Title:	**Temporary Sign Placement Enforcement During Elections Policy**	
Policy #:	118	
Sponsored by:	City Clerk's Office	
Approved by:	City Council	
Date:	Issued: 03/16/2026	Amended: __/__/____

Purpose

This policy establishes standardized guidelines for the City's enforcement of San Mateo Municipal Code (SMMC) Title 25 (Signs) (hereafter, the "Sign Ordinance"), as it specifically relates to temporary signs within city limits.

Policy

The Sign Ordinance establishes standards governing the placement, size, location, and manner of signs within the City. Signs that are installed or maintained in violation of the Sign Ordinance, including but not limited to Chapters 25.04 (Signs on Public Property and in the Public Right-of-Way), 25.06 (Signs on Private Property), and 25.08 (Prohibited, Illegal, and Non-Conforming Signs, are subject to enforcement action in accordance with the municipal code. These include signs commonly displayed during election campaigns, referred to herein for convenience as "temporary signs."

Except where a sign is prohibited or otherwise unlawful under the Sign Ordinance, this policy does not restrict an individual's ability to place a temporary sign on private property they own or lawfully control, and is not intended to regulate the content of signs, including political speech. The provisions of the Sign Ordinance are content-neutral time, place, and manner regulations, adopted to preserve community aesthetics, as well as traffic and pedestrian safety, while protecting free speech rights in accordance with the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, among other purposes identified in SMMC section 25.02.010.

Refer to the Sign Ordinance for applicable restrictions and definitions. See Exhibit 1 for excerpts most applicable to temporary signage.

Scope

This policy shall apply to all city employees, unless a department policy addresses the same subject. If there is a conflict between the requirements of this policy or the procedures implementing the policy and the department's policy, the more restrictive shall apply, unless compliance with the more restrictive requirement would conflict with applicable law

Responsibility

1. City Clerk's Office

    A. Receive and record complaints regarding temporary signs, either directly (e.g., via email or phone) or through a web-based complaint form. Record: date/time received, location, photos (if provided), complainant contact (if any), and alleged issue (ROW/private property/visibility/attachment, etc.).

    B. Serve as the primary point of contact between: the complainant, the impacted campaign committee (if applicable and when identifiable), and City staff responsible for verification and/or removal/impoundment.

    C. Distribute this policy and an informal Code Enforcement courtesy notice to each active campaign committee operating within the City (e.g., upon filing/ identification as active) and maintain a record of distribution.

    D. Maintain public-facing educational information on the City's website (e.g., "Temporary Sign Rules") that summarizes the City's content-neutral time/place/manner sign regulations under the Sign Ordinance, including key restrictions for signs in the public right-of-way (Chapter 25.04) and prohibitions under Chapter 25.08.

    E. Coordinate periodic election-season reminders to campaign committees and the public.

2. Code Enforcement Division

    A. Assist with field verification of potential violations of the Sign Ordinance, including: whether the sign appears to be in the public right-of-way and subject to Chapter 25.04 restrictions; whether the sign appears to meet prohibited conditions under SMMC section 25.08.010(a)–(b) (e.g., no consent, prohibited locations, visibility/ingress-egress hazards); and whether immediate action is warranted due to safety concerns (unsafe sign condition consistent with SMMC section 25.08.010(c)(2))

    B. Prepare a formal courtesy notice from the Code Enforcement Division to be distributed to campaign committees and violators.

    C. When signs require immediate removal/impoundment (e.g., signs in the ROW in violation of the Sign Ordinance), assist with or coordinate collection support consistent with SMMC section 25.08.010(d)(2).

    D. Issue formal notifications on Code Enforcement letterhead to address repeat violations of the municipal code.

3. Public Works Department

A. Once the City Clerk's Office or Code Enforcement Division has identified a violation, the Public Works Department will assist with the collection, transport, and impoundment of signs that are removed from public property or the public right-of-way pursuant to SMMC section 25.08.010(d)(2).

