

How To Make an Effective (Protest) Sign



Go Big
OR
Go Home

The usual look of residents campaigning



I have watched news coverage of protests, and I am amazed at how unreadable many, if not most signs are. Either too many words crammed onto a poster in tiny print or large letters that are too faint to read at a distance.

You might have thought long and hard about what you say on your sign, but does it make sense to those passing by, and can they even read it?

And remember it?

This is an effective sign



This sign is 24" x 24"
The letters are approx. 8 1/2" x 5"

These are effective signs



This sign is 24" x 30"

These letters are approx.
4" x 2"

The **40** is 12" x 8"



This sign is 24" x 18"

The letters are approx.
8" x 6"

The letters are approx.
3" x 1 1/2"

These are effective signs

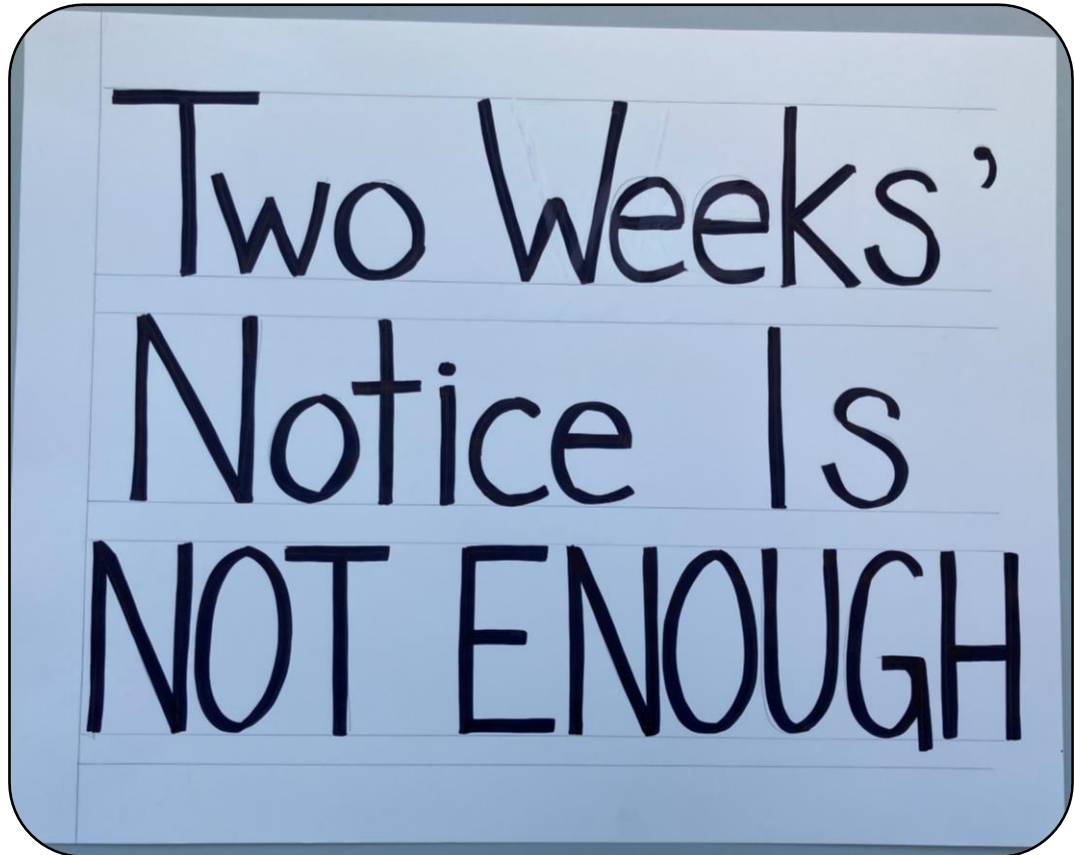


This sign is 18" x 18"
The letters are approx.
5" x 3 ½"



This sign is 36" x 24"
The letters are approx.
5" x 5"

This sign will be remembered!



