



**San Francisco  
Planning**

# Standards for Storefront Transparency

PLANNING CODE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
COMMERCIAL BUSINESSES

SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT | NOVEMBER 2013





#### ORGANIZATION:

This document is divided into four sections:

- **Introduction**
- **Visibility Requirements**
- **What This Means for Every Store**
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

## Introduction

The storefront is arguably the most valuable space in a store and should be used to full advantage. A transparent storefront welcomes customers inside with products and services on display, discourages crime with more “eyes on the street,” reduces energy consumption by letting in natural light, and enhances the curb appeal and value of the store and the entire neighborhood. For these reasons the San Francisco Planning Code requires that storefronts must maintain transparent windows that allow visibility into the store. This handout explains these requirements.



## Visibility Requirements

Section 145.1(c)(6) of the Planning Code requires that “frontages with active uses that are not residential or PDR must be fenestrated with transparent windows and doorways for no less than 60 percent of the street frontage at the ground level and allow visibility to the inside of the building.”

To ensure visibility into active spaces, any fenestration of active uses provided at pedestrian eye level must have visibility to the inside of the building. The following definitions apply:

- 1) **Pedestrian Eye Level** includes the space that is between 4 feet and 8 feet in height above the adjacent sidewalk level, following the slope if applicable.



ABOVE: Window signs should be limited in size and number to maximize visibility inside the store.

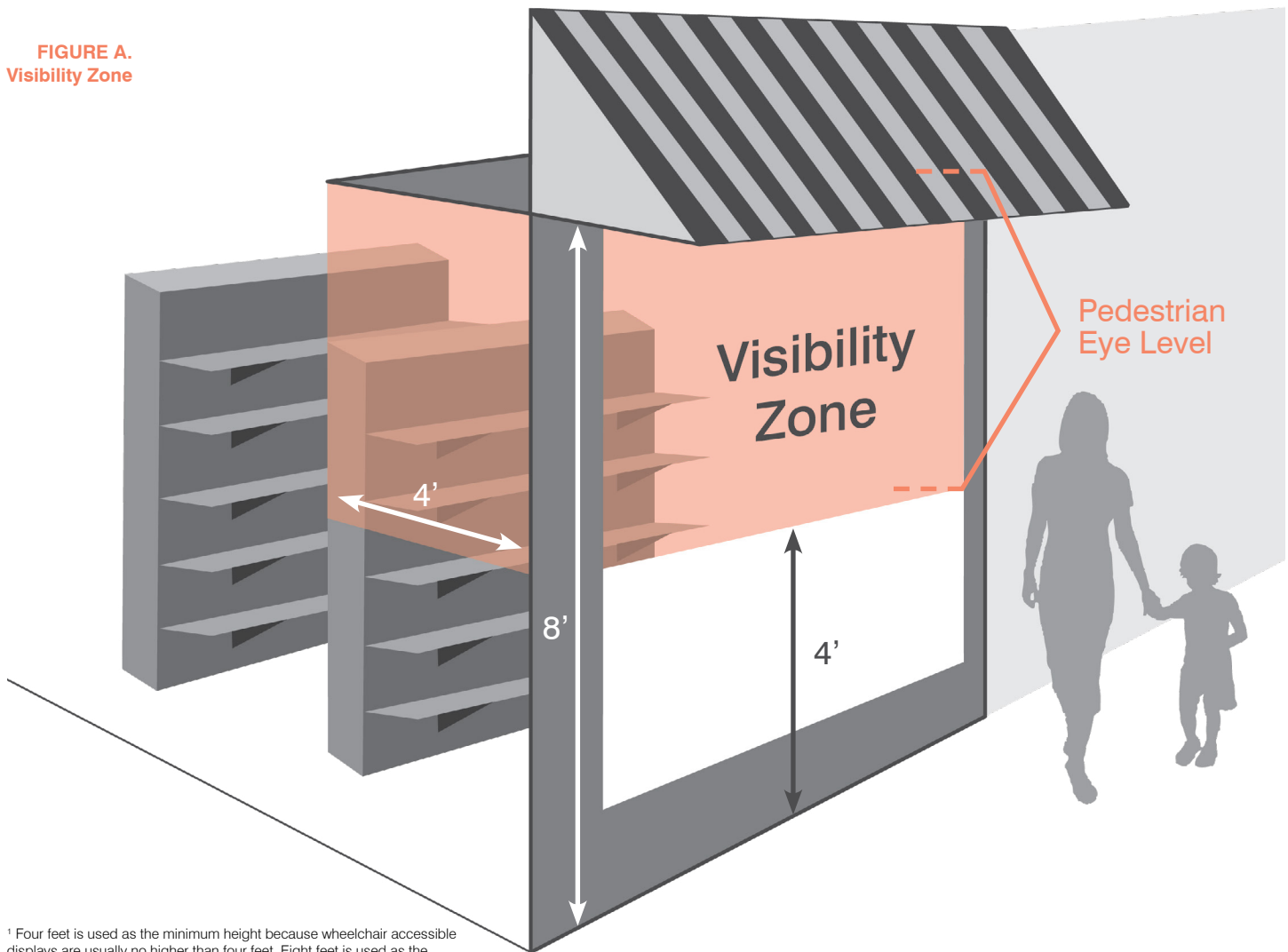
- 2) **Visibility to the Inside of the Building** means that the area inside the building within 4 feet from the surface of the window glass at pedestrian eye level is at least 75 percent open to perpendicular view.

