

## Councillor trashes condo signs littering sidewalks

A-frame signs advertising sales offices are a hazard, says Josh Matlow.



Councillor Josh Matlow removes developers' sandwich signs from the sidewalk and places them beside garbage bins at Yonge St. and St. Clair Ave., joining some already laid flat by citizens. (J.P. MOCZULSKI / The Toronto Star)

By Tess Kalinowski Real Estate Reporter  
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They are just one of the downsides to growing the city up, but Councillor Josh Matlow is so fed up with those A-frame sidewalk signs advertising [condos](#), he folds them up and stacks them beside the nearest garbage bin.

“I find it cathartic,” said Matlow (Ward 22, St. Paul’s), who posts pictures on social media showing the signs he has collected.

He says that sometimes other pedestrians, fed up with jostling for sidewalk space, cheer him on, high-five him or have what Matlow calls “guerilla activist moments when people come and help me pick them up.”

“The development industry has so much power in this city and this province, where they are routinely having the Ontario Municipal Board ignoring the city’s official plan. (The signs are) disrespectful to local residents and the community,” he said.

“It sure feels good to pick up one of their signs and pitch them in the garbage.”

The signs are legal in Toronto, but developers have to apply for a permit and pay a fee to stand them on public space.

Developers can receive a permit for up to 10 signs per project. They pay \$218 per sign. Only five signs, no higher than 1.2 metres, can be displayed in a 10-metre area at any given intersection. If it's a busy corner for building, developers get that space on a first-come, first-served basis.

The city doesn't issue fines for signs that violate the rules. But it does seize them. Sign owners have to pay a fee to get them back, but they are seldom retrieved, said Mark Sraga, director of Investigation Service for Municipal Licensing and Standards.

Condo signs can be a problem, but increasingly, realtor open house signs are drawing complaints, he said.

Four bylaw officers monitor and enforce the rules, prioritizing areas where complaints originate. They are aided by police and transportation crews where safety is an issue, said Sraga.

He said there haven't been a lot of complaints from residents about condo signs downtown. But he cited concentrated areas of development such as Humber Bay Shores, Avenue Rd., Yonge St. and Sheppard Ave.

Matlow doesn't have the authority to act as a bylaw officer, said Sraga. "That gets into a civil matter. That would really be if the developer or sign owner called the police," he said.

The Star called several of the sales offices for condos advertised on signs Matlow moved. None returned the calls.

Matlow says he's certain he's acting within his citizen's rights and he only picks up signs he is sure are violating the law.

"The signs in most cases are directly next to several other signs, which makes all of them violate the bylaw, given their proximity to each other," said Matlow.

But a spokesperson for the development industry said the signs provide critical directions to sales offices that aren't always immediately recognizable among the many construction projects in the city.

"Those signs are very useful and effective that way. If they weren't, condo developers would not put them out," said Richard Lyall, president of the **Residential Construction Alliance of Ontario**.

Condominiums are an important part of the rental housing segment and, for some, the only affordable option for ownership given that the average price of a single-family, detached home in Toronto is about \$1.2 million, said Lyall.

"I'm kind of surprised that a city of Toronto councillor would spend their time doing something like that. We've got some serious problems from a housing perspective," he said.

But pedestrian advocates agree with Matlow.

John Fischer, a member of the Walk Toronto steering committee, has called the city with specific complaints about signs in his Chinatown neighbourhood and been told that enforcement must be triggered by complaints.

Fischer said he was told that a city official would then explain the rules to the offending business and they would be given a few weeks to comply with the sign bylaw. Seeing no enforcement, Fischer said he called the city again and left a message but received no response.

“As Toronto city staff seem unwilling or unable to properly enforce the bylaw, Toronto should follow the lead of [Mississauga](#) and let citizens enforce it,” said Fischer, referring to a 2008 bylaw in that city that permits residents to remove “litter” from hydro posts and other city surfaces.

But residents are not allowed to remove A-frame signs advertising developments or open houses, said a Mississauga spokeswoman.

“We have not received any complaints regarding residents removing new home developments signs,” said Karen Flores in an email.

“If they do, it would be a private civil matter between the developer and the resident. The resident is not authorized by the city to remove the sign.”