Cities often ONLY give residents two weeks' notice before an Information Meeting.
This is a disrespectful process.

Imagine this ...

You are planning a RALLY. You are encouraging people to bring signs. Each person wants to have their say. But you also need to ensure that the issue and the most important concerns are clearly seen and will be remembered.

Your goal is to prepare signs that are **BIG** enough to be read by pedestrians and stopped cars. (Think poster paper.) And that these signs are your *'sound bites'*.

Your next goal is to make **HUGE** signs that are readable from a significant distance.

(Think 4' X 8' sheet of corrugated plastic, a can of paint and a big paint brush.)

Great visuals for social media. A memorable message if your rally gets news coverage.

My Story

I am leading my neighborhood's charge. I am retired. I am enthusiastic. And one of my life's mottos is 'One is good, two is better, three or more is best' which translates into many signs.

They got the job done.

Proposed: 63 3-storey rowhomes with tandem parking

Outcome: 40 2-storey townhomes with 2-car garages

I am choosing to include my photos of these basic (and slightly embarrassing) signs to help you with this unknown learning curve.



Report by Simon Fraser University's Urban Studies Program "Residential Building Approval Processes in Metro Vancouver, 'Getting to Groundbreaking, Focus on Townhouses' - Case Study 1: Pitt Meadows Neighbourhood Resistance to Townhouses, Best Practice: Better Public Engagement(page 34)

Would signs be helpful for your campaign?

You have a captive audience:

- 1) At an intersection... for a whole minute...
- 2) At a City Council meeting... for the entire meeting
- 3) At a rally.... For those who are attending and those passing by

So, I am hoping that these thoughts will help you get your message out there.

You Signs need to:

- Summarize your concerns
- Elicit an emotional response
- Draw people in
- Make a nice social media or local news photo



Your words

You want to create memorable 'sound bites' – a few words that summarize your concerns. Maybe one will become your slogan.

Your mindset

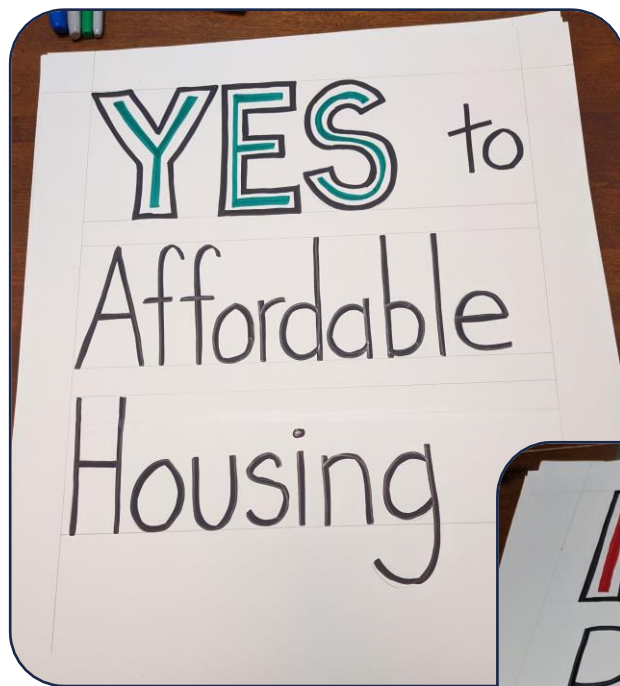
Imperfect signs (the photos of my signs will prove this point!) but not grossly uneven or with spelling mistakes or an unclear message or sloping words or vastly uneven letter sizes. (Keep them neat, tidy and straight)

Style of printing

Unless you are a natural and have a flair for this endeavor, **stick with straight lines.**

Choose your words carefully;

I call them 'sound bites'... You will repeat them often throughout your campaign.



