



How to Prevent Tree/Sign Conflicts

TREE CITY USA®
BULLETIN

No. **11** Editor: Dr. James R. Fazio • \$3.00



WRONG: The signs are visible, but without trees the streetscape is harsh and unpleasant.



WRONG: Because the trees are not properly pruned and one of the signs is poorly located, business signs are difficult to see.



RIGHT: By correctly locating signs and pruning trees, business areas can have both beautiful trees and readable signs.

Signs are the lifeblood of most businesses. But so is a friendly, inviting shopping environment. Trees can provide a softened touch to an otherwise harsh downtown area and reduce even the most imposing buildings to human scale, and they can do it without interfering with signs.

The saying goes that some people shop to live, and others live to shop. That may be so, but one thing that is certain is that few of us enjoy the trudge between stores. In recent years, smart shopping mall designers have taken note of this fact and have gone to great lengths to provide interesting, appealing indoor decor to enhance the between-shop experience.

Outside the mall in the sprawling parking lots and in the central business area of town, trees can be an important way to provide an interesting, attractive business environment.

They do this by giving the area a unified appearance even if stores vary widely in architectural design; they also “soften” hard building materials, sidewalks and harsh streets, and add color, character and seasonal variety. Of course, they also provide their cool, welcome shade in summer.

How ironic, then, that some merchants oppose tree planting or ask that trees be removed. The reason is usually signs. Signs are a merchant’s link to customers and they must be seen to do their job. If a tree blocks the view, the conclusion by many business owners is that the tree must go.

Fortunately, there are proven ways to prevent the conflict between visible signs and the benefits of trees. Through improved signage, proper planting and planned tree care, an improved business environment can be created and both the businesses and the community will benefit from the presence of trees.



Arbor Day Foundation®
100 Arbor Avenue • Nebraska City, NE 68410

Basics of Effective Signs

Much of the tree/sign conflict disappears when businesses reject the old methods of trying to outshout each other! Instead, if all agree to “speak quietly” and are assured an equal opportunity to be heard, the chaos, ugliness and information overload of signs can be transformed into pleasant, useful communication. Quite simply, two principles behind effective signs are: 1) less is best, and 2) tell it at a personal level. Put another way, simple signs say more, and placement – not excessive size or cost – is the key to success.

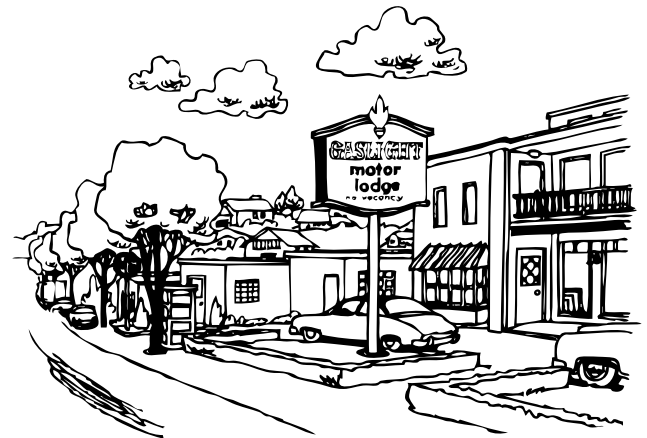
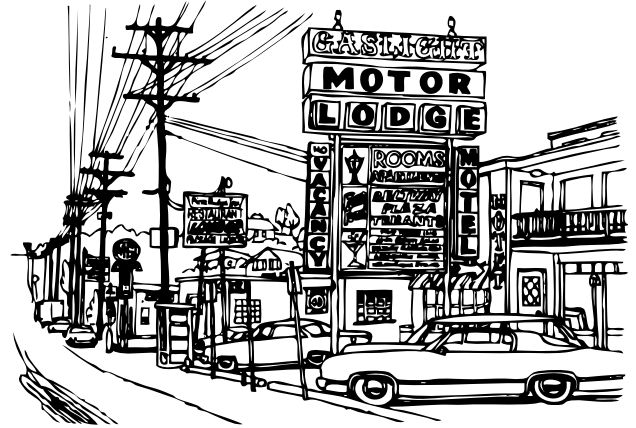
SMALL, SIMPLE SIGNS SAY MORE

While huge signs may sometimes be necessary in malls with gigantic parking lots, they are not appropriate in downtown areas, small communities or other sites where businesses cater to pedestrians.