B. Maintain or coordinate an impound storage process consistent with SMMC section 25.08.010(d)(2) (e.g., holding period, inventory, and disposal process after a minimum of 10 days' notice), and provide inventory details to the City Clerk's Office and Code Enforcement to support owner notification efforts, including retrieval after the appropriate impounding time has elapsed.

Procedures

1. Violation Criteria

    A. Refer to the Sign Ordinance for applicable restrictions and definitions. See Exhibit 1 for excerpts most applicable to temporary signage.

2. Reporting and Intake

    A. Complaint Intake

        a) The City Clerk's Office is responsible for receiving and documenting temporary sign complaints submitted by members of the public or City staff.

        b) Complaints should include location, description of the sign, date observed, and photographs.

        c) Signs deemed to be in violation of the Sign Ordinance and this policy will be removed without notice.

    B. Recordkeeping

        a) Maintain a log of reported violations, including referral status and resolution.

    C. Recordkeeping

        a) The City Clerk's Office will refer reported violations to Code Enforcement, with City Attorney's Office support, as needed, for verification and follow-up.

3. Enforcement Process

    A. Education and Awareness

        a) The City Clerk's Office shall provide a copy of this policy to candidates, and active committees to advise of the temporary sign placement rules, reporting procedures and enforcement process.

B. Verification:

a) Code Enforcement Division, in coordination with the City Clerk's Office, will verify reported violations to determine whether the sign complies with the Sign Ordinance.

b) Enforcement of sign regulations is generally complaint driven, however City staff may identify signs in violation of the Sign Ordinance during routine inspections or while performing official duties.

C. Violations on Private Property

a) Code Enforcement, in coordination with the City Clerk's Office, may contact the property owner or lawful occupant to confirm whether permission was granted for the placement of the temporary sign.

b) Upon verification of a violation, if that violation is not cured by the property owner or person responsible for the installation or maintenance of the sign, Code Enforcement may issue a formal notice of violation.

D. Violation on public Property or in the Public Right-of-Way

a) Immediate Removal

i. Pursuant to SMMC section 25.08.010(d)(2), any temporary sign placed on public property or within the public right-of-way in violation of the Sign Ordinance may be removed and impounded without prior notice.

ii. Code Enforcement, with assistance from Public Works staff, will coordinate removal and transport of the sign and place it in a dedicated storage area.

b) Impounding and retrieval

i. Removed signs must be held for a minimum of thirty (30) days

4. After notice is provided, the owner has ten (10) days to retrieve the sign and pay the fee for retrieval and storage, as determined by City Council.

i. During this period, the City will make reasonable efforts to notify the sign owner or responsible party, if identifiable.

ii. If the sign is not retrieved within that timeframe, the City may dispose of the sign at its discretion.

Attachments

1. Exhibit 1 - Excerpts from San Mateo Municipal Code— Title 25 (Signs)

Related Policies

Note any related policies that should be cross-referenced using the following format:

1. Policy XXX – The City's Policy is established in accordance with Municipal Code Chapter 25.08 (Prohibited, Illegal And Non-Conforming Signs) and may be modified by the City Manager to comply with any changes to that Chapter.

Contact for this Policy

City Clerk

Code Enforcement Manager

Approval

This policy was issued on March 16, 2026 and approved by:

CITY COUNCIL

Resolution No. 24 (2026)

Exhibit 1

Excerpts from

San Mateo Municipal Code— Title 25 (Signs)

Chapter 25.02 GENERAL PROVISIONS

25.02.010 PURPOSE.

The intent of this Title is to provide standards for the regulation of signs in order to:

(a) Protect and enhance the visual and aesthetic character of residential neighborhoods, business areas, and all zoning districts by prohibiting the visual clutter of obtrusive and incompatible signs;

(b) Allow for reasonable and equitable identification of businesses and properties; and

(c) Protect free speech rights in accordance with the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

25.02.030 DEFINITIONS.

(i) **Freestanding Sign.** A sign which is self-supporting in a fixed location and not attached to or projecting over any building.

…

(v) **Private Property.** Property other than Public Property or Public Right-of-Way.

