

IOWA OUTDOOR  
ADVERTISING  
REGULATIONS FOR

**U.S. & IOWA  
HIGHWAYS**



## **Purpose**

In 1965 Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act in order to reduce sign clutter, visual deterioration, driver distraction, and the eroding of the public's dollar which had been invested into our nation's highway systems. While signs were not necessarily banned, they were limited to the commercial and industrial areas and subjected to spacing requirements. The Federal law contains a withholding penalty in the event of noncompliance consisting of ten percent of the total highway funds granted to the states each year. For example, if the State of Iowa receives \$500,000,000 in highway funds, the penalty for noncompliance is \$50,000,000.

Iowa Code 306C, and Iowa Administrative Code 761 IAC 117 are patterned after the Federal Act and Federal regulations. This pamphlet is intended to summarize requirements and aid the user in comprehending them. In the event that the contents of this publication could be interpreted differently than the statutes or regulations, the statutes and regulations shall prevail.

## **Control Limits and Applicability**

Iowa's outdoor advertising control law applies to all advertising devices visible from primary highways, except for areas beyond 660 feet of the right-of-way inside city limits. Secondary road systems and municipal streets are not included, if not within view of the primary highway system. Signs which exist without the exchange of remuneration (i.e., signs installed by a business for the business on the property, and signs erected by a resident to display an opinion) may be exempt from control. For guidance on whether your sign will require permitting, consult with Department staff.

## General prohibitions

In addition to the zoning and spacing requirements discussed later in this guide, the following general prohibitions apply to advertising devices visible from U.S. and Iowa highways.

1. No advertising device may encroach on or hang over the highway right of way.
2. No advertising device may be lighted so it impairs the vision of any motor vehicle driver.
3. No advertising device may obstruct the view of any highway or railroad to the extent it makes it dangerous to use the highway.
4. No advertising device may imitate or resemble an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
5. No advertising device may obscure or physically interfere with an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
6. No advertising device shall include flashing, intermittent or moving lights. LED displays may be permitted under conditions listed on page 9.
7. No new advertising device shall be located beyond 660 feet from the right of way in the rural areas and visible from the main traveled way.

## Permit Required

A permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.

## **Scenic byways**

The erection of advertising devices is prohibited along any state or nationally designated scenic byway. Existing permitted advertising devices along scenic byways may remain in existence, provided that appropriate permit fees are remitted in a timely manner and no relocation or reconstruction of the advertising device occurs. Information about Iowa's byways is available at the Iowa DOT's website at [www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways](http://www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways) or by contacting the Iowa DOT's Office of Systems Planning at 515-239-1369.

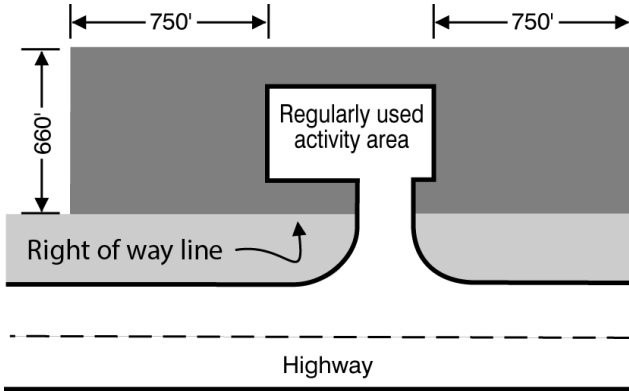
## **Property zoning requirements**

In cities and counties where local zoning has been established, new signs may be erected only in areas zoned commercial or industrial in accordance with 761 IAC 117.3(4).

In unzoned cities and counties, new signs may be erected only in areas classified as "unzoned commercial or industrial." These are areas occupied by at least one activity (usually a business) generally accepted as commercial or industrial by zoning authorities in the state of Iowa. The unzoned commercial or industrial area includes the area surrounding the activity by a distance of 750 feet, but not extending across the highway, as measured from the "regularly used" portion of the activity (see Figure 1).

