

# **City of Portage Business Sign Forum**

## **Executive Summary of Participant Feedback**

### **April 13, 2013**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This *Executive Summary* provides TSI Consulting Partners' analysis of the input received during the City of Portage's Sign Forum on April 13, 2013. Approximately 34 participants in the Sign Forum gave input in two ways:

- Providing qualitative input in response to open-ended questions asked in facilitated focus groups, and
- Providing quantitative input in response to survey questions asked in a large group setting by entering their answers on key pads.

This *Executive Summary* is divided into three sections.

- "Section 1: Summary of Survey Responses" reports the number and percentage of participant responses to each of the nine questions on the survey.
- "Section 2: Key Themes from the Focus Groups" summarizes input from the focus groups by theme under each question. Additional input from the survey is also included where appropriate to provide additional insight.
- "Section 3: TSI's Conclusions" provides several conclusions based on TSI's analysis of both survey and focus group responses.

This *Executive Summary* provides highlights of participant input and should not be considered a comprehensive summary of all participant responses.

#### **SECTION 1: SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES**

Participant responses to each of the nine questions in the survey are summarized with graphic displays of the results on pages 2 through 6 below.

Session Name: City of Portage v2

Date Created: 4/19/2013 4:00:37 PM

Active Participants: 34 of 34

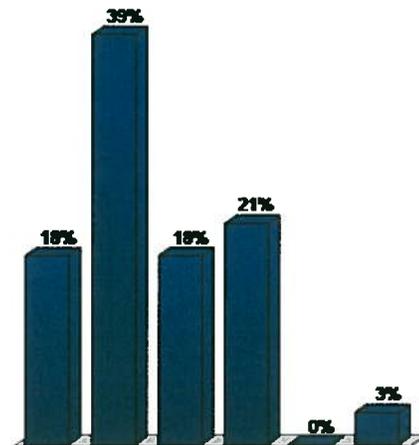
Average Score: 0.00%

Questions: 9

## Results By Question

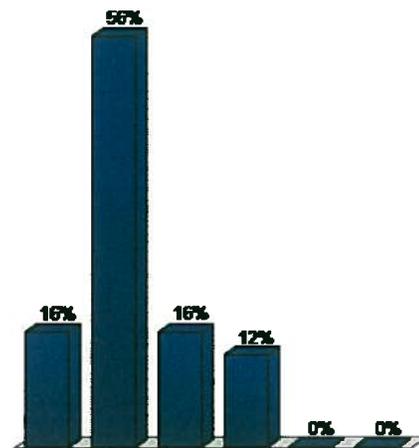
1.) On a scale of 1 to 5, the existing approach to regulating signage in the City of Portage is: (Multiple Choice)

Responses		
	Percent	Count
Far too restrictive;	18.18%	6
Somewhat too restrictive;	39.39%	13
Appropriate / At the right level;	18.18%	6
Somewhat too permissive;	21.21%	7
Far too permissive;	0%	0
Not sure/no opinion.	3.03%	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>



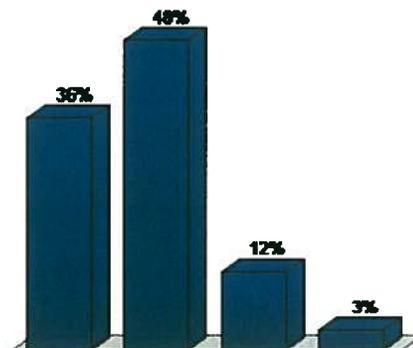
2.) On a scale of 1 to 5, I think existing signs in business areas of the City of Portage are: (Multiple Choice)

Responses		
	Percent	Count
Highly effective;	15.62%	5
Somewhat effective;	56.25%	18
Neither effective or ineffective;	15.62%	5
Somewhat ineffective;	12.5%	4
Highly ineffective;	0%	0
Not sure/no opinion.	0%	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>



