

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 billboard control law applies to all outdoor advertising devices visible to the primary highway system in Iowa, with the exception of areas beyond 660 feet of the right-of-way inside city limits. The term "advertising device" is defined in Iowa Code 306C and includes any-sized sign which conveys a message and includes all types of mediums (i. e., licensed trailers, barns, etc.). The term "billboard" is used in this pamphlet but includes all outdoor advertising devices. However, on-premise signs are signs which display messages concerning businesses, services, and products available on the same property as the sign. These signs are exempt from most of the regulations and this pamphlet is generally not applicable.

General prohibitions

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

1. No billboard may encroach on or hang over the highway right of way.
2. No billboard may be lighted so it impairs the vision of any motor vehicle driver.
3. No billboard may obstruct the view of any highway or railroad to the extent it makes it dangerous to use the highway.
4. No billboard may imitate or resemble an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
5. No billboard may obscure or physically interfere with an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
6. No billboard shall include flashing, intermittent or moving lights. LED displays may be permitted under conditions listed on page 9.
7. No new billboard 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 billboards is prohibited along any state or nationally designated scenic byway. Existing permitted billboards 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 billboard occurs. Information about Iowa's byways is available at the Iowa DOT's website at www.iowadot.gov/iowasbyways or by contacting the Iowa DOT's Office of Systems Planning at 515-239-1369.

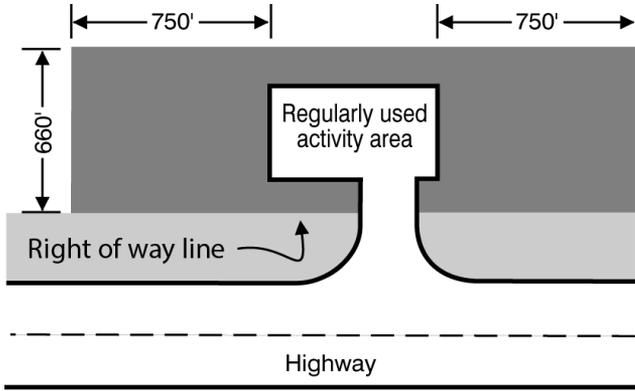
Property zoning requirements

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.

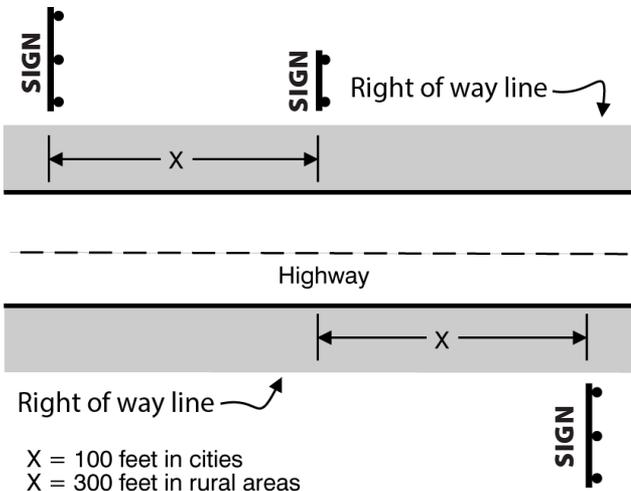
Spacing requirements

In cities, a new sign must be a minimum of 100 feet from any other off-premise 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 off-premise 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.

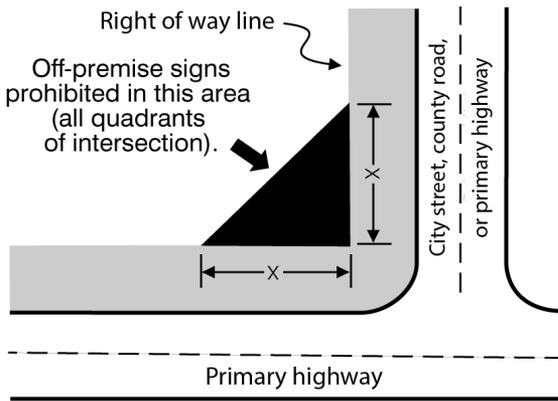
Figure 2
Sign spacing

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, off-premise signs are prohibited in an area at the corner of private property to maintain adequate sight distance for motorist safety (see Figure 3).

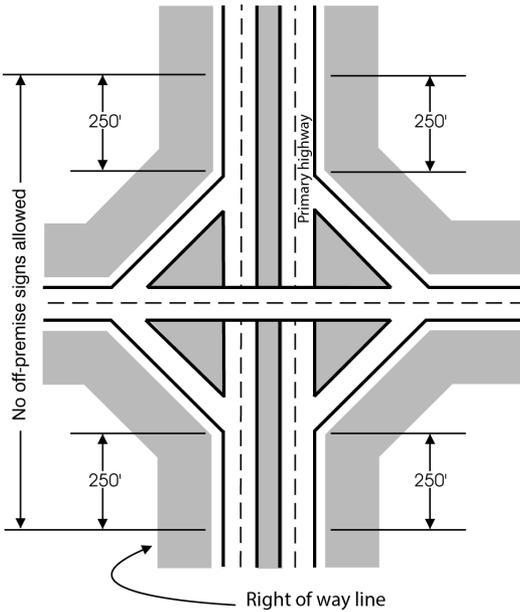
Figure 3
Sight distance at intersections
(daylight area)



X = 50 feet in cities X = 100 feet in rural areas

Billboards 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
Off-premise 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 billboard constitutes billboard “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.

SIZE (sq. feet)	FEE
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.

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.

Frequently asked questions

Q. If billboards are not allowed in the agricultural areas, why have some of them been allowed to remain there?

A. These billboards were built prior to passage of Iowa's Billboard Control Law in 1972. They applied for and received permits to remain in place as (grandfathered) nonconforming signs. If the permit fees are paid each year, and the billboards are not modified or reconstructed, the billboards may remain in existence at their locations.

Q. Is there a setback or safe distance where I can place my billboard along the highway without being subject to control?

A. In general, the answer is no. If the sign is visible to the highway, it will require a permit.

Q. I've heard that if I place my advertisement on a licensed trailer or vehicle located on my property, it is exempt from these regulations. Is this true?

A. No. The definition of an outdoor advertising device is contained in Iowa Code chapter 306C and makes no exemption for signs mounted on vehicles, if they are serving in the same capacity as a traditional advertising device. If the message itself qualifies as an off-premise message, it is subject to control, regardless of the type of supporting device used.

Q. I own property along the highway. Shouldn't I be able to advertise my own business on it without a state permit?

A. It depends on whether that business is located on the same property as the proposed advertising sign. If it is, then your proposed sign may qualify as an on-premise sign. You should contact the Iowa DOT's Advertising Management section to verify its status before proceeding with installation. If the business is not located on the same property, the sign will still need to meet all of the requirements for a billboard permit.

Q. I don't need a billboard; just a small directional sign. Is this possible?

A. Federal and State regulations do not provide for exceptions from the zoning, spacing, and permitting requirements based on size, nor is there any category for a small "directional" sign for general business purposes. There is, however, a separate program for small state-erected signs on the right-of-way known as "tourist-oriented directional signs" or TODS. Refer to that separate publication for program requirements.

**WHERE TO OBTAIN APPLICATION FORMS
AND INFORMATION**

Advertising Management
Office of Traffic and Safety
Iowa Department of Transportation
800 Lincoln Way
Ames, IA 50010
Phone: 515-239-1296
Website: 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.