



SAN FRANCISCO  
**PLANNING**  
DEPARTMENT

# Commission Guide for Formula Retail

DETERMINING LOCATIONAL APPROPRIATENESS AND  
PERFORMANCE-BASED DESIGN GUIDELINES

SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT | UPDATED: AUGUST 2018





Originally Published: July 2014

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Cover Photograph: GGP Inc.

The purpose of this document is to evaluate the appropriateness of each individual formula retail establishment's use, design, and necessity, to help preserve the character of the City's neighborhoods.



Photos by Matthew Dito



## PURPOSE

The Commission Guide to Formula Retail is intended to maintain the character and aesthetic qualities of San Francisco neighborhoods. It is designed to encourage harmony between retailers and the districts they reside in.

This document seeks to promote such harmony in two ways. First, the document establishes the methodology the Department will use in evaluating the appropriateness of the formula retail use in the neighborhood. Second, this document articulates Performance-Based Design Guidelines to ensure that the proposed formula retail use is aesthetically compatible with the neighborhood.

## RELEVANT CODE SECTIONS

*Section 303.1:* Formula Retail Uses

*Section 703.4:* Conditional Use Authorization for Formula Retail Uses

*Section 803.6:* Formula Retail Uses in Article 8 Districts

*Article 6:* Signs

*Article 11:* Preservation of Buildings and Districts of Architectural, Historical, and Aesthetic Importance in the C-3 Districts

## INTRODUCTION

Formula retail can act as a homogenizing force in neighborhoods if its presence overwhelms neighborhood character. Formula retail, by nature, is repetitive. If not properly regulated, this repetition can detract from San Francisco's vibrant neighborhoods by inundating them with familiar brands that lack the uniqueness the City strives to maintain.

San Francisco is a city of surprises. Its diverse and distinct neighborhoods are identified in large part by the character of their commercial areas. This feeling of surprise invites both residents and visitors alike to explore the City.

Urban neighborhood streets should invite walking and bicycling. The City's mix of architecture contributes to a strong sense of neighborhood community within the larger City. Many formula retail concepts are developed and refined in suburban locations. Standard store design that primarily accommodates automobile traffic may not work in dense, transit-oriented cities.

The Performance-Based Design Guidelines can improve pedestrian walkability and encourage more walking in neighborhoods by helping to preserve a safe, aesthetically pleasing area that feels connected from beginning to end. This is achieved by improving pedestrian accessibility and by creating stores with unique visual identities that also don't overpower one another.

The increase of formula retail businesses in the City's neighborhood commercial areas, if not monitored and regulated, will hamper the City's goal of a diverse retail





While any one formula retail establishment may fit well in a neighborhood, overconcentration of formula retail can degrade the character of a street.

Illustration by Raven Keller  
for The Bold Italic

base with distinct neighborhood retailing personalities comprised of a mix of businesses.

These standards are intended to lessen the visual impacts that the repetitiveness of formula retail brings by first evaluating whether the formula retail use is either necessary or desirable in the neighborhood. See a discussion of this topic in Part I: Determining Locational Appropriateness. Once the use is deemed appropriate, the next step is to ensure aesthetic compatibility. For more information on this topic, see "Part II: Performance-Based Design Guidelines."

While a factor in the homogenization of neighborhoods, formula retail does provide lower-cost goods and services, and is generally recognized to provide more employment opportunities to minorities and low-income workers. Formula retail is neither good nor bad – and it plays an irrefutable role in the City. To best accentuate the benefits of formula retail, the City should regulate it with care, helping to reduce its standardized features.

San Francisco needs to protect its vibrant small business sector and create a supportive environment for new business innovations. One of the eight Priority Policies of the City's General Plan resolves that "existing neighborhood-serving retail uses be preserved and enhanced and future opportunities for resident employment in and ownership of such businesses enhances."