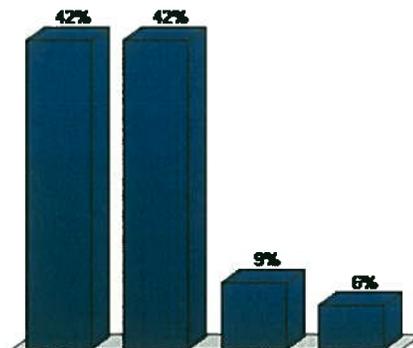
3.) With regard to the number of signs permitted for each business, on a scale of 1 to 3, I favor: (Multiple Choice)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
More signs in business areas along city streets;	36.36%	12
No change in the number of signs in business areas along city streets;	48.48%	16
Fewer signs in business areas along city streets;	12.12%	4
Not sure/no opinion.	3.03%	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>



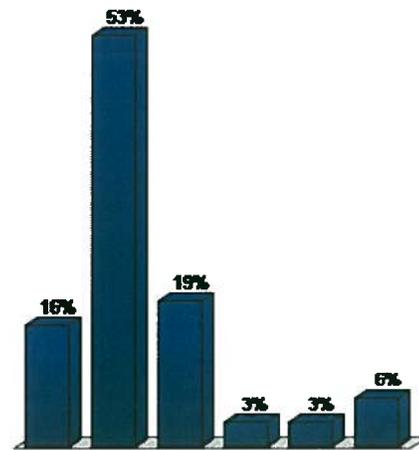
4.) With regard to the size of signs permitted for each business, on a scale of 1 to 3, I favor: (Multiple Choice)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Larger signs in business areas;	42.42%	14
No change in the size of signs in business areas;	42.42%	14
Smaller signs in business areas;	9.09%	3
Not sure/no opinion.	6.06%	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>



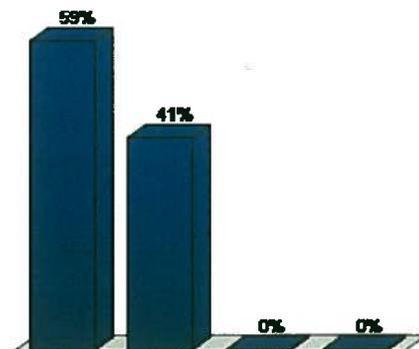
5.) Temporary signs are permitted for a period of 14 days for grand openings, change of business or going out of business events. On a scale of 1 to 5, should regulations for temporary signs be: (Multiple Choice)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Modified to permit their use anytime;	15.62%	5
Modified to increase the frequency of use;	53.12%	17
Remain unchanged;	18.75%	6
Modified to reduce their use;	3.12%	1
Modified to prohibit their use;	3.12%	1
Not sure/no opinion.	6.25%	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>



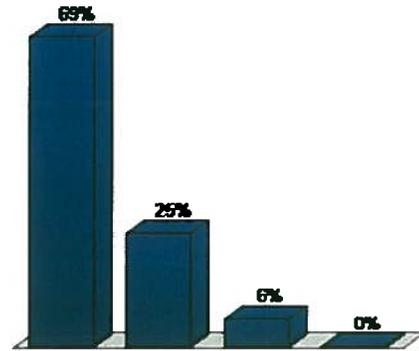
6.) Interior window signs are exempt from regulation by the sign code. On a scale of 1 to 3, should interior window sign regulations: (Multiple Choice)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Remain unchanged/exempt from sign regulation;	59.38%	19
Be regulated to restrict their use;	40.62%	13
Be regulated to prohibit their use.	0%	0
Not sure/no opinion.	0%	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>