Choose your words wisely

Be respectful

Please – Thank You

Cover the basics

Who, What, Where, When Why and How

Wednesday, June 20 @ 7 pm

(**NOT** Wednesday @ 7 pm - **NOT** June 20 @ 7 pm)

DO NOT print anything until you answer all these basic questions and decide what must be included on your sign and decide the placement of your words

Watch your spelling

Google ‘protest signs with spelling mistakes’ – guaranteed, you will think twice before putting any printing, with your permanent marker, on your poster paper

Add emotion

‘This could happen to your neighbourhood.’

‘Lost forever – 40 mature trees’

Add official language

-proposed, draft, (re)development, Official Community Plan, bylaws, Staff report, procedures, Frequent Transit Network, rezoning, review, application, affordable, accessible, sustainable, integrated, civic centre, proactive, collaborate, quality of life, Public Hearing, require, design, committee, childcare centre, priority, inclusive, manage, operate, eliminate, waive, ensure, coordinate, urban centre, culture, recreation, consider, investigate, increase, incorporate, age-friendly, densification, expansion, amendments, adaptable, community, parks, schools, businesses, educational, consultant ...

Add an historic perspective

-built in 1905
-demolished in 2024

Pick an action word

-stop/start, protect/destroy, begin/end, close/open, enter/exit, fast/slow, come/go,

Carefully pick specific words for your issue

-airport, neighbourhood, 'big box' store, park, intersection, warehouse, etc.

Don't use all of these words interchangeably ...

-trains or diesel engines or locomotives or railway or train transport or engine or railway transport or train traffic or train travel or railroad transport or railway transport or transport by rail ...

Think opposites

-yes/no, for/against, pro/con, big/small, new/old, quiet/loud, true/false, yesterday/tomorrow, near/far, good/bad, love/hate, important/irrelevant

Pick sensational words and phrases

Are we prepared ...? Too many ... accidents ... speeding cars ... blind spot ... forever ...

- shocking – treacherous - appalling – exorbitant - important – significant – cheap – dangerous - excellent – alarming - extravagant – ghastly – disaster – tragic – harmful – dangerous – bad – poor – 'too good to be true' – affordable – reasonable – costly

Think environment and climate change

Another stream gone ... 40 trees chopped down ... too much pavement

-too hot ... too cold ...

Them's fighting words

We demand ... - We insist ... Shame on you

Pick/create/use a (polite) gesture

Peace symbol, a raised fist, thumbs up/thumbs down ... ???

Pick an image

-use a recognizable image OR hire a graphic artist

A call to action

Join us in our fight

Check out our website

Join the Resident's Association

Make it about the upcoming election

Only __ days until the election

I and my _____ friends all vote

Resident's Association - ____ members – They all vote

-research how many votes each Councillor received at the last election – a line of these signs containing the vote count for each Councillor, in order, could send a strong message

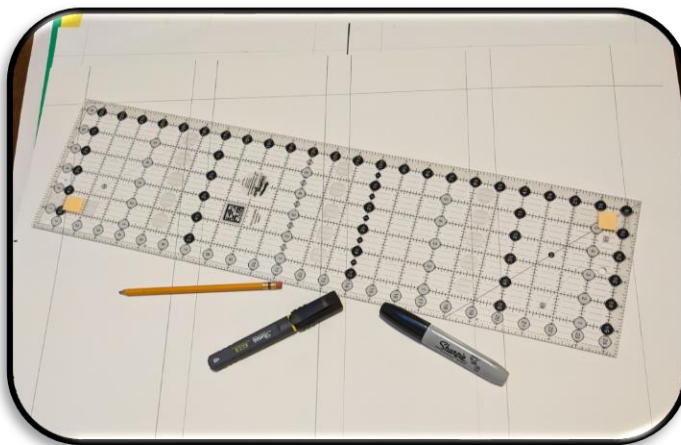
-possibly include signs for those who didn't win if one of them is running again

The practical 'how to'

You will need a little patience - while you go through these amazing steps!