In any circumstance, research has found that the visual clutter often seen as necessary by businesses presents more information than the human mind can use or remember. The result is an information overload that actually interferes with effective communication.

According to the American Society of Landscape Architects, a sign that presents more than 10 “items of information” is lost on its observer. (Count one item of information for each syllable, symbol, abbreviation, broken plane such as two lines rather than one, or discontinuous odd shapes.) For signs to be legible in downtown areas or at malls where traffic moves slowly or pedestrians are the “targets” for information, the total sign space needed for 10 items of information is only 6-8 feet.

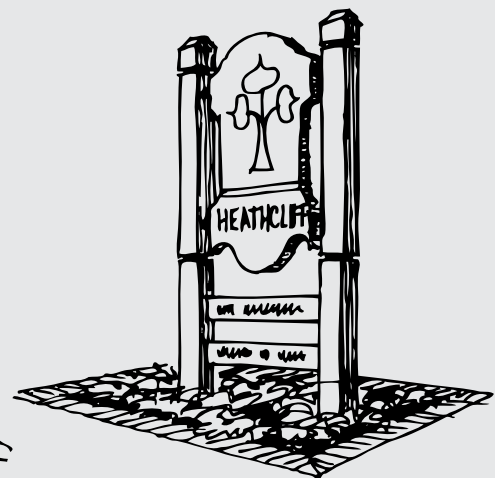
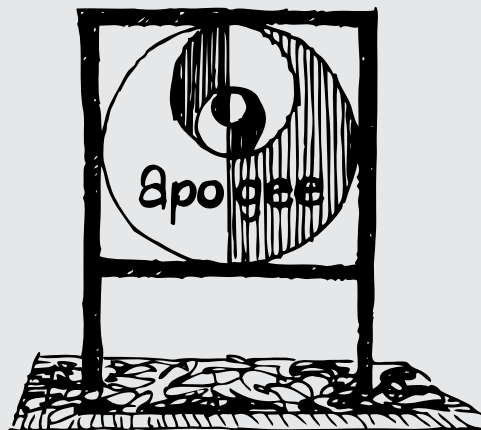
From this kind of research comes the logical suggestion that if fewer and smaller signs were used, businesses could actually improve their ability to help customers find them and, in a general way, learn what they have to offer. However, success rests on two other important tenets. One is that signs should be used primarily for “indexing,” that is, for identifying the business rather than subjecting viewers to myriad advertisements over which they have no control. The other is that all businesses agree (or are required) to honor a given size of sign space.



Low, simple signs are more attractive and communicate more effectively.

GROUND LEVEL IS EFFECTIVE

Ground level signs are relatively inexpensive, easily seen, and help create a friendly, human-scale environment.



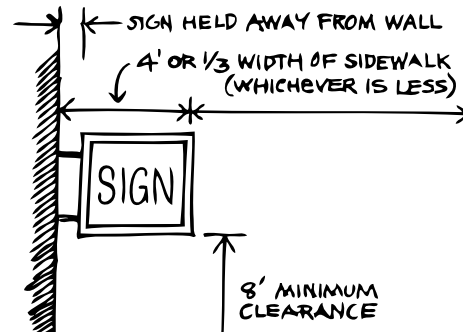


Well-located signs are easily viewed near eye level and are less likely to conflict with shade trees. Such signs also help create a sense of human scale, warmth and pedestrian appeal regardless of the monumental height of buildings or length of the mall.

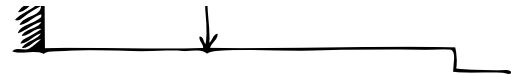
PLACEMENT IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

It would make no sense at all for a television commercial to be blared from a loud speaker truck. For effectiveness, the message is delivered “individually” right in the intimacy of your living room. So it should be with business signs. Rather than placing signs that can best be read by pigeons – and where trees almost inevitably block the view – it is best for the visual environment and for business to bring signs down to the human level.

