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White Paper

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Applying for & Obtaining a Variance

Most people going into business assume they can get the signage they need and are typically unaware they must first get a permit from their local government. Every city has its own sign code and the requirements can be very different from one city to another. Your sign professional will either know the local code or check it as part of their process in developing your sign design.

At times your business needs may require designing a sign that is not allowed to be built under your local sign code. If that occurs, you will need to apply for a variance from the sign code. A variance is a legal exception from the code. Often your sign manufacturer will be able to help you through this process, though you may also need the services of an attorney.

What Are Some Reasons I Might Need to Apply For a Variance?

Some typical reasons why you might need to apply for a variance include:

1. Permitted signage would not be able to be easily seen by passing motorists in one or both directions because existing buildings, trees, traffic (particularly large trucks), or other obstructions would block it from view.
2. Permitted signage could not be seen by passing motorists in time to safely react and stop at the business.
3. Existing signs on nearby parcels would substantially reduce the visibility or advertising impact of a conforming sign on your parcel.
4. Construction of a conforming sign would block motorists' view of the road or otherwise endanger the health or safety of passers-by.
5. Natural land features would have to be removed or severely altered if a conforming sign was constructed (such as removal of trees, alteration of the natural topography, filling of wetlands, or obstruction of a natural drainage course).
6. Variance from certain sign regulations would be offset by increased building setback, increased landscaping, or other such enhancements, so that the overall effect would make the parcel look much better than it would if the sign was built according to code.
7. A taller or larger sign than allowed by the code would be more appropriate in scale because of the large size or frontage of the parcel or building.

Be prepared to explain the reasons why you have selected the sign design you would like to build. Consult with your professional sign designer. The more the municipality understands why you have chosen particular colors, graphics, materials, and sizes, the better they will understand your need for a variance.

In the variance application, it is best to demonstrate how the request will not only help your business, but also how it is in the interest of the local community to grant the request. Show how the improvement to your property will contribute to a revitalization of the district itself and how the resulting increases in income and property value will increase local tax revenues. Talk about the safety benefits that will result from the enhanced readability of the proposed sign.