Supplies

- paper – to sketch out your words
- poster paper from the \$1 store
- yardstick – to draw some accurate lines **OR**
6" X 24" quilting ruler **OR**
- steady hand – to draw some lines
- pencil
- Good (new) eraser – an old one will leave smear marks
- thin permanent marker
- **medium** permanent marker
- **thick** permanent marker



Tools for your campaign:

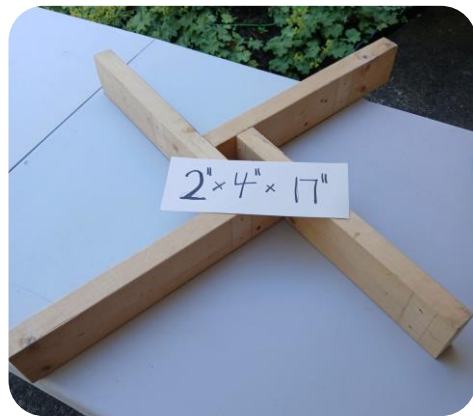
- sandwich board (make or purchase)
- stand (and shim to hold it steady)
- zap straps (to hold sign to rebar)
- duct tape (to hold sign to sandwich board or ...)
- packing tape (a quick fix for if it rains)
- dry erase boards (a quick sign, adjustments can be made easily, reusable)
- display boards, easels (make or purchase)



Lessons learned:

The words feel disconnected, and printing is not dark enough...

but the homemade sandwich board and stand were a great addition to the campaign.

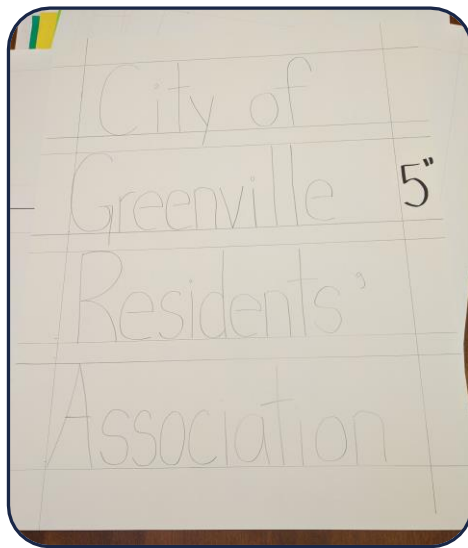


The Process

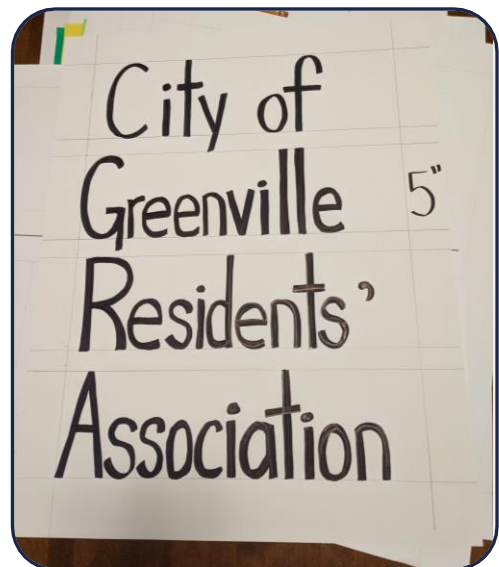
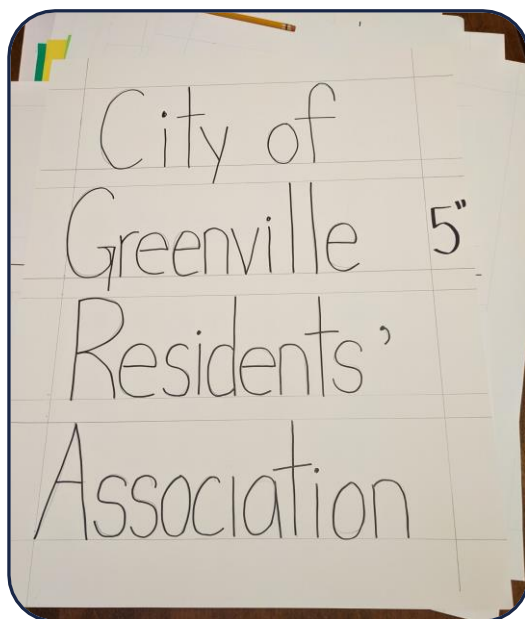
- Decide on your words
- Sketch out their potential placement on a piece of paper
- Draw in your borders on the poster paper, 2” minimum - so you don’t forget and print too close to the edge
- Draw in your lines for letter height
- Sketch in your words – in pencil
- Make adjustments – to size, shape or spacing
- Now, with your thin permanent marker- trace the letters (adjustments can still be made to letter and word spacing)
- Next, with your **medium** permanent marker
- And finally, with your **thick** permanent marker