By placing signs where people walk past shops and other businesses or drive slowly through downtown areas, communication effectiveness will be improved and the signs will be *beneath* the canopy of shade trees.



“Projected” sign placement as recommended by the American Society of Landscape Architects in their book, *Street Graphics*.



By lowering the movie announcement, this sign would be more visible to motorists and pedestrians – and there would be no conflict with the thornless honeylocust tree that graces this downtown street.

Plant and Prune for Signs

To prevent tree/sign conflicts, half of the problem can be solved through better sign size and placement, but half of the responsibility rests with those who plant and care for street and mall trees. Here are some suggestions.



Rather than following a rigid spacing plan, planting in coordination with signs, storefronts and other existing facilities can help to reduce opposition from business owners.

1. PLANT IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Rigid spacing of street trees is sometimes necessary or desirable from the aesthetic standpoint, but to solve the problem of tree/sign conflicts flexibility must be the rule. Variable spacing, as well as a mixture of species and tree sizes, can add interest and aesthetic appeal to a community's streets and shopping malls.

The thriving downtown area of Fort Collins, Colorado, illustrates how "planting islands" and scattered placement of public trees can provide the eco-services and aesthetic benefits of the urban forest while accommodating the desires of business owners.



There is no substitute for common sense. The flowering pear tree in the photo at left was planted virtually in front of a traffic signal. It could have easily been planted to the left in the large planting area, as shown in the illustration.



Although there is a temptation to use only small-maturing species or columnar cultivars as street trees – and they definitely have their place – there is no substitute for large trees that provide the shade and ambience that is appreciated by shoppers.



WRONG:
The unpruned tree blocks the sign.

2. PLANT THE RIGHT TREE

Sometimes uniformity of species and sizes is necessary from a design standpoint, particularly to “unify” a downtown area or city block. However, just as flexibility in spacing can reduce tree/sign conflicts, so can the selection of trees to match specific storefronts or other commercial situations.

For example, to accommodate a higher sign such as a vertical multi-story theater name, planting species nearby that are small at maturity makes good sense. Similarly, overhead wires, traffic signals and street lights need to be considered when selecting trees. Where partial blockage of a sign is unavoidable, a species such as a honeylocust or scholartree (*Sophora spp.*) with a light, airy crown might be a good choice. Another point in favor of a mixed-species approach is that if a new disease or insect epidemic should strike, the results will not be as devastating as they are in a monoculture situation.

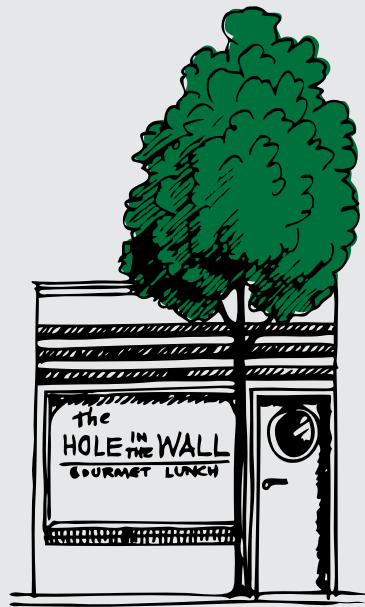
You might want to reread Bulletin No. 4, *The Right Tree for the Right Place*, to review the basics of proper tree selection.

When planning downtown street plantings, a team consisting of a landscape architect or other streetscape designer, an arborist or urban forester, the city engineer, and a business owner should work together to pool their talents and interests. The result of this approach will be an aesthetically pleasing and workable urban forest in the community’s business districts.

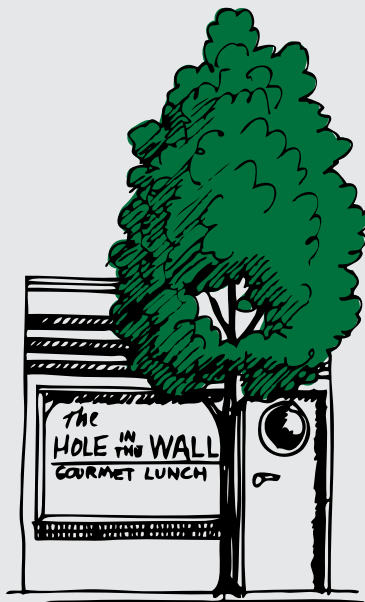
3. PRUNE TO AID VISIBILITY

Whether it is a limb obstructing a stop sign or a shade tree in front of a store, trees in any community require annual inspections and regular pruning to prevent tree/sign conflicts.