The Planning Department recognizes the benefits formula retail can bring to the City. Where the use would provide a necessary or desirable addition to the neighborhood, staff will work with applicants to improve their aesthetics, including signage, storefront design, transparency, and pedestrian accessibility, to help them successfully integrate into San Francisco's neighborhoods.



# I. Determining Locational Appropriateness

For every conditional use authorization the Planning Commission must determine if the proposed use is necessary or desirable for the community and compatible with the neighborhood, per Planning Code Sec. 303(c) (1). Beyond the general consideration of “necessary or desirable,” the Commission reviews five more specific criteria in consideration of conditional use authorization for formula retail. This document establishes the methodology the department will use in assessing these five determining criteria, as required by Planning Code Sec. 303.1.

Determining location appropriateness should be by informed quantitative and qualitative analysis. In general, professional discretion should be used to identify factors not specifically required in this document. For example, if a daily need use is located immediately outside the selected appropriate vicinity, it should still be discussed in the case report. In addition to analyzing the five Planning Code required criteria, professional analysis of locational appropriateness should include the following:

**A characterization of the district as a whole**, based on the stated intent of the district as well as how the district has evolved since it was created. Describe the scale and massing of buildings and uses. Discuss the dominant design orientation people vs. auto-orientation. Consider if the district can be described in other ways: family oriented, entertainment district, culturally-specific, for example. Determine whether there are capital

improvements or large development projects in the pipeline.

**A characterization of the immediate vicinity of the proposed establishment location.** A characterization of the immediate vicinity within 300’ of the subject property is a standard distance that would generally be appropriate. For projects that require conditional use authorization for use size, or occupy a tenant space larger than 10,000 square feet, a one-quarter mile vicinity is more appropriate and should be used. The vicinity concentration should include all commercial uses, not just those within the same Zoning District.

**A description of the commercial nature of the district.**  
Are there retail anchors or clusters present or developing?  
Are there retail or other trends emerging?

**Identification of long term vacancies and/or any commercial use related issues and concerns.**

**Identification of the unique characteristics of the District and/or neighborhood**, where appropriate.

## CRITERIA AND METHODOLOGY

The five criteria and methodology for analyzing locational appropriateness should be examined as described below:

### Existing concentrations of formula retail uses within general vicinity of the proposed project.

- The concentration of formula retail uses is the percentage (%) of formula retail ground floor commercial uses amongst all ground floor commercial uses within the vicinity.
- Generally, the appropriate “vicinity” when determining a concentration is 300’. However, if the proposed use requires conditional use authorization for use size, or proposes to occupy a tenant space that is equal to or greater than 10,000 square feet, a one-quarter mile vicinity should be used.
- Calculation shall include all parcels that are wholly or partially located within the selected radius that are also zoned commercial or contain commercial uses.
- An evaluation of the linear frontage concentration of formula retail establishments within the selected vicinity shall be done.
- An evaluation of the linear frontage concentration of formula retail establishments within the selected vicinity. Concentration is based on Planning Commission Resolution No. 18843, adopted on April 11, 2013 and summarized below. Staff will calculate the concentration of formula retail linear frontage within the selected vicinity of the subject property. Corner parcels are more heavily weighted when counting linear frontage due to their greater aesthetic impacts.
- The methodology is as follows: for each property, including the subject property, the total linear frontage of the lot facing a public right-of-way is divided by the number of storefronts. Formula retail storefronts and their linear frontage are separated from the non-formula retail establishments and their linear frontage. The final calculations are the percentages (%) of formula retail and non-formula retail frontages (half of a percentage shall be rounded up).
- An evaluation of the number of formula retail uses as a percentage (%) of all commercial uses within the selected vicinity. This calculation will count all ground floor storefronts as a commercial use.

- The Department does not identify an ideal concentration threshold because it varies significantly by zoning district. This variation is based on pre-existing uses, vacancy rates, massing and use sizes, and neighborhood needs. Comparisons of the formula retail concentration to citywide numbers and to comparable neighborhoods are encouraged.

