



Highway Maintenance Manual

Bureau of Highway Maintenance

Chapter Interim Policy and Procedures

June 2016

Subject Directional Signs

1.0 Authority

Wis. Stats., s. 84.30 gives the Department authority to control the erection and maintenance of billboards and other forms of outdoor advertising adjacent to the interstate system, federal-aid primary highways and the Great River Road, as well as to promulgate rules for additional appropriate requirements. Wis. Stats., ss. 84.30(3)(a) and Trans. 201.05 Wis. Adm. Code provide the rules for directional signs with regard to the types of qualifying attractions, size, lighting, spacing and other such requirements.

The directional sign category requires an applicant to meet a higher standard of eligibility. It is an intentionally restricted category of sign because:

- Each qualifying attraction is potentially eligible to erect 6 directional signs – 3 signs per direction of travel on a single route approaching the activity,
- They can be erected along multiple highways, and
- The land does not need to be zoned for business. Instead, the lands may be agricultural, forested, recreational, or even residential.

2.0 Criteria for Erection

1. To be eligible for a sign, the attraction or activity must be:

- a. A public place owned or operated by federal, state, or local governments or their agencies; or
- b. Natural phenomena, scenic attractions, historic, educational, cultural, scientific, religious sites, and areas suited for outdoor recreation, which are privately owned. These attractions and activities must be nationally or regionally known and of outstanding interest to the traveling public.

2. Definitions:

- a. Public Places Owned and Operated by Governments: Must provide appropriate documentation that the site is owned and/or managed by a governmental entity.
- b. Natural Phenomena: Sites of interest to the traveling public because of the opportunity to observe and/or experience nature, including geology, flora and/or fauna.
- c. Natural Scenic Beauty: Natural or scenic areas such as beaches, gorges, nature facilities, nature preserves, nature sanctuaries, observation points, observation towers, parks, scenic areas, trails, lakes, waterfalls, waterways, and bluffs.
- d. Historic: Included in official registers of designated state or federal historic sites. Must provide documentation.
- e. Educational: Sites with a primary purpose to impart knowledge or skills through observation or participation. Examples include museums, aquariums, wildlife facilities, wildlife preserves, wildlife sanctuaries and zoos. Can include agri-tourism businesses such as breweries, gardens, cheese factories, vineyards, orchards, and wineries if regular tours are conducted. Must provide documentation of regular tours.
- f. Cultural: Sites dedicated or related to the appreciation of the arts such as galleries, halls of fame, museums, concert halls, and performing arts facilities.
- g. Scientific: Site where scientific studies and/or research are conducted.

- h. Religious: Sites of spiritual significance, religious sites or shrines. Does not typically include cathedrals, churches, chapels, synagogues, temples or mosques, unless the site is regionally recognized and tours are conducted for non-members at least on a weekly basis. Must provide documentation of regular tours.
- i. Naturally Suited for Outdoor Recreation: Outdoor areas used by travelers for participatory activities such as skiing, golfing, swimming, fishing or shooting.
- j. Regional Significance¹
 - i. Regional significance generally is demonstrated by a market presence or significant public awareness of the attraction beyond the local community. While the concept of regional significance is consistent around the state, the significance of a given attraction should be considered relative to other attractions in the area. Areas of the state that are more heavily tourism oriented and those areas that are more rural and less densely populated may result in different determinations of regional significance.
 - ii. Regionally significant attractions are more likely to be preplanned ultimate destinations than convenience stops.
 - iii. Annual attendance, size of geographic market, percent of customers or visitors from beyond 50-mile radius, existence and size of a regional advertising budget, the number of parking spaces, accommodations to handle large groups such as transit or tour bus facilities, the number of seats in performing arts facilities, the percentage of out-of-state plates, the number of hours and days of continuous operations, the availability and number of tours, and the expected contribution to the success of regional tourism may also be considered indicators of regional significance.

3. Qualifying attraction or activity attendance (visitors counts listed are annual requirements)

- a. Interstates
 - i. Must have an annual visitor count of 15,000 or more
- b. Freeways and other controlled routes
 - i. Must have an annual visitor count of 10,000 or more; or
 - ii. Must have an annual visitor count of 5,000 or more and be on the federal historic register; or
 - 1. Applicant must provide proof of listing on federal historic register.
 - iii. Must have an annual visitor count of 2,500 or more, of which at least 25% of the visitors must reside outside the county in which the tourist attraction is located.
 - 1. Applicant must provide proof of visitor addresses residing outside the county where the activity/attraction is located.
- c. Message Content & Design
 - i. Sign shall only identify the following:
 - 1. Name of the attraction or activity
 - 2. Directional information (mileage, route numbers, exit numbers, etc.)
 - ii. Prohibited content
 - 1. Descriptive words or phrases

¹ The definition of Regional Significance is adopted from the 'Advisory Council Attractions Criteria' for SIS and TODS Programs.

- a. Evidence of the legally registered name of the activity/attraction will be considered.
- b. Examples:
 - i. **ALLOWED:** An attraction named "Wisconsin's Best Slopes" (naturally suited for outdoor recreation category). While this appears to be a descriptive phrase, it would be approved so long as it also happens to be the identifier of the attraction.
 - ii. **NOT ALLOWED:** An attraction named "Wisconsin's Best Slopes" (naturally suited for outdoor recreation category) with the additional phrase "Best in the Midwest!" The additional phrase is not part of the identifier and is therefore a prohibited descriptive phrase of the attraction that would not be approved.