“Crown lifting” is a technique used by arborists to remove a tree’s lowest limbs over several years. This is done gradually so that no more than 25% of the living crown is removed during any single pruning. Eventually the lowest part of the crown is 8-14 feet above the sidewalk, well out of the way of street-level signs, vehicles and vandals.

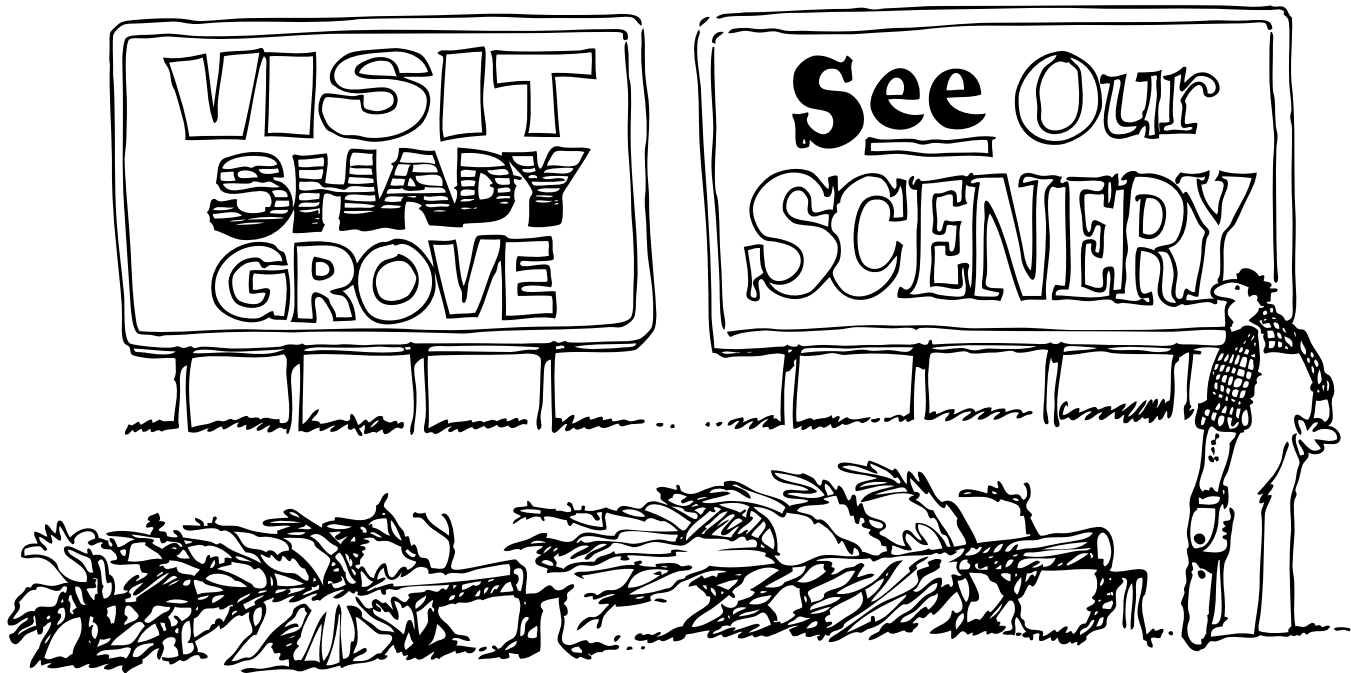


WRONG:
The crown is lifted too high, which results in a weak tree. Generally the crown should be at least 2/3 the height of the tree, the trunk only 1/3.



RIGHT:
The tree is pruned above the sign, but retains the 2/3, 1/3 ratio. Proper pruning techniques are used – never topping!

A Word About Billboards



Highway beautification has been called one of the environmental movement's greatest failures. Although five states and over 1,000 communities have banned the construction of billboards, up to 15,000 new signs are built each year on major U.S. highways.

