

**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT POLICY/ORDINANCE
INTERPRETATION**

Interpretation No.: LIGHTING-01 (Sign lighting)

Effective Date: September 23, 2009

Revised: none

Questions

What are the criteria for sign lighting, including direct and indirect sign lighting, “low-intensity lighting”, and “unobtrusive lighting”?

Applicable Ordinance Section(s)

- 13.10.580
- 13.10.581
- 13.10.582
- 13.10.700-L
- 13.20.130(c)6

INTERPRETATION:

The Santa Cruz County Code allows signs to be lit only in certain zone districts and under certain conditions. Where sign lighting is permitted, the Code restricts the type of sign lighting allowed. The following tables outline the criteria for sign lighting, guidelines for implementing these criteria, and summarize the type of sign lighting allowed in different areas of the County.

Criteria for sign lighting

All sign lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign lighting “shall be unobtrusive to adjacent properties and any glare shall be directed onto the site.” 13.10.581(i) • No flashing or moving signs allowed. • High intensity discharge lights, including mercury vapor, metal halide, laser lighting, and high-pressure sodium lighting, are discouraged.
Direct Sign Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refers to lighting from within the sign itself (interior sign lighting) • Includes box signs, neon signs, LED signs, and canned letters • Allowed only in limited circumstances (see following table) • Preference given to signs with light-colored letters on a semi-opaque dark background (13.10.581(j)).
Indirect Sign Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes all sign lighting not from the sign interior (exterior sign lighting) • Lighting source should be located no more than 10 feet from the sign and directed at the sign itself • Sign may be lit from either above or below, as appropriate • For light fixtures that are of higher intensity (generally those emitting more than 400 lumens, which is equivalent to one 40-watt incandescent bulb), shielded light fixtures are preferred to ensure that the light is directed at the sign at a horizontal plane or below and that offsite glare is controlled.

Locational Restrictions on Sign Lighting

Location	Sign lighting restrictions
Residential and agricultural zone districts	No direct (interior) sign lighting. Indirect (exterior) sign lighting allowed only in limited circumstances: 13.10.580
PR Zone District	Only indirect (exterior) sign lighting allowed: 13.10.582
C, CT, VA, PA, PF, and M zone districts generally	Indirect (exterior) sign lighting or low-intensity direct (interior) illumination, except as noted below: 13.10.581
C, CT, VA, PA, PF, and M property located across street from a residential zone district	Only indirect (exterior) sign lighting allowed: 13.10.581(c)
Scenic corridors	No sign lighting allowed: 13.10.581(h)
Scenic resource areas in the Coastal Zone, except as noted below	Sign lighting allowed only for state and county informational signs: 13.20.130(c)6
Commercial and visitor serving zone districts in scenic resource areas in the Coastal Zone	Indirect (exterior) sign lighting only. No direct, reflective, or blinking illumination: 13.20.130(c)6

Reason

The purpose of regulating sign lighting in the County is to ensure that sign lighting is allowed only where appropriate, and that where it is allowed, glare is directed onsite to reduce impacts to neighboring properties and scenic areas. The County restricts the type of sign lighting allowed according to the location and zone district. The County also regulates the type of sign lighting allowed in general, requiring that sign lighting “shall be unobtrusive to adjacent properties and any glare shall be directed onto the site.” Additionally, County regulations distinguish between direct and indirect sign lighting, allowing direct sign lighting only in certain areas and requiring that it be “low intensity”.

This interpretation outlines locational restrictions for sign lighting in the County, provides additional clarification and guidelines to ensure that sign lighting is “unobtrusive” and that “offsite glare is directed on site”, and that direct sign lighting comply with the “low-intensity” requirement.

This interpretation also clarifies the difference between direct and indirect sign lighting. Although there is no definition in the County Code for direct lighting, it can be inferred from the definition for indirect lighting (13.10.700-L) that since “lighting shining on but not directly from a building or sign” is considered indirect lighting, then lighting from within the sign itself (i.e. the sign interior) would be considered direct lighting. Although in other contexts, “direct lighting” could also include lighting directed on a sign from an exterior light source as well as light from the sign interior, it is clear that in the context of our local sign regulations direct lighting refers only to light from within the sign interior and not to lighting from an exterior light source. If “direct lighting” were to include both lighting from within the sign interior and lighting directed at the sign, then indirect lighting would allow only for ambient sign lighting. Ambient lighting sufficiently bright to make a sign visible could produce off-site glare, which contradicts the purpose of local sign and lighting regulations. The definition of direct lighting as light from the sign interior is also consistent with subsection 13.10.581(i), which distinguishes between “indirect lighting” and “low-intensity interior illumination” as the two types of lighting that are allowed in commercial zone districts.

Tom Burns, Planning Director

Date