…

(x) **Public Property.** Property owned by the City, but excluding Public Right of Way.

(y) **Public Right-of-Way.** That area or those areas dedicated to public use for public street purposes including, but not limited to, roadways, parkways, alleys, and sidewalks.

…

(bb) **Sign.** Any structure, display, device, balloon or graphic placed on any land, building or structure, which is used to communicate any message, or which advertises or promotes any business, product, activity, person or interest. Signs include, but are not limited to, any writing, pictorial representation, logo, symbol, banner, or any other figure of similar character of whatever material which is used to identify, announce, direct attention to, advertise or communicate, which is not inside a building. The term "placed" shall include constructing, erecting, posting, painting, printing, tacking, nailing, gluing, sticking, carving, stringing, or otherwise fastening, affixing, or making visible in any manner whatsoever. Notwithstanding the general scope of the foregoing, the following shall not be deemed to be signs for the purposes of this Title

…

(cc) **Sign Area.** The area in square feet within the smallest rectangle enclosing the total exterior surface of a sign or one face of a "double faced sign". Sign area for a multi-faced sign that

has an angle between sides of the sign that exceeds 30 degrees shall be counted for all sides. Where the lettered or illustrated material of a sign consists of individual letters or if the message surface consists of noncontiguous segments or has an irregularly shaped perimeter, then the area of the sign shall be all of the area encompassed within a single continuous rectilinear- perimeter of not more than six straight lines, including any color, material or graphic which is integrated therein which differentiates the message from the background.

…

(ee) **Temporary Sign.** A sign to be displayed only for a limited time as specified by this Chapter. A temporary sign includes a temporary banner.

Chapter 25.04 SIGNS ON PUBLIC PROPERTY AND IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY

25.04.010 FINDINGS.

In enacting this Chapter, the City Council finds:

(a) If carefully regulated, the placement of signs on city sidewalks by private individuals can provide a useful outlet for the expression of ideas and the communication of information related to beneficial commercial activity, including, but not limited to, the advertisement of real estate open house events.

(b) It is the desire of the City Council to enact standards that would allow for the regulated use of city sidewalks for these communication purposes.

(c) In enacting these regulations it is not the intention of the City Council to regulate the content of messages on signs to be placed on city sidewalks, but, instead, it is the City Council's intention to enact reasonable time, place and manner restrictions aimed at insuring the safety of those using the public sidewalks and those driving on adjacent streets, and to achieve the City's aesthetic interests by reducing visual clutter that would result from the unregulated posting of signs on sidewalks.

25.04.020 RESTRICTIONS APPLICABLE TO SIGNS ON PUBLIC PROPERTY AND IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY

(a) Except as otherwise provided in this Chapter, it is unlawful for any person other than a City representative to place a sign on public property or in the public right-of-way where such sign fails to comply with any of the restrictions stated in this section.

(b) Restrictions Applicable to Signs.

(1) No sign shall exceed thirty-six inches in height.

(2) No sign shall exceed six square feet in area.

(3) All signs shall be constructed or anchored to prevent movement of the sign by the wind, except that an anchoring shall not be permanent and shall not damage the property on which the sign is placed.

(c) Restrictions Applicable to the Placement of Signs.

(1) No sign shall be placed during hours of darkness.

(2) No sign shall be placed within the median of any public street.

(3) No sign shall be attached to, or leaned against, any street furniture, utility facility (including poles and boxes), street light, building, fence, or any other sign.

(4) No sign shall be placed within 50 feet of any other sign placed under the provisions of this chapter, except that as many as 4 signs may be placed on sidewalks within 50 feet of the intersection of public streets on each corner of such intersections.

(5) No sign shall be placed in such a manner as to reduce the unobstructed path of travel on any sidewalk to less than 36 inches, and if the existing unobstructed path of travel of a sidewalk is 36 inches or less, no sign shall be placed on that sidewalk.

(6) No sign shall be placed within a curb cut or ramp installed to provide improved access to a sidewalk to the disabled.