An Example of the Process

Start out printing lightly with a pencil – make adjustments to word placement as needed. Print with narrow marker – adjustments are still possible. Finish by increasing intensity of wording using thicker markers.

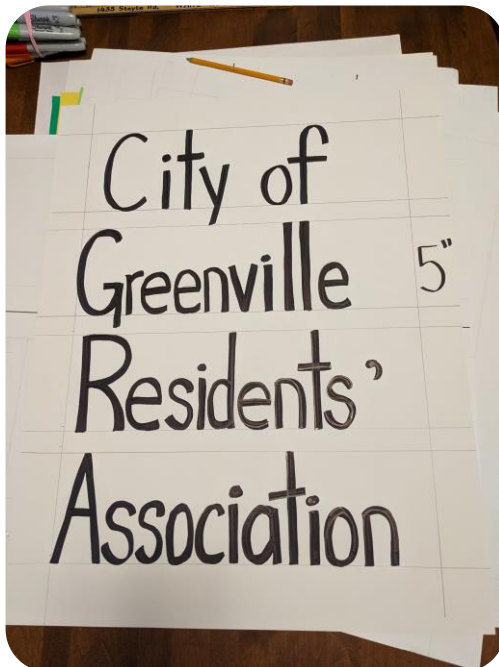
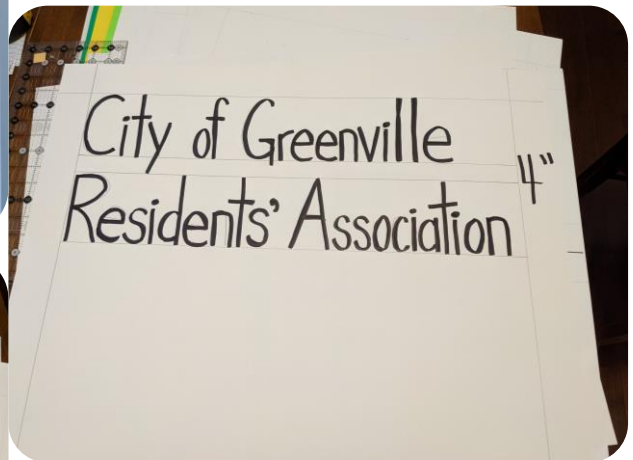
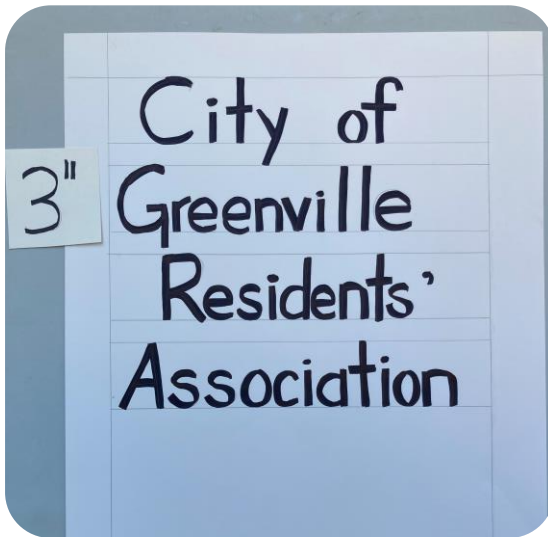


