

ZONING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

July 16, 2025



PREPARED FOR THE URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION

Project Address: 2510 West Beltline Highway

Project Name: Rosen Nissan of Madison

Application Type: Comprehensive Design Review for Signage

Legistar File ID # [88729](#)

Prepared By: Chrissy Thiele, Zoning Inspector; Jessica Vaughn, Urban Design Commission Secretary

The applicant is requesting a Comprehensive Design Review for Signage for an existing auto dealership currently under construction to expand their service area and add a car wash bay, as well as update the building façade. The project site is located in an area that was annexed into the City of Madison after the Town of Madison dissolved on October 31, 2022. Prior to this date, signage was approved by Dane County Zoning and therefore existing signage in the area may or may not reflect signage that complies with the City of Madison Sign Code. The project site is zoned Commercial Center (CC) and abuts the West Beltline Highway (55 mph, 6 lanes).

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

- Five wall signs, including multiple signs on the south elevation, one sign that crosses architectural detail on the south elevation, and one sign that is in excess of the maximum allowed size, greater than 30% of the signage area on the east elevation,
- Two directional wall signs, which are larger than what the code allows,
- One parking lot directional sign, which is code compliant, and
- One ground signs, one that is in excess of the maximum height (13 feet) at 30 feet.

Comprehensive Design Review - Approval Criteria

1. 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 *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.*

Comprehensive Design Review - Proposed Signage

Wall Signage

Wall Signs Permitted per Sign Ordinance: Summarizing Section 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.

Relevant Sign Ordinance definitions:

Signable Area. 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, or in the case of a facade that includes a parapet wall, no more than four (4) vertical feet of the parapet wall, upon which signs are to be displayed.

Proposed Signage: The applicant is requesting a total of five wall signs. One sign is for the dealership, three are for the vehicle manufacturer, and one accessory sign to direct customers to the service area. Four of the requested signs will be on the south elevation and one remaining vehicle manufacturer sign on the east elevation. All the signs are under 120 sq. ft. in net area, but one of the vehicle manufacturer signs on the south elevation will cross architectural detail and the wall sign on the east elevation will occupy more than 30% of the signable area.

Staff Comments: Given the multiple functions associated with larger auto dealerships, it is common and necessary for this type of use to have more than one sign on an elevation, identifying the dealership name, the vehicle manufacturer, as well as accessory signage identifying other uses and ancillary building entries on the site including service or repairs, carwash, etc. with most of these establishments having their signage approved through CDR. Since this site only recently came into the City of Madison, it does not have one yet. Most of the requested signage complies with the sign code individually, however because there is more than one wall sign on the south elevation, CDR approval is needed. The Nissan logo sign also needs CDR approval as it does not sit in a signable area. The color change of the ACM panels is considered an architectural detail and creates different signable areas, which the sign code does not permit signage to cross. Lastly, the Nissan sign on the east elevation occupies 33% of the signable area, which is more than what the code permits. The requested signage for the vehicle manufacturer creates a uniform look on the building and site, with the logo adding uniqueness and interest, as well as helping identify the main entrance. Staff believe that the CDR criteria that speak to design aesthetic and necessity have been met.

Recommendation: Staff have no objection to the requested wall signage and recommend the UDC find the CDR criteria have been met. This recommendation is subject to further testimony and new information provided during the hearing.

Ground Signage

Ground Signs Permitted per Sign Ordinance: This zoning lot is allowed up to two ground signs with a combined net area of 288 sq. ft. A maximum height of 13' is permitted for monument style signs and 22' for pole style signs, based off the prevailing speeds and number of traffic lanes.

Relevant Sign Ordinance definitions:

Pole Sign. A Ground Sign that is supported by one or more poles or other supporting structures, if the total width of the pole(s) or supporting structure(s) is one third (1/3) or less than the width of the net area of the sign copy it supports. The width of all pole(s) and supporting structures at their widest point and any space between poles or supports shall be included when measuring the total width of the pole(s) and supporting structure(s).

Monument sign A Ground Sign supported by and integrated into an internal structural framework or some other solid structural features other than a pole or poles, if the total width of such supporting structure(s) is more than one-third (1/3) of the width of the net area of the sign copy it supports.

