

Category:	General
Winner or Honorable Mention:	Honorable Mention
Title of the Project:	Sign Compliance in Federal Way
City:	City of Federal Way
Population:	83,259
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## **SIGN COMPLIANCE IN FEDERAL WAY**

The City of Federal Way Sign Compliance Program has been a ten-year commitment that has brought together citizens, business owners, elected Officials and City staff in united efforts to establish and enforce signs regulation, remove sign clutter, and improve the appearance of the City of Federal Way.

### **Why was it needed?**

Prior to city incorporation, there was little evidence of sign enforcement. Signs were installed in the right of way and portable signs cluttered the landscape. Pole signs dominated the visual field of many major city streets. This visual blight contributed to poor property and business image. It was found that the unregulated proliferation of signs detracts from the economic value of the community. The proliferation of signs created a visual distraction for drivers of motor vehicles, detracting from traffic safety.

In 1990, Federal Way incorporated as the sixth largest city in the state. The drive to incorporate was fueled by changing growth patterns, increasing traffic congestion, and desire for local control. At incorporation, the City Council adopted zoning regulations patterned after those in Kirkland, including sign regulations. It was apparent that these standards did not reflect the retail and business character of Federal Way, so development of a revised or new code was authorized. The intent was to provide for signage more appropriate to Federal Way's needs, yet maintain control over significant issues relating to design aesthetics and sign clutter.

City staff recognized early in the process that sign regulations were pointless unless they were actively enforced. Staff also realized that there could be no significant change in appearance of the city unless a realistic amortization period was established and backed by incentive programs. With these points in mind, sign regulations and enforcement measures were created to change the look of Federal Way.

## **What is the program?**

The Sign Compliance Program is a layered approach conducted over several years, resulting in comprehensive sign regulations and enforcement measures. The components include:

- **1990 SIGN ENFORCEMENT:** On February 28, 1990, the City of Federal Way incorporates. A 1995 sign amortization date is established with new city code. City staff review all sign permit applications and pick up signs in the right-of-way.
- **ROW SIGNS:** Weekend sign sweeps are conducted. Over 100 nonconforming signs are picked up each month.
- **1994 REVISIONS TO THE SIGN CODE PLANNED:** In 1994, a Citizen Advisory Committee was formed and works for 9 months with staff on sign code revisions. The Federal Way Planning Commission held 7 public hearings on sign issues.
- **1995 NEW SIGN CODE ADOPTED:** Features of the new sign code include the extension of the amortization period to February 28, 2000, prohibition of pole signs, adoption of citation procedures for nonconforming signs, and portable signs and banners require immediate compliance. A systemic approach to enforcement was adopted with the highest priority area being the downtown followed by outlying business areas, and residential neighborhoods last.
- **1995 SUMMER SIGN INVENTORY:** Notification was sent to all businesses about the new sign regulations and that an inventory would be conducted. The first intern crew was hired to inventory 2,900 signs within the city. The inventory established which signs did not meet the adopted code standards.
- **SUBSTANTIAL PUBLIC OUTREACH:** From 1995 to 2000, the City made a significant effort to notify businesses and property owners of the regulations and compliance deadlines. In 1995, initial letters were sent to all businesses and property owners alerting them to sign code regulations and identifying specific information through nonconformance permits. Over 50 newspaper and newsletter articles about signs were published by local press. Staff held individual meetings with approximately 200 business and property owners to discuss sign conformance options and held a sign contractors workshop.
- **1996-1997 ANALYSIS:** The interns analyzed the signs and issued nonconforming sign notices to over 800 businesses.
- **1998 INCENTIVES TO COMPLY:** Sign code incentive program adopted by City Council. \$200,000 of utility tax money was designated by council to assist businesses owners with sign compliance. Formed partnership with Chamber of Commerce for outreach and administration of program. Low interest loan program was also made available through a local bank.

- **1999 D-DAY PREPARATION:** As the amortization deadline approaches, the sign code is fine tuned for clarity, the City Council approves the Sign Compliance Plan, city staff invite business owners to come and speak with staff to learn about sign options for their business and properties (128 take advantage of these meetings), and staff conduct a sign contractors forum to provide training on the sign code to sign contractors.
- **SIGN COMPLIANCE 2000:** On February 28, 2000, the sign amortization period expires. Applicants rush to submit sign permit applications before the deadline. 89 applications are received in February and March alone. Site inspections confirm 597 nonconforming sign sites. 384 cases are closed in 14 months.
- **Implementation: 2001 -** Over 725 business and property owners have brought their signs into compliance with the sign code.

### **What are the costs?**

Costs of the Sign Compliance Program include the following:

- **SIGN INCENTIVE PROGRAM** - The city created a sign incentive program to assist business owners with costs associated with sign compliance. Staff recognized that implementing the sign compliance program was furthered by providing monetary incentives to those seeking to comply with the requirements. The City Council designated the use of \$200,000 of utility tax funds to assist business owners with sign compliance and low interest loan program available. Owners could apply for 25 percent reimbursement of sign costs up to \$20,000. The sign incentive program was administered by the Chamber of Commerce and the City of Federal Way. A low interest loan program was also offered.
- **CODE ENFORCEMENT STAFF** - Staff time included one full time staff person at \$50,000 per year with benefits.
- **SIGN INTERNS** - The first intern crew was hired in 1995 to inventory 2,900 signs within City limits. Teams worked during summers to inventory signs, and input the findings into a database developed to track sign conformance. Over the 10 years of the Sign Federal Way Sign Compliance Program, 15 interns were hired. The interns worked approximately 40 hours per week up to 30 weeks per year and were paid \$10.00 per hour.

**What are the benefits?**

The benefits of the sign compliance program is renewed pride in the community, commitment to the visual aesthetic in the city, and improvement in the appearance and function of the built community. The City has found that reasonable regulation of signs serves to alleviate visual clutter and thereby preserves community scenic, economic and aesthetic values. The regulation of signs supports and enhances the economic well-being of all businesses within the City while providing the opportunity for all businesses to identify their premises and advertise their products.

The ten year amortization period, which ended on February 28, 2000, for the removal of nonconforming signs was sufficient to ease the economic impact of the adoption of the sign code and allowed such signs to have their value amortized. As the sign amortization period ended, staff identified 597 nonconforming sign cases. 384 cases were closed in 14 months following the end of the amortization program. Today, 116 non-conforming sign cases remain primarily in multifamily complexes.

Because of the 2000 amortization deadline, the most striking changes in sign compliance have occurred from 1999 to the present. Downtown Federal Way has been transformed from a disorderly array of signs and symbols to predictable business identifiers. Visual clutter is gone from major thoroughfares. Pole signs which once towered over businesses, sometimes 30 feet in the air, have been replaced by monument and pedestal signs that complement the scale of the adjacent businesses, not the roadway.

Several keys to the success of the Federal Way Sign Compliance Program are: • Strong City Council support for the Program • Partnership with the Chamber of Commerce • Resources to get the job done • Community outreach

**Summary:**

As a civic effort to beautify the City of Federal Way, the Sign Compliance Program incorporated sign code fine tuning, identification of nonconforming signs, systematic enforcement of nonconforming signs, adoption of incentives coupled with agency partnerships and active public outreach. With nonconforming signs removed, changes to the landscape are profound and economic well being of the city is preserved.

**Enclosures**

Copy of the Federal Way Sign Code Then and Now Photos

Public outreach materials Newspaper Articles

Federal Way Sign Compliance Program

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