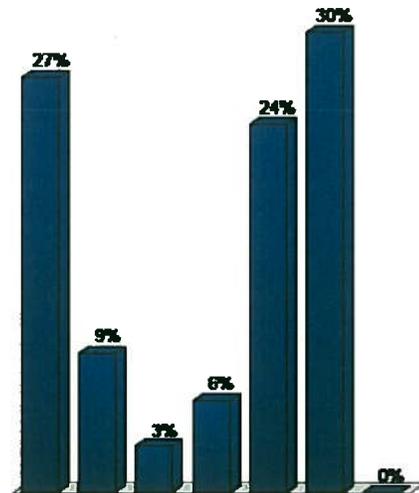
7.) Electronic Message Display (EMD) signs are permitted, but must have static (non-moving) images that change not more than once per 4 seconds. On a scale of 1 to 3, should EMD sign regulations: (Multiple Choice)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Be modified to permit more flexible use;	68.75%	22
Remain unchanged;	25%	8
Be modified to prohibit their use;	6.25%	2
Not sure/no opinion.	0%	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>



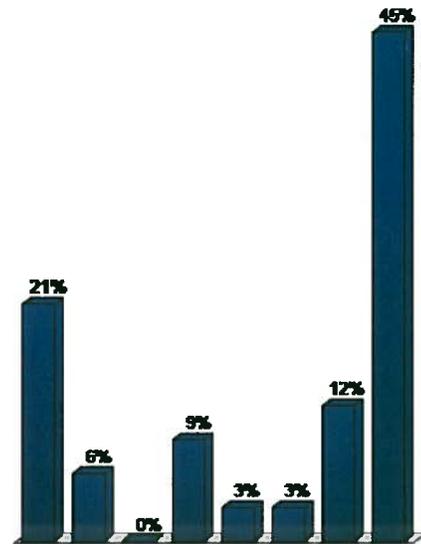
8.) Choose the one category below that best describes you: (Demographic Assignment)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Business owner/operator;	27.27%	9
Commercial developer/landlord;	9.09%	3
Commercial realtor;	3.03%	1
Sign contractor;	6.06%	2
Resident of the City of Portage;	24.24%	8
City Advisory Board/Commissioner	30.3%	10
Other.	0%	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>



9.) If you own/operate a business in Portage, please choose the one category below that best describes the type of business: (Demographic Assignment)

	Responses	
	Percent	Count
Service business (personal service, etc.);	21.21%	7
Office (medical, professional, etc.);	6.06%	2
Retail (general merchandise);	0%	0
Retail (specialty, convenience);	9.09%	3
Retail (eating and drinking);	3.03%	1
Industrial/manufacturing	3.03%	1
Other;	12.12%	4
Not a business owner/operator.	45.45%	15
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>



## **SECTION 2: KEY THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus group participants were asked open-ended question in small groups of ten participants or less. A facilitator led each focus group – asking the following questions while a recorder summarized participant responses.

- What do you see as the strengths of the City of Portage’s current approach to regulating business signage?
- What concerns do you have about the current approach to regulating signage?
- What suggestions do you have for improving the approach to regulating business signage?
- What are your thoughts on:
  - Free standing signs
  - Wall signs
  - Temporary signs
  - Electronic message displays
  - Window signs
  - Banner signs

### **What do you see as the strengths of the City of Portage’s current approach to regulating business signage?**

- Overall, the City of Portage does a good job balancing interests related to the use of signage.
  - The approach balances aesthetics, safety and business identification/visibility.
  - The intent of the sign ordinance is good. City is trying to work on behalf of the community.
  - Community aesthetics are very important – especially for people who live in the community and enjoy it every day.
  - City has done a good job controlling sign blight and distractive signs.
  - Overall, many participants see the ordinance as working well.
  - Some view the ordinance as “average” compared to other communities.
  - Others see it as above average but still see room for improvement.
- The ordinance is important for consistency.
  - The consistency of the ordinance means that we all follow the same rules.
  - The City of Kalamazoo’s lack of restrictions has led to real problems there.
  - The appeals process allows for variances in appropriate situations.
- The ability to enforce the ordinance helps ensure consistency.
  - Some see enforcement as uniform and consistent.
  - Others see enforcement as inconsistent – as is illustrated by responses to the next question.
- City staff is clear about the current code and provides clear communication.
  - Staff members are friendly, professional and provide good customer service.
  - The City is receptive to input from all concerned parties.

