

ZONING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

July 29, 2026



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 16 N Carroll Street

Project Name: The Historian Hotel

Application Type: Approval for Comprehensive Design Review for Signage

Legistar File ID # [93706](#)

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The applicant is requesting a Comprehensive Design Review for Signage (CDR) for an existing commercial building that is being converted into a hotel. Originally known as the Gay Building and noted as the first skyscraper in Madison, the building was built in 1914 as a mixed-use development, with retail on the first floor and offices above. The property is in the Downtown Core (DC) zoning district, where the Downtown Design Guidelines apply. The project site abuts N Carroll Street (2 lanes, 25 mph).

As part of the CDR request, the applicant is requesting:

- One wall sign mounted on the window mullions crossing architectural details (green tinted glass windows), which is not a qualifying signable area.

Comprehensive Design Review - Approval Criteria

Pursuant to Section 31.043(4)(b), MGO, the UDC shall apply the following criteria upon review of an application for a Comprehensive Sign Plan:

1. *The Sign Plan **shall create visual harmony between the signs, building(s), and building site through unique and exceptional use of materials, design, color, any lighting, and other design elements; and shall result in signs of appropriate scale and character to the uses and building(s) on the zoning lot as well as adjacent buildings, structures and uses.***
2. *Each element of the Sign Plan **shall be found to be necessary due to unique or unusual design aspects in the architecture or limitations in the building site or surrounding environment;** except that when a request for an Additional Sign Code Approval under Sec. 31.043(3) is included in the Comprehensive Design Review, the sign(s) eligible for approval under Sec. 31.043(3) shall meet the applicable criteria of Sec. 31.043(3), except that sign approvals that come to Comprehensive Design Review from MXC and EC districts pursuant to 31.13(3) and (7) need not meet the criteria of this paragraph.*
3. *The Sign Plan shall not violate any of the stated purposes described in Sec. 31.02(1) and 33.24(2).*
4. *All signs must meet minimum construction requirements under Sec. 31.04(5).*
5. *The Sign Plan shall not approve Advertising beyond the restrictions in Sec. 31.11 or Off-Premise Directional Signs beyond the restrictions in Sec. 31.115.*
6. *The Sign Plan shall not be approved if any element of the plan:*
 - a. *presents a hazard to vehicular or pedestrian traffic on public or private property,*
 - b. *obstructs views at points of ingress and egress of adjoining properties,*
 - c. *obstructs or impedes the visibility of existing lawful signs on adjacent property, or*
 - d. *negatively impacts the visual quality of public or private open space.*

7. *The Sign Plan may only encompass signs on private property of the zoning lot or building site in question, and shall not approve any signs in the right of way or on public property.*

Wall Signs Permitted per Sign Ordinance: Summarizing MGO 31.07, there shall be one signable area for each façade facing a street or parking lot 33 feet in width or greater. For a single occupancy, stand-alone, non-residential building with twenty-five thousand (25,000) square feet or more in floor area, or a non-residential occupancy or tenant space with twenty-five thousand (25,000) square feet or more in floor area in a multi-tenant building, the maximum net area of all wall signs shall be thirty percent (30%) of the signable area. In no case shall a wall sign exceed one hundred twenty (120) square feet in net area.

In addition, wall signs shall be located in an identifiable *signable area* as defined by MGO 31.03:

*One designated area of the facade of the building up to the roof line that is **free of doors, windows** (for purposes of this definition, spandrel panels or other non-vision glass used as an exterior building material are not considered windows) or **other major architectural detail**, that extends no higher than the juncture of the wall and the roof...*

Proposed Signage: The applicant is requesting an internally illuminated, individual channel letter sign, with a net area of 19.15 sq. ft. The sign will be mounted to the aluminum storefront window frames above the canopy. This is not considered to be a qualifying signable area, as the area consists of green tinted glass windows.

Staff Comments: Given the high level of architectural detailing found on this building's street-facing façade, there are extremely limited alternatives locations for a wall sign of this size located by the main entrance to this building.

Staff note that the Sign Code would allow for an above-canopy sign. However, given that the canopy only projects three feet from the building, it too would need an exception. The Sign Code requires that above-canopy signs be placed more than 3 feet away from the building face, which is not possible in this case. In addition, the sign design would also need to be simplified to only include the channel lettering and not the decorative bars and stars. These design elements are what makes the sign unique and contribute to its enhanced design aesthetic. The applicant has also indicated that the proposed location on the windows and overall appearance of the sign is designed to complement the building architecture and historic character. For these reasons, staff **does not** believe that an above-canopy sign is a more viable alternative.

The window area has an area of 36 sq. ft. and at 19.15 sq. ft., the proposed sign would occupy 53% of that space, which is more than what the Sign Code would permit for a wall sign. If the proposed sign were reduced in size to only occupy 30% of the area as required by the Sign Code, it would be reduced to less than 11 sq. ft. Significantly reducing the visibility of the sign, making it less effective for business identification. Staff believe that the proposed sign size is consistent with the CDR criteria that speak to necessity (CDR Criterion No. 2).

The sign is constructed of individual channel letters with faces made of opal glass, which the applicant notes to be historically appropriate to the period the building was constructed, and would be the only kind of sign like this in Madison (CDR Criterion No. 1).

In addition, to the CDR criteria for approval, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines are also applicable. Generally, the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines speak to signage being well integrated with the building design and detailing, being contextually appropriate, as well as simple in design. As noted above, there are limited alternatives

for code compliant wall signage on this building given the design and detailing on the façade. Mounting the sign on the window mullions versus to the wall in a location obscuring other architectural details is more consistent with the intent of the guidelines. Overall, staff believe that the type of sign (wall sign) and sign design are consistent with the guidelines given the design reflects individual channel lettering which maintains an openness so as to not limit functionality of the windows; the sign type is commonly found in the downtown core; and the design (opal glass) is unique and more period appropriate for the building.

Recommendation: Staff have no objection to the CDR request and recommend the UDC find the CDR criteria for approval have been met and the proposed sign is consistent with the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines. This recommendation is subject to further testimony and new information provided during the hearing.