- Concentration thresholds may also vary significantly based on proximity to a zoning district more favorable to formula retail, or to a Commercial District that principally permits formula retail.

### The availability of other similar uses within the vicinity of the proposed project.

- An evaluation of similar retail uses within the district requires a concentration calculation of retail sales and/or service uses that offer the similar products or services to those being proposed. This concentration shall be based on the number of available uses as a percentage of all commercial uses.
- Using the same selected appropriate vicinity as identified in criterion 1B, an evaluation and accompanying map shall be produced showing the location of similar uses throughout the vicinity. If no similar uses are available within the vicinity or district, the closest offerings may be identified.

### The compatibility of the proposed formula retail use with the existing architectural and aesthetic character of the district.

- Use the Performance-Based Design Guidelines to ensure compatibility with the signage, storefront design, storefront transparency, and pedestrian accessibility.
- Identify the business’ place in the District (corner, anchor, recessed from street) and whether it is in a protected viewshed in the General Plan.

### The existing retail vacancy rates within the district.

- Identify current vacancy rates in district and compared to historic vacancy rates, if this information is available.

- Identify vacancies within the selected vicinity and discuss the conditions and potential impacts of vacant buildings within the selected vicinity.

**The existing mix of Citywide-serving retail uses and daily needs serving retail uses within the appropriate vicinity of the proposed location.** Neighborhood Commercial Districts are intended to serve the daily needs of the neighborhood residents. As such, daily needs service retailers are those that provide goods and services that residents want within walking distance of their residence or workplace.

It is important to note that formula retail uses can also be daily needs serving uses; the terms are not mutually exclusive. For example, banks and other financial institutions are subject to formula retail controls; however, having a bank within walking distance is a valuable amenity to a neighborhood.

- Evaluate the provision of daily needs for the immediate vicinity in relation to the district's defined intent. Some districts are intended to only support residents. Conversely, the district may be intended to meet resident needs and wider shopping or tourist needs.

- The following uses are considered "Daily Needs" uses:

- Limited Restaurant, as defined by Planning Code Sec. 102
- Specific Other Retail, Sales, and Services, as defined by the following subsections of Planning Code Sec. 102:
  - (a) General Grocery
  - (b) Specialty Grocery
  - (c) Pharmaceutical drugs and personal toiletries
  - (e) Self-service Laundromats and dry cleaning
  - (f) Household goods and services
  - (g) Variety merchandise, pet supply stores, and pet grooming services
  - (l) Books, music, sporting goods, etc.
- Personal services, as defined by Planning Code Sec. 102
- Limited Financial Service, as defined by Planning Code Sec. 102, and/or Financial Service, as defined by Planning Code Sec. 102

- Trade Shops as defined by the following subsections of Planning Code Sec. 102
  - (1) Repair of personal apparel, accessories, household goods, appliances, furniture and similar items, but excluding repair of motor vehicles and structures
  - (6) Tailoring



## II. Performance-Based Design Guidelines



### FORMULA RETAIL SIGNAGE

This section establishes design guidelines to ensure the aesthetic compatibility of formula retail uses.

Signage creates visual impacts which affect how residents feel about their neighborhood and play a role in the attraction of visitors who are important to the City's economy. Signs serve as markers and create individual identities for businesses that add to the greater identity of a neighborhood and district, hence the need for guidelines to ensure compatibility between businesses and their surroundings.

Formula retail uses can have a homogenizing effect on neighborhood character. This is largely due to standardized signage and branded features that promote recognition. These Performance-Based Design Guidelines seek to minimize the uniform aspects of formula retail signage.

Business signs are generally regulated to ensure an appropriate and equitable degree of commercial communication without contributing to visual clutter.



Scale of sign is inappropriate and extends beyond the storefront entrance.



Sign does not extend out and beyond the width of the storefront opening.