Proposed Signage: The applicant is requesting one internally illuminated double-sided monument styled ground sign, 30' tall with a total net area of 200.89 sq. ft.

Staff Comments: While the net area of the ground sign is compliant with the sign code, the applicant is requesting a new monument style ground exceeding the maximum height allowance by 17'. The sign replaces an older monument sign, which was originally approved by Dane County Zoning when it was in the Town of Madison. It should be noted that while staff would be supportive of a change of copy request (sign face change only), staff is not and have not in the past been supportive of any new ground signage being larger than what the code permits for auto dealerships, given the larger and often times increased number of wall signage also commonly associated with this type of use. In addition, staff note that UDC, generally as a past practice has consistently approved code compliant ground signage for other auto dealerships such as Hyundai East and West (Legistar File ID [80807](#) and [54199](#)), Lincoln (Legistar File ID [78596](#)), and Mitsubishi (Legistar File ID [50018](#)).

The applicant states that with the property situated lower than the Beltline, they need extra height for visibility. However, staff do not believe sufficient information has been provided to support this reasoning, including as it relates to the grade change between the W Beltline Highway and the project site, or exploring alternative sign heights in the range from 13' (a code compliant sign) up to the proposed sign height of 30' that could also be viable. The auto dealership building is visible from both westbound and eastbound lanes of the Beltline Highway, and additional building signage is also part of this CDR request, which will provide clear visibility and identification of the dealership. A ground sign at this location will seemingly be more oriented towards serving those accessing the site from the frontage road, in which case a smaller sign may be more contextually appropriate.

In addition, the photos of the requested sign imposed on the photos appear bulkier and more massive than the existing sign. All other existing signage on the Beltline appears to have space between the posts, which reduces the perceived mass and bulk of the sign, making it seem smaller in size. The ground sign request appears to be based upon the desire of the applicant for a sign that exceeds the code requirements rather than any site-based

specific challenge or condition. Overall, staff do not believe that sufficient justification has been provided for the proposed ground sign to make a finding that it is consistent with CDR Criteria No. 2.

Staff also note that a change of copy request would be a viable alternative to maintain the sign at the same height it is today.

Recommendation: Staff do not believe the applicant has satisfied CDR Criteria 2, which speaks to, in this case the necessity for a ground sign in excess of what the code would allow – a 30' tall monument styled ground sign. Staff recommend that the UDC find the criteria for CDR review have not been met and either refer the request for more information or deny the request for a monument ground sign taller than what would be otherwise allowed. This recommendation is subject to further testimony and new information provided during the hearing.

Parking Lot Signage

Parking Lot Signage Permitted per Sign Ordinance: Summarizing Section 31.03(2) and 31.044(1)(l), parking lot directional signage are necessary for safety or prompting traffic flow to a location on the premises on which the sign is located. These signs can be a maximum size of 3 sq. ft. with a maximum height of 10', and two signs per street frontage. These types of signs are exempt from permits.

Parking lot directional signs, on the other hand, designate the condition of use or identity of such parking areas. These signs can be a maximum of 9 sq. ft. and require a 10 ft. setback from the property line.

Proposed Signage: The applicant is requesting one non-illuminated double-sided monument styled ground sign, 9'10" in height, with a total net area of 1.38 sq. ft., which would be considered a parking lot directional sign. They are also requesting two directional wall signs above the garage services doors, each with a net area of 8.67 sq. ft. in net area.

Staff Comments: The proposed signage is similar in size with other parking lot directional signs used by auto dealerships and that were approved through CDR. In addition, the parking directional signage is consistently designed to reflect similar design elements as the other proposed signs in the package, and is strategically placed the building and site so as to clearly identify other services/uses on the site. For these reasons staff believe the CDR criteria have been met.

Recommendation: Staff has no objection to the CDR request and recommends the UDC find the standards for CDR review have been met. This recommendation is subject to further testimony and new information provided during the hearing.

Recommended Conditions of Approval:

- The Letter of Intent shall be revised to show single color message for the electronic message directional signs, consistent with the sign construction details.