- A number of participants expressed appreciation of the City's efforts to host this meeting and request input from everyone.

### **What concerns do you have about the current approach to regulating signage?**

- Participants expressed a range of views on current signage regulations.
  - Some express concern that current regulations are too restrictive and inhibit business growth.
  - Others see it as adequate but do not want it to become more restrictive.
  - Some participants, particularly those most concerned with aesthetics, express a desire to increase restrictions. (The responses to survey question 1 reported above on page 2 illustrate this range of views.)
  - The sign code is too complex.
  - The broad definition of "sign" and the inability to apply more discretion and reasonableness in what constitute a "sign" is an issue.
  - What's the rational basis for the sign sizes permitted under the ordinance?
  - There needs to be future consideration and allowances for mixed use developments consistent with City of Portage Vision 2025 Plan.
  - The sign code needs to keep up with rapidly changing technology.
  - The variance process is daunting.
- Signage is not being looked at from a business perspective.
  - Portage's sign code is perceived as hostile towards business compared to communities like Kalamazoo or Vicksburg
  - In considering the sign code, the important question for the City to ask is: "Does signage help a business grow?"
  - Currently, there isn't an effective way to advertise a new service, member, or product.
  - Business owners face difficult times; they need more opportunities/allowances for on-premises signage, such as:
    - Slightly larger signs
    - More temporary signage options
  - Businesses are unaware signage is nonconforming until after they move in and are forced to sign a five-year agreement to remove the sign.
- Current signage regulations are more appropriate for big business than for small business.
  - The code seems to be geared towards big chains, not local small businesses.
  - The City should have separate standards for large businesses and small businesses.
  - There's too much emphasis on safety at the expense of small businesses being able to get their message out.
- Because enforcement is complaint-based, it's inconsistent.
  - The City doesn't have the budget to have the staff drive all the key routes on a daily basis.
  - Violations are brought to the staff's attention by employees, the City Council and concerned citizens.
  - There is no enforcement of sign violations by churches and schools.

- There have been times when staff members may have an underlying agenda regarding the use and appearance of signs. They should be unbiased and just let the sign code speak for itself.
- Zoning Board members are not well-informed about sign code.

**What suggestions do you have for improving the approach to regulating business signage?**

- The City of Portage needs to consider ways to provide more proactive advice on signage regulations.
  - There's a need for more education for business owners regarding the types of signs that are allowed in the City of Portage.
  - The need for education and advice is even more critical to help small businesses.
  - Before conducting a survey or considering changes to the ordinance, the City needs to educate the community on what the current sign regulations are. If businesses were fully aware of the current requirements, ordinance changes may not be necessary.
- Adopt ordinance amendments friendly to small businesses.
  - For example, allow small businesses to use inexpensive, temporary signs.
  - Don't penalize the smaller business owners; they don't have the advertising budget of larger businesses.
  - Have a special liaison or ombudsman to help small businesses with code issues.
- Sign contractors need to do a better job of helping their clients understand what the ordinances are in the City of Portage and the importance of complying with them.
  - They need to advise clients on what they can and can't do in the City.
  - If they promote the full capability of an electronic message display, they are overselling their customer.
  - They need to let customers know that regardless of what the sign is capable of doing, only certain things are allowed within the City of Portage.
- Increase the consistency of enforcement of signage regulation.
  - The City needs to make it easier to report violations – by telephone, email, etc.
  - The methods need to be confidential. (That's why the City's website specifically says not to use the website to report ordinance violations.)
  - One remedy for "snipe" temporary signs would be to find a volunteer whose sole job is to remove them.
  - The City of Portage needs to follow its own signage regulations.
- Find more creative ways to solicit additional citizen input regarding signage in the community.
- Participants provided the following suggestions for changing signage regulation.
  - Adopt state sign regulations to ensure consistent standards between the City of Portage and the public schools.
  - Have sign companies draft the new sign code.
  - Consider an ordinance option that would allocate a total square footage formula to a property (based on size, frontage, etc.) and give the business owner the

flexibility to determine how to distribute that total square footage among different sign types – such as freestanding, wall, billboard, etc.