Signage guidelines for formula retail business signs<sup>1</sup> are as follows:

- One sign per tenant shall be permitted. A ground floor establishment with a corner storefront may have one sign on each building façade. Signs should not extend beyond width of the storefront opening.
- Signage, painted on glass doors, windows, and transoms, where the sign does not exceed 25% of the glazed area, is permitted.
- Sign depth should be reduced by placing the transformer in a remote location and not housed within the sign itself.
- Signs that are located on the inside of a storefront should be setback a minimum of 6" from the display glass.
- Scale of signs and placement on the building should be appropriate to the elements of the building and the character of the neighborhood.

- Upper story establishments with a corner storefront may have one sign adjacent to the building entrance. It should be a small identification sign or plaque, installed adjacent to the ground floor entrances.
- Signs should be constructed of durable high-quality materials that retain their characteristics within a high-traffic area over time. Acrylic and vinyl signs are discouraged.
- Signage is to be scaled and placed primarily for pedestrian legibility, and secondarily for vehicular visibility.
- Materials should be compatible with the craftsmanship, and finishes associated with the District. Glossy or highly reflective surfaces will not be approved.
- Signs should be attached in a manner that avoids damaging or obscuring any of the character-defining features associated with the subject building. Signs should be attached in a manner that allows for their removal without adversely impacting the exterior of the building, ideally pin-mounted.

<sup>1</sup> A business sign is defined as a sign which directs attention to a business, commodity, service, industry, or other activity which is sold, offered, or conducted, other than incidentally, on the premises upon which such sign is located, or to which it is affixed.



**NOT RECOMMENDED**

There is an excessive number of wall signs attached to the building facade, and the windows are covered, preventing visibility.



**NOT RECOMMENDED**

Sign is directly lit with visible lighting conduits.



**NOT RECOMMENDED**

Scale, placement, and design of sign are inappropriate to the building and its surroundings.



**RECOMMENDED**

A corner storefront with one sign on each building facade, as permitted.



**RECOMMENDED**

Sign is indirectly lit with a reduced profile due to a light emitting diode (LED) method of illumination.



**RECOMMENDED**

Sign is attached above the entrance bay, and does not detract from the buildings aesthetic qualities.

- Signs should be externally illuminated, or appear to be indirectly illuminated, such as by installing an external fixture to illuminate the sign or by using a reverse channel halo-lit means of illumination.
- Signs should have an opaque background that does not transmit light and text.
- Signs should be minimized in profile or depth, for example, by using a light emitting diode method of illumination.

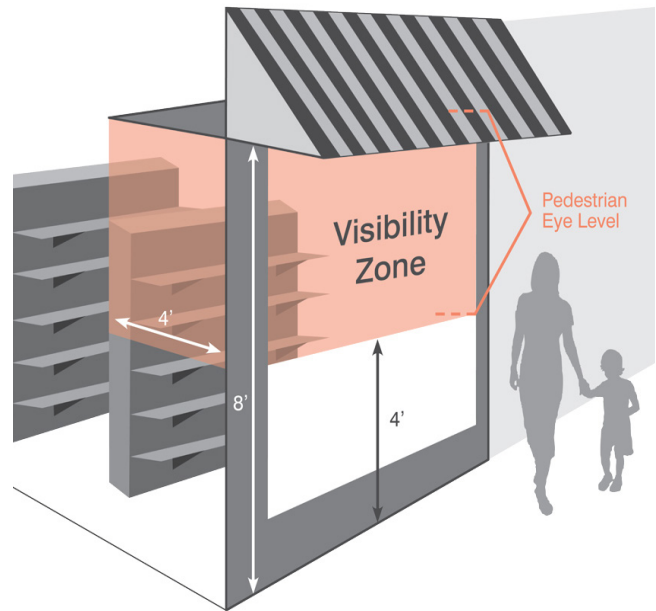
- Sign legibility shall be of minimum appropriate intensity to be visible while not being visually dominating.
- Signage lights should be dimmed or off when business is closed.
- Businesses should not use exterior digital or LED screens to amplify branding beyond the signage limits.