While off-premise signs such as billboards do not usually conflict with trees, there are exceptions and the consequences are shocking. According to the Southern Environmental Law Center in *Visual Pollution and Sign Control: A Legal Handbook on Billboard Reform*, no billboard issue has aroused more citizen opposition than the destruction of trees and vegetation on public rights-of-way to make signs more visible. The Center reports that thousands of permits are issued each year for such work. Worse yet, many of the trees which have been cut for this reason were originally planted under federally funded landscaping schemes!

Although the practice is legally questionable, according to the Center, the Federal Highway Administration grants states the discretion to remove trees from federal roadsides. The Center reports that some states allow tree cutting by statute, while others have promulgated regulations permitting "vege-

tation control." About half our states prohibit the practice.

To learn about the specifics of billboard regulations in your state – or lack of them – contact your Department of Transportation or other state agency that is responsible for such regulatory matters. If you learn that you live in a state that allows tree removal from public rights-of-way to accommodate billboard or monopole (those large signs supported by a single metal pole) visibility, legislative reform may be in order.

WHEN THERE'S ROOM FOR COMPROMISE

In Cincinnati, a compromise with billboard companies has been worked out that might serve as a model for other cities. When a company wants a tree removed from the public right-of-way, the company pays the appraised value of the tree and the money is then used by the city forester to buy new trees for planting nearby. This has resulted in a net gain in trees and good relationships that have meant free public service space on billboards for themes related to trees, tree care and conservation.



By Permission-Johnny Han Creators Syndicate

Signs and Community Forestry

Few issues evoke as much emotion from urban foresters and arborists as the subject of tree/sign conflicts. When queried about what should be covered in this issue of *Tree City USA Bulletin*, those with whom we talked said that the aesthetic and eco-services of downtown trees far outweigh any problems caused by blockage of signs and should therefore be the overriding consideration.

We believe that with cooperation and planning, trees and signs are completely compatible and that this philosophy should guide the actions of an urban forestry program. However, the issue of tree/sign conflicts should be a definite area of concern in any urban forestry program.

Besides the practical actions illustrated in this issue, sign ordinances, appearance codes and appearance commissions can help protect trees by requiring the subjugation of signs to the greater benefits of community aesthetics.

A LEGAL BASIS FOR AESTHETICS

An interesting evolution in land-use law has been the clear trend toward judicial acceptance of aesthetic-based regulations. The current attitude seems to be reflected in a 1982 legal decision involving a dispute between a municipality and an advertising association, "... zoning solely for aesthetic purposes is an ideal whose time has come; it is not outside the scope of police power."

The earliest cases on behalf of sign limitations were viewed differently. In 1905, Passaic, New Jersey, lost its case on sign regulation with a rebuke that aesthetic considerations were a matter of "taste, luxury and indulgence" rather than matters of necessity.

Given that legal view, to create and enforce sign regulations, it was necessary to somehow link signs to health, safety and general welfare. This seemed to work, even if it required a stretch of the imagination such as condemning billboards because they provided hiding places for criminals, prostitutes and other miscreants! "Unsightliness" was tacked on as an "also" statement.

In the 1930s, aesthetics got a foot in the legal door by being linked to economic well-being, particularly in places like Florida where the relationship between tourism and the general welfare was clear.

Finally, in 1954 the United States Supreme Court confirmed that aesthetic standards are by themselves within the scope of legislative control. One of the court's landmark statements was "The concept of public welfare is broad and inclusive..."

The values it represents are spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as monetary."

The validity of aesthetics within governmental "police power" has been underscored in court cases ever since. Even so, many communities still feel safer in trying to link sign ordinances to health, safety and protection of property values rather than relying on aesthetics alone as a legitimate concern of the community. But whatever the wording or classification of the ordinance within the legal codes, no community need shy away from setting standards when necessary to bring signs down to the level of humans who want to live and work in a pleasant, beautified urban environment.