- Allow larger signs so that businesses don't have to resort to a roadside "clown suit" strategy
- Use new approaches to ordinance development in order to allow creative signs.
- Provide more advertising options for businesses using technology.
- Consider increasing the square footage on billboards (600+ square feet is standard size) and allow them in districts zoned other than industrial – especially along US-131 and I-94.
- Consider removing billboards from other inappropriate locations within the community.
- Don't require landscaping along streets; it sometimes obstructs the visibility of signage.

### **Free standing signs**

- The City should make minor adjustments to its regulations in order to allow for more sign area.
- The City needs to continue to be sensitive to vision blockage.
- Business signs for corner lots should not be permitted at the corner (intersection).
- I have a strong preference for monument signs. Often, they have an architectural element that is very aesthetic. In addition, if there is an attractive border/architectural element or landscaping around the base of the sign, it helps aesthetically. If signs use these features, the City could allow them to be larger – loosening the restrictions on monument signs to apply the size/scale restriction only to the sign face.
- Multi-tenant freestanding business signs are often too small to be effective in identifying the businesses. When larger tenant suites are broken up into smaller suites, the business name for each tenant ends up being too small.

### **Wall signs**

- Most participants thought that the current wall sign regulations are appropriate.
- Some thought minor adjustments could be made to allow for more sign area.
- Some indicated smaller businesses could be given a "sign bonus."

### **Temporary signs**

- A number of participants expressed concern about pop up temporary signs.
  - Pop up signs are an eye sore, and the City should tighten restrictions on them.
  - As a business owner, I think that temporary signs – particularly pop up signs – are clutter and an eye sore. They should be restricted more.
  - As a resident I totally agree.
  - Too many 'snipe' yard signs and telephone pole signs blight major intersections.

- Firms on the internet actually promote these “bandit signs” – knowing that they will only survive for two to three days.
- A number of participants suggested expanding the use of temporary signs.
  - Provide more options for business owners to advertise special events for short periods of time
  - Allow more days for temporary signs. (Texas Township allows 52 days per year, and the City of Kalamazoo allows 30 days per year.)
  - Allow temporary signs for sales in commercial zones for two weeks every year.
  - Two weeks for temporary signs is sufficient, but we could consider four weeks.
  - Temporary signage should be expanded to include advertising a new service, member, product or special event.
- Other participants want to keep temporary sign availability limited and appreciate the current approach to temporary signs. In addition, concern was expressed that temporary signs advertising festivals downtown detract from business and should be more tightly restricted.
- Participants provided the following suggestions regarding regulation of temporary signs.
  - Require permits for the temporary signs like Kalamazoo does.
  - Reduce the application fee for temporary signs.
  - We need stronger enforcement on temporary signs and put teeth into the regulation.
  - We need increased enforcement of pop up temporary signs, including increasing the consequence for repeat offenses. Removing the sign is not a sufficient disincentive.
  - The City should consider whether to regulate political signs. During the election season, they can get out of hand. Candidates don't do a good job of taking down their signs after the election.
  - There's a need to enforce the current code on temporary signage equally.
- Survey results demonstrate that all eight respondents describing themselves as business owners/operators support more frequent use of temporary signs.

### **Electronic message displays**

- Participants expressed significant differences of opinion on electronic message displays.
  - Some residents argue that the ordinance regulating electronic message displays should stay at least as restrictive as it is – if not become more restrictive.
  - They prefer less movement on electronic message displays – expressing concern about safety, particularly driver distraction.
  - They also express a desire for appropriate regulation knowing that the number of electronic message displays will increase over time.
  - Business owners view the sign ordinance as very restrictive of the use of electronic message displays. They want greater flexibility to more fully utilize the capability of electronic message displays.