## FORMULA RETAIL TRANSPARENCY

A transparent storefront welcomes customers inside with products and services on display, discourages crime with more “eyes on the street”, reduces energy consumption by allowing natural light into stores, and enhances the curb appeal and value of the store, as well as the entire neighborhood. As mentioned earlier, successful city living depends on surprise to maintain interest. Even if the formula retailer is familiar, a view into the store may spur interest in the people and products inside.

The City strives to ensure that tenant spaces remain transparent to the exterior, contribute to the activity of the public realm and do not devolve into de facto sign boards for tenants.



### Visibility Requirements

To ensure visibility into active spaces, any fenestration provided at eye level must have visibility beyond a window display and into the store.

The following definitions apply:

- **Pedestrian Eye Level:** the space between 4-feet and 8-feet in height above the adjacent sidewalk level, following the slope if applicable.
- **Visibility to the Inside of the Building:** the area inside the building within 4-feet of the window surface at pedestrian eye level must be 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 with a 4-foot by 4-foot “visibility zone” at pedestrian eye level. In addition, 60 percent (%) of all street frontages must be transparent windows, while any railings or grillwork placed in front of or behind storefront windows must be at least 75 percent (%) transparent at a perpendicular view.

To ensure visibility, business signs may not exceed one-third the area of the window in which the sign is located. The Department will work with applicants to improve visibility wherever possible.

The Performance-Based Design Guidelines require formula retail applicants to work with staff to determine what transparency improvements can be made. Changes required may include converting windows to transparent glazing, relocating shelving and displays away from windows, or removing security grilles and other window coverings.



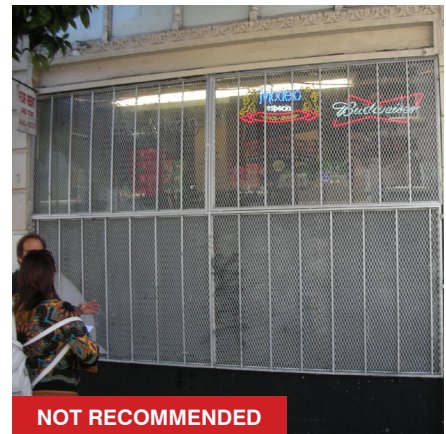
**NOT RECOMMENDED**

Views through the frontage fenestration are obstructed by advertising signs and business identifiers.



**NOT RECOMMENDED**

The 4-foot by 4-foot visibility zone inside the establishment is obstructed by excessive signage.



**NOT RECOMMENDED**

The security grille does not have at least 75% transparency at a perpendicular view.



**RECOMMENDED**

The space between 4 feet and 8 feet above the sidewalk has at least 75% of its frontage fenestrations open to perpendicular view.



**RECOMMENDED**

Limited window signage maximizes visibility inside the store.



**RECOMMENDED**

The security grille allows for visibility of at least 75% at a perpendicular view.

## What This Means For Formula Retail Uses

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 percent (%) open to perpendicular view).
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 percent [%] open to perpendicular view).
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 on which they are placed.

## FORMULA RETAIL STOREFRONT DESIGN

Storefront design can be used to extend branding beyond the dimensions of signage. To maintain emphasis on architecture and to prevent formula retail from overwhelming neighborhood character, it's important to prevent facades from becoming defacto branding opportunities.

Historic qualities present in a storefront should be preserved and maintained, as well as integrated into additions or modifications made to the storefront. The most successful storefronts combine contemporary design with sensitivity to the character defining storefront components.



### Storefront Components

The components of Performance-Based Design Guidelines for Storefront Design are: facades and street walls, corner lots, storefront bays, entrances, bulkheads, and display windows.