2. Pictorial or photographic representations of the activity

- a. Exception: Logos, trademarks, or brand symbols may be allowed, subject to the following restrictions.
- b. Only **one identifier** is allowed for each attraction/activity.
 - i. If the name of the attraction is used as the identifier, then a separate logo is not allowed to identify the activity/attraction.
 - ii. If the logo is the identifier, a separate word message is not allowed to identify the activity/attraction.
 - iii. Both a word message and logo may be allowed as *one singular identifier*, however, the combination must be used in a comprehensive marketing strategy by the activity/attraction in all forms of media, signing, letterhead, and advertising. Documentation of this combination must be submitted with the application.
- c. Additional word messages are not allowed, except for the directional information to the activity/attraction.
- iii. No sign shall resemble any traffic sign or signal or any state installed official signs or markers.
- iv. No sign shall have any moving or animated parts.

4. Illumination

- a. No sign shall contain, include or be illuminated by any moving, flashing or intermittent lights.
- b. No sign shall emit or reflect beams or rays of light on any portion of the traveled way or shall emit or reflect light of such intensity or brilliance as to cause glare or to impair or otherwise interfere with a driver's vision.
- c. No sign shall be so lighted as to obstruct or interfere with an official traffic sign, device or signal.

5. Size & Number

- a. Maximum area = 150 square feet.
 - i. Maximum height = 20 feet
 - ii. Maximum length = 20 feet
 - 1. The measurements include the border and trim, but exclude the supports.

- b. The same attraction or activity may not be advertised on more than 3 signs that are:
 - i. Facing the same direction of travel
 - ii. Along a single route approaching the activity

6. Location, Placement & Spacing

- a. *For interstate system & other freeways*: signs must be placed at least 2000 feet from any intersection at grade or any interchange. The measurements shall be taken from the beginning or ending of pavement widening at the exit from or entrance to the main-traveled way.
 - iii. Signs adjacent to the interstate system shall be within 75 air miles of the activity.
- b. *For non-freeway federal-aid primary highways*: signs must be placed at least 300 feet from any intersection at grade or any interchange. The measurements shall be taken from the beginning or ending of pavement widening at the exit from or entrance to the main-traveled way.
 - iv. Signs adjacent to the primary system or Great River Road shall be within 50 air miles of the activity.
- c. Sign to sign spacing shall be at least 1 mile (directional to directional)
- d. Signs must be placed at least 2000 feet away from any rest area, parkland, or scenic area.
- e. Additionally, the sign shall not:
 - a. Be located past the advertised attraction or activity
 - b. Obstruct any signs or markers used for traffic control, any state installed official signs or markers or any other lawfully erected sign.
 - c. Obstruct or interfere with a driver's view of approaching, merging or intersecting traffic.
 - d. Not be erected or maintained on trees or painted or drawn on rocks or other natural features.
 - e. Not be located in rest areas, parklands, or scenic areas.

3.0 Management Guidance

1. Application

- a. Illustration
 - i. The illustration of the proposed sign must give a full sense of the overall design and message of the sign, along with the height, length and area of the sign, as well as a map indicating the proposed site.
- b. Certification
 - i. The application requires the owner of the attraction or activity to certify that the attendance count is current, true, and correct.
- c. Documentation
 - i. Documentation is required to show that the attraction or activity draws the requisite number of visitors and otherwise meets the requirements of regional significance. Documentation can include, but is not limited to:
 - 1. Marketing efforts. This may include paid advertising, written publications such as brochures and social media. Provide relevant website links or examples of such efforts.
 - 2. Examples of feature stories highlighting the attraction or activity.

3. Annual or regular events hosted and corresponding attendance records.
4. Website. May include information on number of visits to the site.
5. Business hours and days/months of operation.
6. Documentation of comprehensive marketing strategy in all forms of media, signing, letterhead, and advertising. (Required if applicant submits a logo, trademark or brand symbol for consideration as the identifier of the activity/attraction.)
7. Documentation of listing on federal historic register. (Required only for Historic category.)
8. Documentation of visitors residing outside the county where the activity/attraction is located. (Required only if applicant chooses attendance count option of 2,500 or more annual visitors, of which at least 25% of the visitors must reside outside the county in which the tourist attraction is located.)

d. Fee

- i. \$175

2. Site Investigation

- a. Each proposed site should be investigated prior to a sign's erection. The person doing the investigation should measure the distance between the sign site and the nearest intersection, interchange and other signs to ensure the above spacing requirements are met.
- b. The person should also verify that the proposed sign will not obstruct a driver's view of traffic or block another lawfully erected sign.

3. Change of Message

- a. Approval of the department is required in advance of any message change on a directional sign that involves a different attraction or activity than originally approved.
- b. Message change applications must submit a new application and fee.
- c. If a directional sign message is changed from what was originally approved, the sign will be ordered removed at the expense of the owner, unless the owner:
 - i. Changes the message back to the original message to bring the sign into conformance with the law and the original permit.
 - ii. Submits a new application and fee for the new message to bring the sign into conformance with the law.

4. Annual Fee

- a. Directional signs are subject to an annual fee of \$50.
- b. Fees are non-refundable and may not be prorated.
- c. Failure to pay the annual fee within two months after the date payment is due is evidence the sign has been abandoned.