The regularly used portion is the portion that is open for business and staffed for at least 20 hours a week on property assessed as commercial or industrial. The hours of operation must be visibly posted on the premises.

**Figure 1**  
**Unzoned commercial or industrial area**



The following conditions are not sufficient in meeting zoning requirements.

- Commercial or industrial areas that are not regulated by comprehensive zoning in accordance with Iowa Code chapters 335 or 414.
- Areas rezoned from a noncommercial or nonindustrial classification to a commercial or industrial classification for the primary purpose of securing approval for outdoor advertising.
- A zone in which limited commercial or industrial activities are permitted incidental to other primary land uses. This may include mixed-use zoning classifications, commercial/noncommercial hybrids, and some commercial classifications that allow the development of noncommercial activities and restrict the development of generally accepted commercial activities.

## Size requirements

The display area of a single face sign is limited to a maximum of 1,200 square feet. For signs facing more than one direction, the display areas are limited to a maximum of 750 square feet per direction.

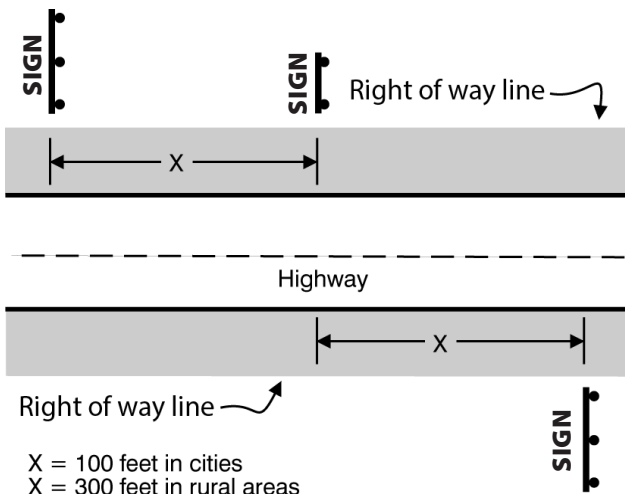
## Spacing requirements

In cities, a new sign must be a minimum of 100 feet from any other sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located (see Figure 2).

In rural areas, a new sign must be a minimum of 300 feet from any other sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located (see Figure 2). Where two routes intersect, the sign must meet the spacing requirements from both routes.

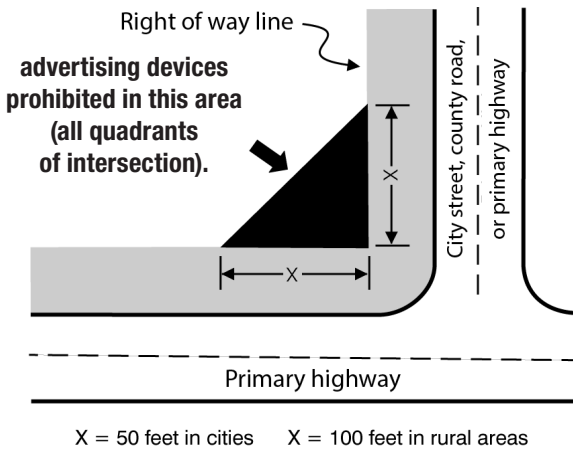
**Figure 2**  
**Sign spacing**

**All measurements are along the centerline of the highway between signs facing the same direction.**



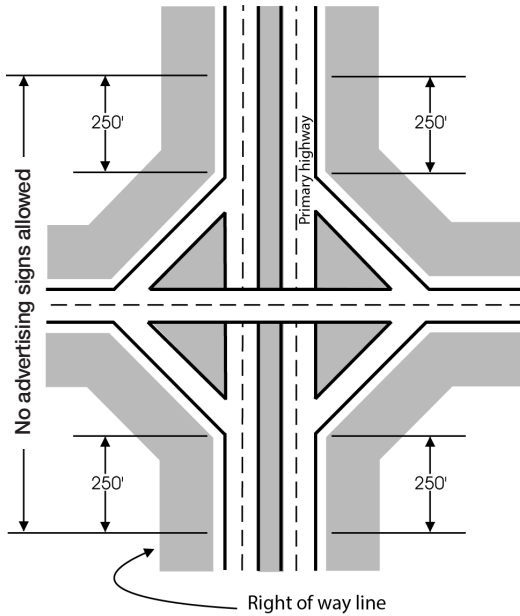
At the intersection of a primary highway and a city street, county road, or another primary highway, advertising devices are prohibited in an area at the corner of private property to maintain adequate sight distance for motorist safety (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
**Sight distance at intersections**  
**(daylight area)**