Therefore, any fenestration of frontages with active uses must have visibility to the inside of the building with at least 75 percent open to perpendicular view within a 4-foot by 4-foot “visibility zone” at pedestrian eye level. This visibility zone is located between 4 feet and 8 feet in height above sidewalk level and extends 4 feet from the surface of the window glass inside the building<sup>1</sup>. Section 145.1(c)(7) of the Planning Code requires that decorative railings or grillwork placed in front of or behind the storefront windows must also

be at least 75 percent open to perpendicular view. Greater transparency, including expanded “visibility zones”, may be required in buildings designated under Article 10 or 11 of the Planning Code (see FAQs on page 6).

Notwithstanding the above visibility requirement, individual products for sale or used in service and on display inside the building are not restricted; and, window signs not exceeding 1/3 the area of the window on or in which the signs are located are not restricted if such signs are permitted by the Planning Code<sup>2</sup>. For more info about business signs, please refer to the Sign Handout on our website at [www.sfplanning.org](http://www.sfplanning.org).

**FIGURE A.**  
Visibility Zone



<sup>1</sup> Four feet is used as the minimum height because wheelchair accessible displays are usually no higher than four feet. Eight feet is used as the maximum height because overhead awnings must maintain an eight-foot clearance above the sidewalk. Four feet is used as the minimum depth because it allows the minimum three-foot path of travel required for wheelchairs plus additional space for a display. Seventy-five percent openness is used because it matches the existing required openness for security gates and grillwork in Section 145.1(c)(7) of the Planning Code.

<sup>2</sup> Window signs that are affixed or adhered directly to the window glass do not require a sign permit. All other business signs must have a sign permit or they are illegal and must be removed.

# What This Means for Every Store

Every merchant and store owner should be sure that their storefront is in full compliance with the Planning Code. Below are the five most common violations to look for.



1) Windows that have been covered over with boards, film, or paint must be restored to transparency.



2) Security gates or grillwork on the inside or outside of the window glass must be primarily transparent (at least 75% open to perpendicular view).



NON-COMPLIANT



COMPLIANT

3) Shelving, display cases, appliances and other items placed within four feet of the window glass must be no taller than four feet or be primarily transparent (at least 75% open to perpendicular view).



NON-COMPLIANT



COMPLIANT

4) All exterior signs must have a sign permit or must be removed.

5) Business signs affixed to the window (painted or adhered to the glass) can be no larger than one-third the size of the window in which they are placed.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## If my building does not have 60% of its ground floor façade fenestrated with windows and doors do I have to add them?

If your building was legally built with less than the current 60% required fenestration, it is “grandfathered in,” which means it is legally non-complying with regard to the fenestration. In that case all of the existing storefront windows (up to the 60% standard) must be transparent and provide visibility to the inside.

## If my windows have been covered over for several years, aren't they also grandfathered in?

Unless the windows were covered over with a lawfully issued building permit they are not grandfathered in and you must restore them to comply with the storefront transparency requirement.

## If I have a display case within four feet of the window that is filled with products for sale, do I have to reduce the number of products on display so that it is 75 percent open?

Only the display furniture and equipment (when empty) must be 75 % open to view for any portion higher than four feet. Products used in sales or service within a display are not restricted.

## Do I need a building permit to rearrange my store to comply?

In most cases you do not need a building permit to simply rearrange or replace display furniture, but

you should check with the Department of Building Inspection at 628.652.3200 or [dbicustomerservice@sfgov.org](mailto:dbicustomerservice@sfgov.org) to be sure.

## What if I don't comply?

Until you fully comply with the transparency requirement, you may be subject to enforcement action. In that case there could be a hold on all permit activity for the property ultimately resulting in penalties accruing at a rate of up to \$250 per day.

## Are there any additional requirements for historic properties?

Display fixtures may require a greater setback and area than the minimum “visibility zone” defined in this document. You may also be required to provide more than the minimum 60 percent transparency for windows along the ground- and second-floor street frontage. Please consult with a Department Preservation Planner at the Planning Information Center for additional guidance

## What assistance is available?

The Office of Economic and Workforce Development has numerous technical and financial assistance programs available to help small businesses that are pursuing improvements to their business. For more information, see OEWD's web site:

<http://oewd.org/Neighborhood-Grants-Loans.aspx>



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### FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact the San Francisco Planning Department

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