(7) No sign shall be placed upon any public right-of-way other than a public sidewalk, except that signs may be placed in unimproved right-of-way with the consent of the owner of the adjoining property.

(8) No sign shall be placed upon public right-of-way within the areas bounded by Baldwin Avenue to the north, Railroad Avenue to the east, Fifth Avenue to the south, and El Camino Real to the west.

(d) No person shall display a sign that would otherwise be in violation of any of the standards provided in subsections (b) and (c) by placing the sign upon, or leaning the sign against, a vehicle parked within the public right-of-way. This prohibition shall not apply to signs placed within the interior of a vehicle, signs that are painted on a vehicle, or to signs

Chapter 25.08 PROHIBITED, ILLEGAL AND NON-CONFORMING SIGNS

25.08.010 PROHIBITED SIGNS ON PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROPERTY AND PUBLIC RIGHT OF WAY.

(a) Prohibited Signs. No person shall install or maintain any of the signs described below. Upon notice by the City, any prohibited sign shall be immediately removed by the property owner

or person responsible for the installation or maintenance of the sign. The following signs are expressly prohibited:

(1) Without Consent of Property Owner. Signs erected or maintained without the written consent of the owner of the real property or the person or entity in legal possession of the real property;

(2) Banners, except as permitted by Sections 25.04.030 and 25.06.050(a) and there may be permanently displayed on each zoning plot 1 flag that is no larger than 6 feet by 4 feet in dimension, and there is no limit on the number of flags that may be displayed by public agencies on public property;

(3) Rotating, animated, moving or flashing signs;

(4) Roof Signs;

(5) Off-Site Advertising Signs; except that one six (6) square foot sign containing off-site advertising shall be permitted on each zoning plot; (6) Inflating Devices, including balloons and other lighter than air objects;

(7) Signs not permitted by this Title.

(b) **Signs At Prohibited Locations:** No person shall install or maintain any of the signs identified below. Upon notice by the City, any sign at a prohibited location shall be immediately abated by the property owner or person responsible for the installation and/or maintenance of the sign.
The following locations are expressly prohibited:

(1) **Signs at Intersections.** No sign shall be erected at or near the intersection of any street or at any location where, by reason of the position, shape or color, it may interfere with, obstruct the view of, or be confused with any authorized traffic sign or signal device; or which makes use of the words "Stop," "Go," "Caution," "Look," "Danger," or any other word, phrase, symbol or character in such a manner as to interfere with, mislead or confuse traffic.

(2) **Intersection Visibility.** No sign shall be erected at or near the intersection of any street so as to obstruct free and clear vision, or obstruct visibility within the triangular area of private property formed by the extension of intersection curb lines, or pavement edge where no curb exists, and the diagonal line connecting the point on each of the two streets at a distance 45 feet back from the intersection.

(3) **Ingress/Egress.** No sign shall be erected, relocated or maintained so as to prevent free ingress to or egress from any door, window, fire escape or fire equipment.

(c) **Illegal Signs—Nuisance.** All illegal signs are expressly declared a nuisance. For purposes of this section, an illegal sign shall mean:

(1) A sign erected and/or maintained without first complying with all ordinances and regulations.

(2) A sign which is a danger to the public or is unsafe.

(3) A prohibited sign as defined by this title.

(d) Enforcement.

(1) The placement of a sign on public or private property or in the public right-of-way in violation of any provision of this Title may be enforced by any method provided by this Code. Each day that the violation continues shall be deemed to be a new violation. All violations are declared to be public nuisances.

(2) Any sign placed on public property or in the public right-of-way in violation of any provision of this Title may be removed and impounded without notice. Impounded signs will be held for at least 30days. If possible, the City will make reasonable attempts to notify the owner of an impounded sign that the sign has been impounded. If after 10 days' notice to reclaim the sign, the owner of the sign fails to retrieve the sign and pay the City's reasonable costs to impound and store the sign, the sign may be disposed of in any manner whatsoever at the City's discretion. The amount of the sign retrieval fee shall be established by City Council resolution.