Advertising devices cannot be located within an interchange area. The interchange area includes all property within the adjacent area and within 250 feet of whichever ramp taper extends the farthest from the interchange (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
**Signs within**  
**an interchange area**





## **Light emitting diode (LED) displays**

LED displays are permitted under the following conditions.

- Adding this type of technology for an existing advertising device constitutes advertising device “modification” under Iowa law. Therefore, a new permit application is required.
- Each change of message must be accomplished in one second or less.
- Each message must remain in a fixed position for at least 8 seconds.
- No traveling messages (e.g., moving messages, animated messages, full-motion video, scrolling text messages) or segmented messages are presented.
- The intensity of the illumination does not cause glare or impair the vision of the driver of any motor vehicle or otherwise interferes with any driver’s operation of a motor vehicle.

The following information will help you complete the permit application correctly.

1. **A permit is required for each direction a sign is facing.**
2. **Permit fees are set by statute as follows.**

The application fee (nonrefundable), payable at the time of application, is \$100 per advertising face. However if the sign is 32 square feet or less, there is no fee.

The annual renewal fee, due on or before June 30 each year, is based on size of the face and is as follows.

<b>SIZE (sq. feet)</b>	<b>FEE</b>
0-32	\$0
33-375	\$15
376-999	\$25
Over 1,000	\$50

3. **The following items must accompany each permit application.**
  - a. A check for the fee or fees due, made payable to the Iowa Department of Transportation.
  - b. A copy of the sign owner's site lease with the landowner. (In the case of a verbal lease, a statement of the terms of the lease signed by the sign owner will be accepted.)
4. **In cities or counties where zoning has been established**, the respective zoning official must complete the portion of the permit application entitled "Zoning Information."

(Local sign regulations and zoning information may normally be obtained at city halls or county courthouses.)

In cities or counties **where zoning has not been established**, the qualifying activity must be identified in the appropriate space on the permit application (see page 4).

5. **The permit application will require the following.**

- a. Use the milepost nearest the sign as a reference point for the sign location. (In areas where mileposts are not in place, locate from a major intersection.) Measure the distance from the nearest milepost to the sign, and record the distance as indicated on the application.
- b. Identify highways and intersecting city streets or county roads on the sign location map. Indicate the distance from the sign to the pavement. (Measure from the back of the curb or nearest white paint line, not from the road shoulder.)

NOTE: To help process your permit more quickly, reference your sign site to identifiable landmarks, and stake the proposed sign location.

For specific requirements consult Iowa Code 306C and 761 IAC 117.

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### **Illegal signs**

We strive to keep our highways safe and beautiful. If you believe there is a sign illegally erected on private property, please contact us at the phone number listed on the last page. We value public input and will investigate all reports.

**WHERE TO OBTAIN APPLICATION FORMS  
AND INFORMATION**

Advertising Management  
Traffic and Safety Bureau  
Iowa Department of Transportation  
800 Lincoln Way  
Ames, IA 50010  
Phone: 515-239-1296  
Website: [www.iowadot.gov/iowaroadsigns](http://www.iowadot.gov/iowaroadsigns)



Federal and state laws prohibit employment and/or public accommodation discrimination on the basis of age, color, creed, disability, gender identity, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran's status. If you believe you have been discriminated against, please contact the Iowa Civil Rights Commission at 800-457-4416 or Iowa Department of Transportation's affirmative action officer. If you need accommodations because of a disability to access the Iowa Department of Transportation's services, contact the agency's affirmative action officer at 800-262-0003.