FRIENDLY PERSUASION

By putting signs where they belong in the streetscape, regulations can help urban foresters do a better job of planting and maintaining trees that do not interfere with visibility. However, the best route to success is to have a business community that is supportive of downtown trees. There is no substitute for friendly persuasion, and toward that end the following techniques should be part of every urban forestry program:

- ✓ Cooperate with business owners when tree plantings are being planned.
- ✓ Adopt the techniques and practices outlined on pages 4 and 5.
- ✓ Direct special communication campaigns at the business community, stressing the relationship of trees to an improved shopping and business environment that is also appealing to shoppers.
- ✓ Have a civic group, appearance review board, tree board, or the forestry department sponsor an annual design award for good signage that is compatible with trees and other landscape components.

Point out, too, the economic benefits of large vs. small trees such as greater stormwater control, more energy savings, cooling the air, and controlling dust and other air pollution.

Implementation of the techniques above can qualify for points toward your community winning a Tree City USA Growth Award. For an application form and list of all qualifying projects, contact your state forester's office or the Arbor Day Foundation (arborday.org/treecity).



TREE CITY USA®

Respect Trees, Keep Signs Off

This is a hot topic in some communities. Should signs be allowed to be placed directly on trees?

In a few communities, 'no parking' signs and others have been screwed or bolted directly onto the trunks of trees. More commonly, citizens nail or staple 'yard sale' signs and other announcements directly on to the bark of trees. Arguably, if the nail or staple does not penetrate the tree's bark, little harm is done. However, on thin-barked trees the hole created by the nail or staple kills cells in the inner bark, interrupts the flow of nutrients and provides an entry way for fungal spores that cause decay. While one or two such holes may do little harm, repeated use of the tree as a bulletin board or sign post is sure to shorten its life.

Trees deserve respect for their beauty and functionality. From the aesthetic standpoint, affixing signs on them is not unlike putting graffiti on a building. In addition, healthy trees provide enough environmental benefits and services without being asked to serve as sign posts. They also represent an investment worth protecting.



An urban forestry program that promotes trees in business districts also promotes good business. One survey found that over 80 percent of the respondents preferred shopping at a business that had substantial amounts of landscaping.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Dunn Foundation and Keep America Beautiful are two of the national organizations that focus on keeping both our natural and built environments clean and beautiful. For contact information about these organizations and for other information about signs in our communities, please visit arborday.org/bulletins.

Tree City USA Bulletin ORDER FORM

Name _____
 Organization _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 Phone _____

Previous bulletins that may be especially helpful as you plan for Arbor Day.
 For a complete list of back issues, please visit arborday.org

	1 Issue \$3.00 ea.
1. How to Prune Young Shade Trees	1. \$
2. When a Storm Strikes	2. _____
3. Resolving Tree-Sidewalk Conflicts	3. _____
4. The Right Tree for the Right Place	4. _____
5. Living With Urban Soils	5. _____
6. How to Hire an Arborist	6. _____
7. How to Save Trees During Construction	7. _____
8. Don't Top Trees!	8. _____
9. Writing a Municipal Tree Ordinance	9. _____
10. Plant Trees for America!	10. _____
11. How to Prevent Tree/Sign Conflicts	11. _____
— Tree City USA Annual Report	_____
TOTALS:	\$ _____

Annual Friends of Tree City USA
 Membership \$15.00 \$ _____
 Tree City USA Bulletin 3-Ring Binder \$ 5.00 \$ _____
 TOTAL PAYMENT: \$ _____

Order Tree City USA Bulletins online at arborday.org or send this form and mail with your payment to:

Arbor Day Foundation • 211 N. 12th Street • Lincoln, NE 68508
 888-448-7337 • (Make checks payable to: Arbor Day Foundation) 1599 011

Tree City USA Bulletin © 2014 Arbor Day Foundation. Published by the Arbor Day Foundation, James R. Fazio, editor; Ginger Falldorf, graphic designer.



The Tree City USA program is sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and National Association of State Foresters. To achieve national recognition of being named as a Tree City USA, a town or city must meet four standards:

- Standard 1: A Tree Board or Department
- Standard 2: A Tree Care Ordinance
- Standard 3: An Annual Community Forestry Program
- Standard 4: An Arbor Day Observance and Proclamation

Each winning community receives a Tree City USA flag, plaque, and community entrance signs. Towns and cities of every size can qualify. Tree City USA application forms are available from your state forester or the Arbor Day Foundation.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: James R. Fazio (page 4, 5).