



The purpose of this guide is to assist business owners, institutional leaders, and sign installers with requirements for Electronic Message Center (EMC) signs in Bismarck and its extraterritorial area.

All requirements for EMCs are found in Chapter 14-03.1 Signs, in particular Section 14-03.1-08(3)d for Commercial and Section 14-03.1-07(5)d for Residential.

Definition of Electronic Message Center

Electronic Message Center (EMC) Signs are defined in the ordinance as:

“An on-premise advertising sign with a digital display of information that is capable of displaying characters, letters or illustrations and can be electronically changed by remote or automatic means.”

An EMC may be incorporated into a permanent pole sign, monument sign, or wall sign, but not a portable sign or projecting sign (i.e. a sign that is attached to and extends perpendicular from a wall).

This sign type is distinct from digital off-premise signs (i.e. billboards), and also on-premise signs that may employ limited LED lighting effects with digital means.

Public Safety Verification

All EMCs must be reviewed and approved by the traffic engineer and law enforcement to determine if there are potential safety concerns with a specific design and location. Illustrations from street-level are required from applicants to facilitate this review.

Zoning District of the Sign

Requirements for EMCs vary by zoning district, according to the following broad categories:

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| Commercial /Industrial | EMCs are allowed by-right with certain limitations. See section below for more. This applies to the CG, CA, MA, MB, HM, and RT districts, unless within 150 feet of a residential zoning district, as well as areas zoned P – Public not adjacent to residential. |
| Residential | EMCs are allowed with a special use permit. See section below for more. This applies to the R5, R10, RM, RMH, RR, RR5, P-Public districts adjacent to residential, commercial/industrial areas within 150 of residential. |
| Downtown /Agricultural | EMCs are not allowed. This applies to the DC, DF, and A districts. |

A [zoning map](#) is on the City website with the ability to measure distances. City staff is also available to help determine which location would apply.

EMCs in Commercial Areas

In commercial areas, each parcel may have 1 EMC per street frontage. Any EMC on a freestanding sign must be below the static portion of the sign, and no greater than half the total sign area.

The allowable area of the sign depends on the zoning district and the adjoining street, as shown on the following page.

Maximum Allowable EMC Sign Area in Commercial Areas

Functional Class of Road	Zoning District				
	MA or MB Industrial	CG Commercial	CA Commercial	HM Health Medical	RT Residential
Interstate	100 SF	100 SF	72 SF	N/A	48 SF
Principal Arterial	100 SF	100 SF	72 SF	32 SF	32 SF
Minor Arterial	72 SF	72 SF	48 SF	32 SF	32 SF
Collector	48 SF	48 SF	32 SF	32 SF	32 SF
Local	32 SF	32 SF	32 SF	32 SF	32 SF

Requirements also apply to sign operation. New EMCs must be equipped with automatic sensors to adjust light output based on ambient light. It should be set to 0.3 foot-candles above ambient light.

In commercial areas, each frame must hold for at least 1 second, not including any animations or effects. Certain entrance and exit effects are permitted, but the effect should facilitate, rather than detract from, reading the message of the sign, and refrain from flashing or other distractions. See the ordinance for a detailed description of allowable effects.

EMCs in Residential Areas

In residential areas, an EMC sign is only allowed on a non-residential use, such as a school, church, or community center. Homes or apartment buildings may not be equipped with EMCs.

A special use permit is required, which involves a public hearing with the Planning and Zoning Commission and notification of surrounding property owners. The process may take around 45 days from time of the application.

Each parcel may have 1 EMC per street frontage. Any EMC on a freestanding sign must be below the static portion of the sign, and no greater than half the total sign area. Additionally, the EMC portion of the sign may not be greater than 32 square feet.

Requirements also apply to sign operation. New EMCs must be equipped with automatic sensors to adjust light output based on ambient light. It should be set to 0.3 foot-candles above ambient light.

During daytime hours (7:00am to 9:00pm), each frame must hold for at least 3 seconds. During the nighttime, the sign must be turned off or kept on a static message. No effects or animations are allowed.

Non-Conforming Signs

EMCs that were installed in conformance with all requirements at that time may remain in place, even if rendered non-conforming in the current ordinance. The owner of sign is allowed to maintain and perform technological upgrades on an existing non-conforming EMC, as long as the overall dimensions, orientation, or location of the sign does not change. No conforming signs must still comply with all operational requirements.

Other Requirements

EMCs are subject to all other general requirements that apply to the sign type they are mounted to, including height limits, restrictions from placement in a sight triangle or easement, and general upkeep and maintenance. These requirements are beyond the scope of this guide.

How to Apply

Sign Permit

All EMCs require a sign permit. A licensed sign installer may submit a sign permit with the Building Inspections Division of the City of Bismarck's Community Development Department.

Special Use Permit

For EMCs in residential areas, a special use permit may be requested. Submit a Unified Development Application to the Planning Division of the City of Bismarck Community Development Department.

For additional information, contact the City of Bismarck Planning Division at 355-1840 or visit the City-County Office Building 221 N. 5th Street during standard office hours.