#### TYPICAL FEATURES INCLUDE:

**Bulkhead:** The low paneled base of a storefront bay that supports the glazing and elevates merchandise for pedestrian viewing.

**Façade Materials:** Original exterior cladding, typically brick, wood or stone provide a sense of permanence, scale and texture and often convey the work of skilled craftsmen.

**Lintel:** The horizontal structural element that spans above the storefront bays to support the weight of the upper façade.

**Mullion:** The vertical element that separates window units or storefront glazing; typically not a structural support for the building.

**Pier:** The vertical structural or decorative elements, also known as a column, which supports and/or frames the glazing.

**Storefront Bay:** Defined by the height of the lintel and separated by piers, a storefront bay is composed of bulkhead, glazing, transom, and entry.

**Transom:** The small, operable or inoperable framed windows above the glazing and below the lintel that filter light into the ground floor space; sometimes sheltered by awnings.





**NOT RECOMMENDED**

Design, including colors, finish, and texture, is inconsistent with the surrounding buildings.



**RECOMMENDED**

Storefront design is consistent with surrounding buildings, and the setback creates a continuous street wall and edge.

## Façades and Street Walls

The façade is the exterior wall of the building, or frontage, and should utilize traditional building materials such as terra cotta, brick, stone, and scored stucco. The color should be limited to different tones of one color, and said color should be similar in profile to the surrounding buildings. Buildings should have a finished texture that is smooth and painted with a satin or light finish. Color washing an entire storefront to extend branding detracts from the character of a neighborhood and will not be permitted.

The design should remain consistent with surrounding buildings in the neighborhood. As such, the setback should be as such that it creates a consistent, continuous street wall and edge.

## Corner Lots

Many buildings on corner lots exhibit special features that emphasize the corner and add accent to both intersecting streets, providing visual interest to pedestrians. Corner entrances, storefront windows, and displays that extend along both street facades emphasize corner lots are encouraged.

Where entrances are not located at the corner, storefront windows should turn the corner, in addition to windows on each side of the building.

## Storefront Bays

Appropriate alignment and proportions of the storefront bay are critical in creating a unified appearance within the district.

Windows should be consistent in height and design with storefront doors to create a cohesive appearance, however, slight variations in alignment can add visual interest. Piers and lintels should be treated and designed as a single component. The lintel establishes the top of the storefront bay, visually separating it from upper floors. Proper proportions must be maintained between windows and the lintel. Elements such as signs and awnings that obscure the spacing of the bays or other elements that define those bays should be avoided. Colors should be similar in profile to the surrounding buildings, and limited to different tones of one color.

## Entrances

Typically, entrances are recessed by about two to six feet from the sidewalk, allowing for protection from the rain, providing additional display frontage, and creating a rhythm of defined commercial spaces. Together, these features can establish a sense of scale and identify business entrances. In San Francisco, entrances for people should be emphasized and entrances for cars should be minimized.

A service door may also exist for access to building systems.



Colorwashing a building facade in branded color serves as oversized signage and is not permitted.

## Bulkhead

The bulkhead is the one to two foot high based of the building, upon which the storefront display window is placed. Traditionally, bulkheads are made of painted wood, decorative metal, small ceramic tiles, or masonry. Replacements should match or be compatible with original materials. Bulkheads should be consistent with surrounding buildings in the neighborhood, and are typically between 18 inches and 24 inches.



Transparent display with simple, effective signage on the bulkhead.

## Storefront Displays

Storefront display windows typically consist of large panes of plate glass set in metal or wood frames, with the primary purpose of allowing passerby to see goods or services available inside. Individual panes of a window are separated by mullions, which should be as narrow and as limited in number as possible. This maximizes visibility into interior activity and merchandising.



While the establishment utilizes the corner lot with its entrance, the facade and bulkhead are incompatible with the surrounding buildings.

