage Code purposes, such as using lighting, graphics and architecture so that the entire facade or portions of a facade become a branded communication device, in excess of the sign size limitations. In this regard, architectural design and sign design review need to be coordinated.*

#### Quality of Design and Problematic Signs

##### *Comments*

- Allocation of sign area among multiple tenants - Because the total allowable business sign area is allocated by property rather than by space frontage or floor area, for example, landlords may inequitably allocate their sign area allotment among tenants, particularly leaving some new tenants with inadequate sign area that can result in appeals to the ZBA to obtain reasonable sign sizes from a business and communication vantage point.
- Calculation of allowable sign area - This is complicated if there are existing signs that have not been measured, and if frontage and other information is not readily available.
- Examples of other successful communities in gaining higher quality signage - Dedham should consider the relative success of some other communities in engaging large companies and chains to modify standard sign designs as well as the buildings, with Westwood being a nearby case in point, such as the new Islington CVS.
- Controversy - The new gun shop sign in Oakdale and the Hooter's sign on Route 1 were the focus of community debate and concern. A proposed are mural on the rear of the Motherbrook

Arts Center became a subject of regulatory concern after a neighbor complained about the subject matter, according to one commenter.

- Signage Plan - The Signage Plan mechanism works very well, and allows predictability.
- Lack of adequate business signage allowed - The Code is too restrictive from a business vantage point in regards to practical needs, such as properties visible from two streets.
- Route 1 is a consistent focus of concerns about sign size and design - Many comments focused on the misalignment of the regulations with the signage along Route 1, and the poor-quality signage in terms of scale and other factors, which creates a chaotic impression.
- The "strip" image of Boston's segment of Route 1 - The poor-quality site and sign designs between Route 109 and the Dedham border gets confused with Dedham, which is a better environment.
- The quality and sophistication of signage seems to be improving - The quality of the applications submitted to DRAB seem much better over the past ten years or so.
- The signage for small businesses on Route 1 near Legacy Place - The small businesses between Route 1 and Legacy Place have been a source of visual signage problems, but redevelopment provides an opportunity to improve this.
- Signage affordability - For many small businesses, the sign is a considerable cost, and the regulations and process need to provide a route to affordable solutions.
- Off-premise signs needs consideration - Certain destinations have minimal frontage, leading to strange solutions and waivers, such as the Holiday Inn and Bamboo restaurant off of Route 1. Some signage near the roadway would be appropriate.
- Poor sign quality negatively impacts new development - The low-quality signage in some location is a poor-quality neighbor to high quality development which is occurring in some locations.
- New signage quality - Signage associated with new development and new tenants tends to be improving in quality, better than the older signs.
- Information hierarchy - There is a great variability in the hierarchy of information; this would be improved if the identity and address were more clear, and the promotional and branding elements less prominent.

### *Observations*

*The update Code needs to better address types of sign that raise significant concerns about quality and related enforcement. Categories include large pylon and highway-business type signs, temporary signs and banners serving as business signs, window signs. Examples from other communities may be informative.*

### Process of Application, Review and Approval

#### Comments

- Confusing process - The process is initially confusing and has several separate parts - the building department review and approval, the DRAB and ZBA and their interactions are not clear to those not familiar with Dedham's Code.

- Time consuming process - Some enterprise owners, merchants are not good at anticipating time required to secure permits.
- Hardcopy versus digital documents - The application process could be streamlined and made less costly to applicants if Dedham converted to on-line access and submittals with digital documents.
- Payment process - It would be easier if permit payments could be made on-line.
- Fees - The permit fees seem reasonable.
- Professionalism - The Dedham process is very professional and has been well-run for many years relative to some other jurisdictions.
- Improvements over time - The DRAB process seems to have been streamlined from earlier practice, and has qualified participants who are knowledgeable and amenable to good ideas.
- Historic District reviews - These are generally not an issue, because their limits are outside of the commercial areas.

### *Observations*

*Dedham and applicants would benefit from more clear information directions about the process. Everyone would benefit from the ability to use digital technologies for application, reviews and permit fee payments, rather than hard copies of documents.*

### Role and Influence of the Design Review Advisory Board (DRAB)

#### *Comments*

- Impact on sign quality - The DRAB seems to have had a positive impact on sign quality, in part because of the experience and qualifications of those on the Board.
- DRAB and communication quality - From the perspective of a manager of multi-tenant property, DRAB is easy to work with, and they are very thoughtful.
- DRAB should either be advisory or not participate in reviews - Because DRAB is only advisory, applicants know or become informed about this and don't take them seriously, often expecting to go straight to the ZBA to get what they seek. However, the additional step can add a month or more to the process, which is a major delay for a new tenant or enterprise starting out.
- Paperwork that may not be helpful - The DRAB process results in unwanted and ineffectual paperwork if it is not an effective participant in the sign review and approval process.
- Time - The DRAB process, in conjunction with the application, review, and ZBA process is very time consuming for applicants, which is a business problem.
- Effectiveness - The DRAB is generally effective in achieving some design modifications and improvements from the initial application. This may be occurring for 50 to 75 percent of the applications they review. DRAB's recommendations are often taken into account and influence waiver appeals to the ZBA.
- Resource for consultation - DRAB could serve as a consultation resource, and not just a response panel to formal applications.