LIGHT
MEDIUM
DARK

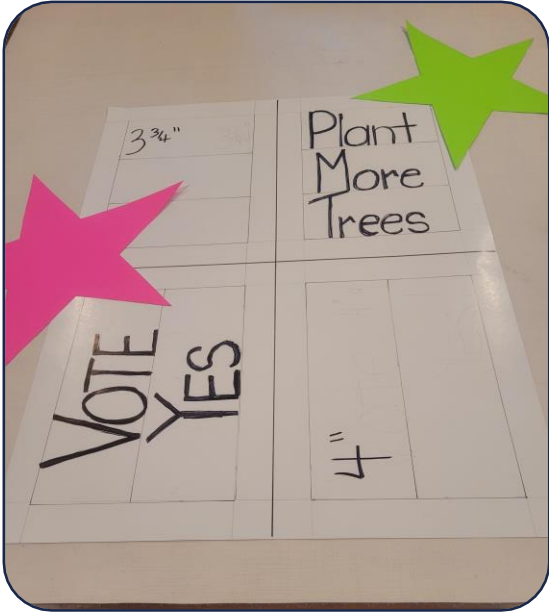


Size DOES make a difference!

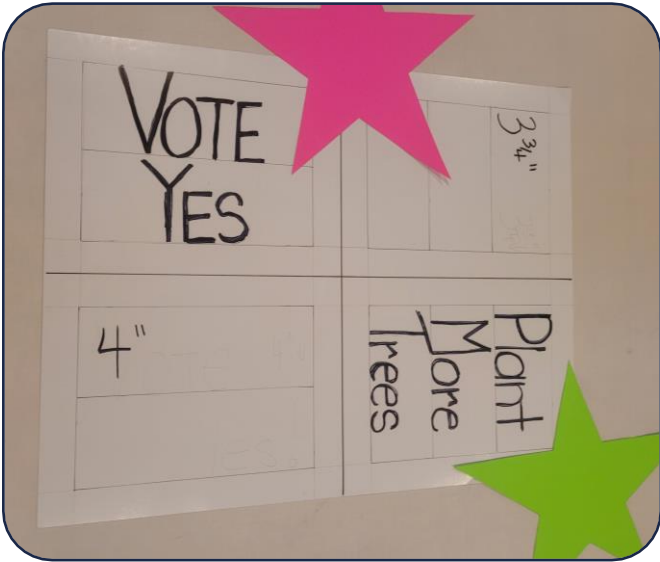
Here are examples of different sized fonts
3", 4" and 5"