Photos by Matthew Dito



## PEDESTRIAN ACCESSIBILITY

Ensuring that businesses are easily accessible creates a more inviting environment in commercial neighborhoods. For smaller formula retail establishments, pedestrian accessibility is usually not a problem. Larger formula retail establishments, however, tend to limit and control entrances. A suburban design may cater to those who arrive by car. In order to preserve the City's walkable character, formula retail in particular must be designed for pedestrians. Entrances that are distinguishable from the façade of a building invite and allow pedestrian access. Entrances should be located in a manner that keeps with the rhythm established by surrounding buildings. This consistency creates a familiarity that draws the attention of pedestrians.

Requirements for pedestrian accessibility are as follows:

- All businesses must have an ADA compliant entrance
- Corner lot locations should have at least an entrance on the corner, or one on each street
- Improve the pedestrian environment with clearly visible, easy, safe routes to business entries, including through parking lots and to the public sidewalk and transit stops.
- Provide pedestrian access onto the site from the main street on which the business is located.
- All existing street-facing doors, with the exception of emergency and service entrances, shall remain unlocked and open to the public during regular business hours.



The business entrance is not distinguishable from the corner lot window, and is located in a manner that does not utilize or promote pedestrian access to the building.



Business entrances are distinguishable from the building facade with a consistent rhythm that creates a familiarity to draw attention of pedestrians. Entrances are also visually compatible with the entrances to upper residences.

Photos by Matthew Dito



## LIMITED FINANCIAL SERVICES

Limited Financial Services are defined in Planning Code Sections 102 as a retail use which provides banking services, when not occupying more than 15 feet of linear frontage or 200 square feet of gross floor area. Automated teller machines (ATM), if installed within such a facility or on an exterior wall as a walk-up facility, are included in this category. A Conditional Use authorization is required for all Limited Financial Services that are also a formula retail use, with the exception of single automated teller machines located within another use that are not visible from the street [Sec. 303.1(b)(13)].

When placing an ATM, the feature should be integrated into the overall composition of the storefront, so as to not detract from the architecture or the quality of the pedestrian experience.

A single ATM at a street façade may be permitted without conditional use authorization if the machine meets the Performance-Based Design Guidelines in this document. A single automated teller machine may not be permitted at the street front if it compromises the storefront's ability to meet other Performance-Based Design Guidelines, including visibility and transparency goals.



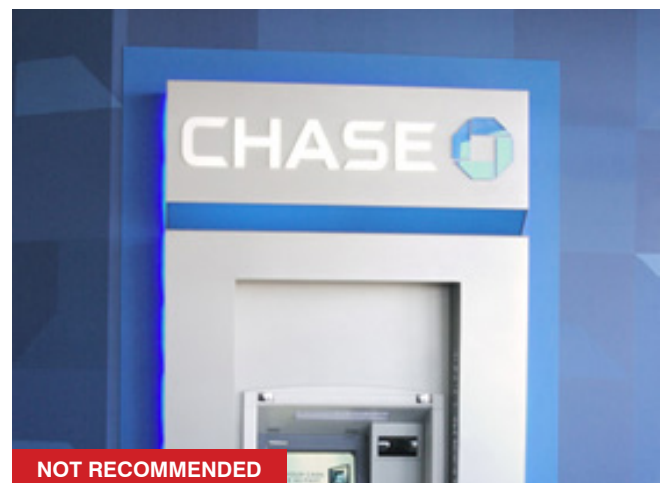
### General guidelines for ATMs are as follows:

- Minimize lighting elements and brightness intensity.
- Areas using materials that need to be lit, or backlit, should be minimized.
- ATMs should be proportionate to the storefront or building facade.
- Framing elements should be used, as appropriate, to integrate ATMs into the facade composition.
- Architectural quality should be maximized.

Photos by Matthew Dito



This requires a conditional use permit because there is more than one ATM at the street front.



Colorwashing a building facade in branded color serves as oversized signage and is not permitted.



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