## Observations

*DRAB seems to be performing a very helpful function in many instances. It's ability to improve the quality of the physical and business environment through good design practices may need to be better integrated and communicated. The idea of a single review board as the design review and waiver granting authority should be revisited, but few commenters have recommended this.*

## Role and Influence of the Zoning Board of Appeals Board (ZBA)

### Comments

- Reasonableness - In many cases, the ZBA tends to be pragmatic and apply sympathetic common sense to small business situations.
- Approval versus disapproval - In general, ZBA does not typically condition or modify applications but takes an "up or down" approval stance.
- Rate of acceptance of waivers - The ZBA has a strong tendency to accept waivers properly presented to them, rather than apply existing standards and reject proposals.
- Lack of appeal process - There is no appeal process available if the ZBA rejects a waiver request.
- Standard corporate brand signage and the ZBA - Dedham has a variety of zones and districts with different restriction, sometimes the standard corporate entity signs don't work within the regulations., Rather than considering modifying the design, they use the design review process to obtain approval without altering the sign.
- The attentiveness to sign issues varies with the composition of the Board - the degree of attention paid to the Code and the issues, such as the alignment of decisions with the waiver review criteria, has varied according to the composition and focus of different Board members over time.
- Additional clarity regarding waiver criteria - It would be helpful if the Code were more clear and descriptive of the intent of the Code and waiver criteria to better guide decisions in the future.

## Observations

*The waiver criteria can be clarified in the Code, and consultations and discussions with other related boards, committees, and staff could be helpful. The prospect and implications of adding an appeal process to its decisions should be considered.*

## Enforcement

### Comments

- After business hours illumination - Lighting is supposed to end at the end of business hours, but persists in some instances. This needs to be better enforced.
- Signs and locations - Residential areas near commercial areas are where the enforcement issues seem most prevalent.
- Routine enforcement - Typical issues are routinely enforced, such as moving or portable signs that are clearly not in conformance.



- Difficulty in staffing and prioritization of enforcement - Pro-active enforcement is not readily accomplishable with existing staffing nor has it been a priority. However, the Town is responsive to direct resident complaints.
- Non-conforming signs and violations - Temporary signs, time limits and restrictions on banner signs are not being honored or enforced adequately.
- Window signage non-conformance (and appearance) - Window signage is very chaotic and, in many cases, appears to exceed the area limits in the Code.

#### *Observations*

*Methods and instances of enforcement, including types of signs, methods, and prioritization should be reviewed.*

#### Potential Future Issues

##### *Comments*

- Digital technology - The definitions and regulations don't adequately address evolving digital sign technologies, and additional guidance is needed for interpretation and approval processes.
- Public art and signage - With growing activity in the Dedham arts community, the distinctions and processes related to public art and artistic business signage need to be clarified.

#### *Observations*

*An improved Sign Code needs to anticipate evolving technologies and associated policy and implementation issues to meet Town goals, and provide for a clear set of standards for application and approval. As the Town encourages and supports an artistic community and civic life, the sign-related aspects of this need to be considered.*

#### Sign-Related Issues and Opportunities

##### *Comments*

- Proactive programs - The pro-active programs in Dedham Square sponsored by Dedham Square Circle several years ago had a significant impact on the quality of some signs, and included providing references to accomplished graphic designers, advisory assistance and loans. They provided a helpful summary of resources and the sign review process. They are not currently maintaining that program.
- The downtown wayfinding signage initiative - John Sisson applied for and received a grant from Mass initiative to develop a wayfinding program for Dedham Square through the State's MDI program, which will be prepared in the coming months.
- Communication among boards and staff engaged in signage reviews and approvals - There is a lack of communication among the participants.

#### *Observations*

*The process and overall design quality could be improved if there were clear guidance and explanatory documents to accompany the Code. An active referral program to a list of quality, experienced graphic designers and sign fabricators would also be helpful if it were readily available either through the Town or through local advocacy groups. Some joint meetings or discussions among the staff and board participants in the process could build better understanding and appreciation regarding key issues, practices, and purposes.*