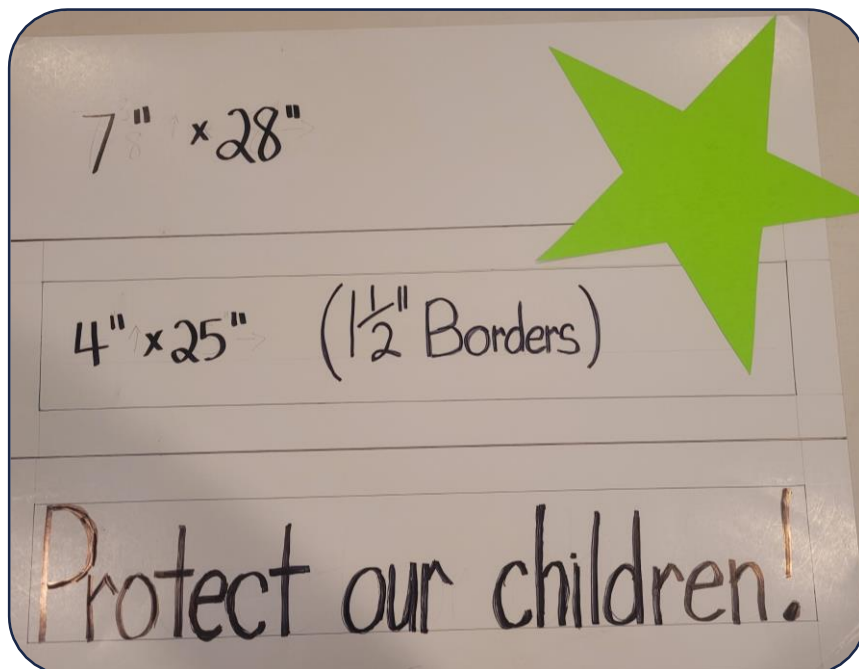
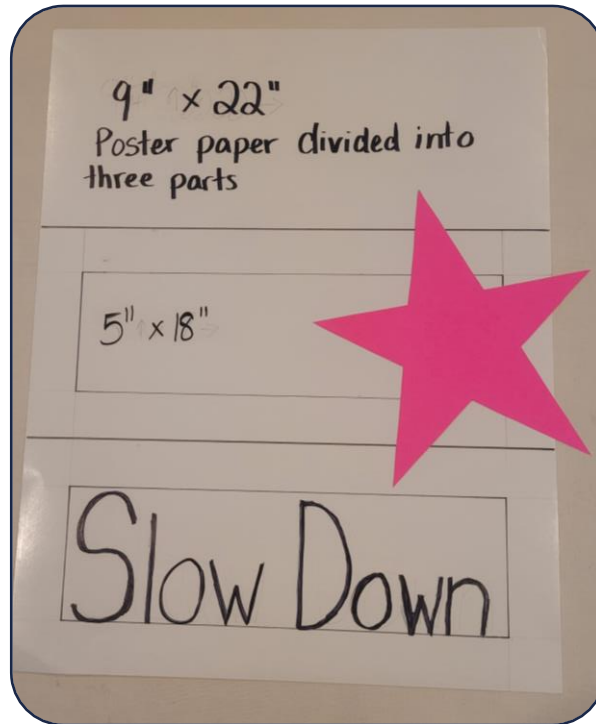
Let's get creative with your poster paper



Remember that the paper can go 2 ways!
-use this to your advantage



More ways to use poster paper.



Add a little colour...



Our Local
Amenities
are **ALREADY**
Overcrowded!

Add a little flare



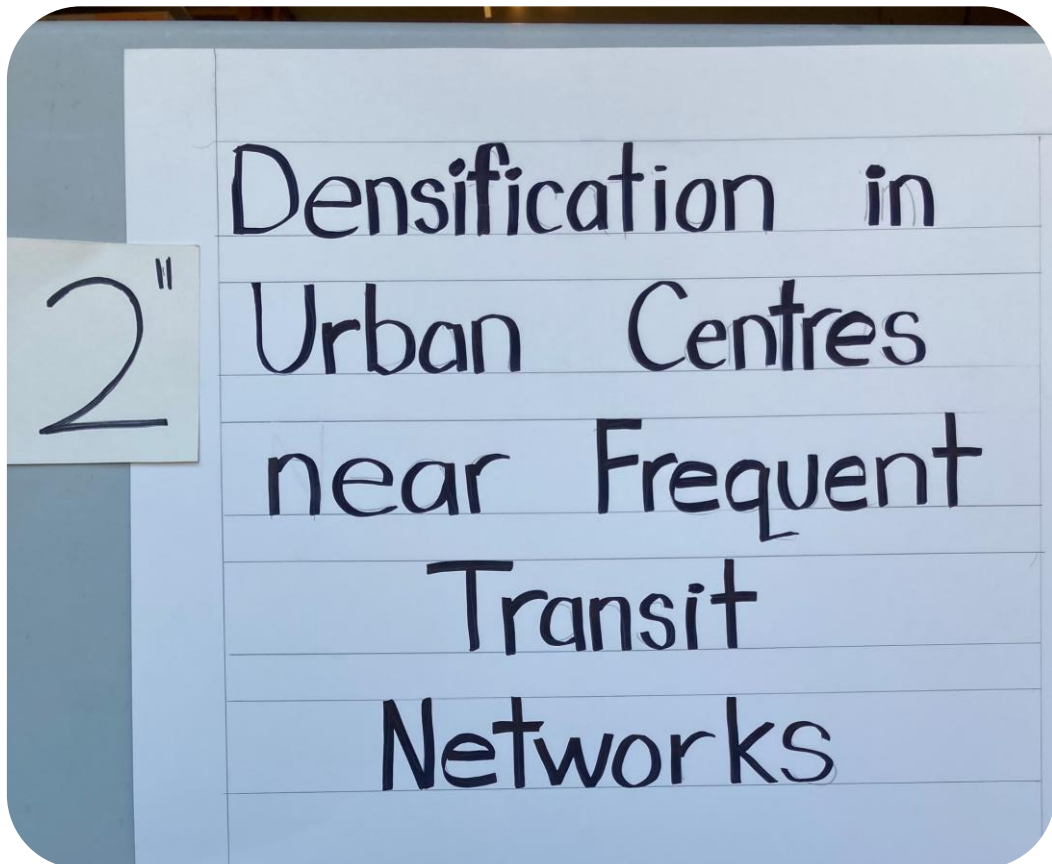
On a Rainy day...