- As a business owner with an electronic message display, I would like to see fewer restrictions on them.
  - At present, the only possibility is “block on/block off” with a four second message. I’d like to have more flexibility to allow “twinkle on/twinkle off.”
  - I agree that we don’t want to allow video or push electronic signage to the extreme.
- The City should allow softer transitions for electronic message displays to reduce a harsh or flash transition from one image to the next.
- Some business owners want the ability to use video while other business owners think the City should stop short of allowing video.
- As technology becomes more inexpensive, electronic message displays will proliferate and there will be pressure on the City to ease restrictions.
- Some participants expressed concern about the brightness of electronic message displays, particularly its impact of neighborhoods, the elderly and safety at night.
- The City should consider further regulation of sign brightness, such as using photo sensors that adjust brightness and contrast based on ambient light levels.
- Concerned was expressed about the visual impact of an existing I-94 electronic billboard on the residential area surrounding it.
- Some participants urge stronger enforcement of electronic message display violations.
  - Some businesses are in violation of the ordinance.
  - There doesn’t seem to be enforcement of violations by churches and schools.
  - Businesses that are complying with the ordinance are being disadvantaged by those who go against the ordinance without suffering any consequences.
  - With all signs other than electronic message displays, compliance with the ordinance occurs when the sign is erected. With electronic message displays, compliance can be a day-by-day or hour-by-hour issue. Every time the business changes its message, the sign can violate the ordinance.
- Survey results indicate that all but one of the nine respondents that categorize themselves as business owners/operators favor allowing more flexible use of electronic message displays.

## **Window signs**

- The biggest concern expressed about window signs is that they often create clutter and are “tacky.”
- Even those participants who view window signs as creating clutter and question their effectiveness don’t necessarily advocate regulating them.
- Other participants do recommend regulating window signs.
- Because window signs are more often oriented toward foot traffic than vehicle traffic, they don’t pose the level of safety concern as other signs.
- All respondents (eight) that characterize themselves as business owners/operators want window signs to remain exempt from regulation. 50% (four respondents) of those who characterize themselves as residents think window signs should be regulated to restrict their use.

## **Banner signs**

- Some participants recommend that banner signs be allowed in all commercial districts and on all commercial property.
- Some business owners participating in the Sign Forum were unfamiliar with the possibility of using banner signs and appreciated the additional flexibility they provide for promoting their businesses.
- Some participants expressed concern that banner signs are too costly to help small business owners.

## SECTION 3: TSI CONCLUSIONS

This section provides TSI Consulting Partners' conclusions based on its analysis of the survey results and focus group input.

- The Sign Forum provided an effective approach for:
  - Convening a wide range of participants interested in signage regulation in the City of Portage,
  - Securing their input on current and potential approaches to signage regulation,
  - Providing a forum for community dialogue on signage regulation in which differing views could be voiced, summarized and reported.
- The difficulty of regulating signage in the City of Portage is illustrated by response to survey question 1 – which is reported on page 2 above.
  - 19 of 33 respondents (approximately 58%) indicate that signage regulation is too restrictive.
  - Six respondents (approximately 18%) indicate that it is appropriate/at the right level.
  - Seven respondents (approximately 21%) indicate that it is too permissive.
- The survey respondents who characterized themselves as business owners/operators are the strongest proponents of more flexible signage regulation.
  - Four respondents (50%) view the existing approach as “far too restrictive.”
  - Four respondents (50%) view it as “somewhat too restrictive.”
  - Six respondents (67%) would like more signs in business areas along city streets.
  - Seven respondents (78%) would like to see larger signs.
- Participants voluntarily self-selected to attend the Sign Forum. As a result, it brought together people with a significant interest in signage regulation. While this is valuable method of surfacing a range of views on signage regulation, this input should not be considered a scientific sample of Portage residents.
- The number of people participating in the Sign Forum is relatively small – 34. In addition, when considering the views expressed of categories of participants – such as business owner/operators or residents – the numbers are even smaller. (In most cases, less than 10.) As a result, policy makers and administrators will need to consider the input from the Sign Forum in light of other factors in developing and implementing approaches to regulating signage within the City of Portage.