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Wednesday, January 12, 2005

## For one pub, future may hold good signs

Restaurant owner hopes new Farmington signage law lets it keep custom-made items.

By Delores Patterson / The Detroit News

**FARMINGTON** -- Almost three years ago, John Cowley & Sons restaurant and Irish Pub had two new signs shipped from Ireland and installed outside the building as part of a remodeling project.

The family business owners didn't realize that a Farmington law prohibits signs that project from buildings.

The fate of the signs is left hanging as city officials study proposed changes to its law, to improve aesthetics of the area and allow for more modern signs in the downtown area.

"We are in total support of changes because our business has to be visible to our clientele within reason," said Maureen Cowley, the wife of one of the restaurant owners. "Our new signs stand vertical off the building as opposed to being flat, which makes it more pedestrian-friendly because you can walk or drive down the street and see the signs without having to turn and look at the building. That also helps from a public safety point of view as well."

Updating the local law is partly a result of the Main Street Oakland County revitalization program, City Manager Vincent Pastue said. Main Street has been



Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

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working with Farmington for two years to enhance downtown, with the help of consultants. The goal is to allow for improvements while preserving historical buildings, Pastue said.

When analysis of the downtown began, the city was advised to design guidelines for storefront displays because many stores had unattractive hand-written signs in their windows, said Nick Kalogeresis, program associate at the National Main Street Center in Chicago.

"We want to help reduce any clutter and motorist distractions," Pastue said.

The proposed changes to the law include phasing out the roughly five or six large freestanding signs that are supported by poles and replacing them with monument signs that are built into the ground.

The new law also would allow for panel signs that include multiple business names, window signs that don't cover more than 25 percent of the window and projecting signs that extend from a building but no more than 8 feet above ground, according to the ordinance draft.

"I think the changes will provide certain quaintness," Pastue said.

Skip Rosenthal, owner of Books Abound on Grand River, said he will comply with any changes in the law.

"We mostly have signs in the widows that may be a bit over what is required but are in no way obtrusive and wouldn't require a lot to modify," Rosenthal said.

Other communities that have been studying such sign laws include Birmingham, where some members of the city's Historic District and Design Review Committee want to rid the area of all pole signs to reduce visual clutter. But the matter was tabled last year for further review after the business community spoke out against it, saying signs like the big wheel

**Maureen Cowley, whose husband owns John Cowley & Sons, says the restaurant-pub could be forced to move its sign depending on what changes are made to Farmington's sign laws.**

### Banned signs

The following is a sample of signs that currently are not allowed in downtown Farmington.

- Abandoned or obsolete signs that no longer advertise a bona fide business.
- Signs held by pedestrians intended to draw customers to a business.
- Signs that include moving or flashing lights.
- Signs affixed to a parked vehicle or truck trailer that is being used solely for advertising.



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sign at Albans restaurant on Woodward are landmarks.

Pole signs are defined as permanent signs that stand separately from the business they advertise. Birmingham made changes to its law in 1995 and 1999 to reduce sign sizes and ban the construction of any new pole signs. The committee wants all pole signs that have been grandfathered in brought into compliance or removed by 2011.

Last year in Rochester Hills, about 100 businesses fought for an extension on a deadline for bringing all commercial signs within the city's 7-foot cap on sign height. In 1997, the city amended the sign law to give owners seven years to comply with the cap, which was extended to 2010.

The proposed Farmington changes will be presented to the city's planning commission next month. A public hearing will be held for community feedback before the City Council makes a final decision in March. The goal is to have the new law amended and ready for implementation before April 1, Pastue said.

Signs that do not comply with the revised law will have 12 years to make changes. The Downtown Development Authority also is contemplating a program for any of the 180 merchants who need financial assistance replacing existing signage, said authority member Greg Cowley, a member of the family that owns John Cowley & Sons, which has been on Grand River since 1972.

Cowley is allowed to keep up his more-than-\$5,000 noncompliant restaurant signs until a decision is made on the proposed law changes.

*You can reach Delores Patterson at (248) 647-7225 or [dpatterson@detnews.com](mailto:dpatterson@detnews.com). Source: City of Farmington Source: City of Farmington*

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**The sign at John Cowley & Sons projects from the building rather than resting flat against it, which makes it noncompliant with Farmington's sign laws.**

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