- covering your sign with packing tape works as inexpensive lamination



Lesson learned:

2" printing seems large when making your sign, but from a distance, it is essentially unreadable.



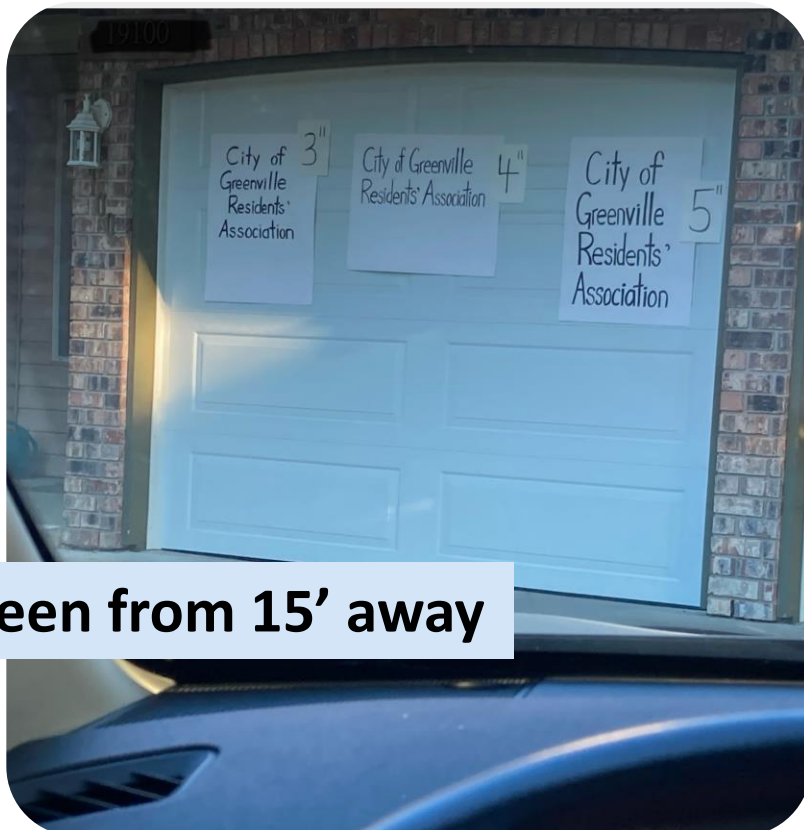
Lesson learned:

- priming the public before you approach will get you better results than a clipboard in the face.



As seen from a Distance

To be more specific, while I was preparing some signs for this chapter, I took photos of them from 15', 20' and 25' away. Ah ha! Not really readable! And we often protest on city streets, hoping that passing motorists will read, understand, agree and join us in the fight. Needed: a drastic rethink about the effectiveness of our signs and where best to use them.



As seen from 15' away



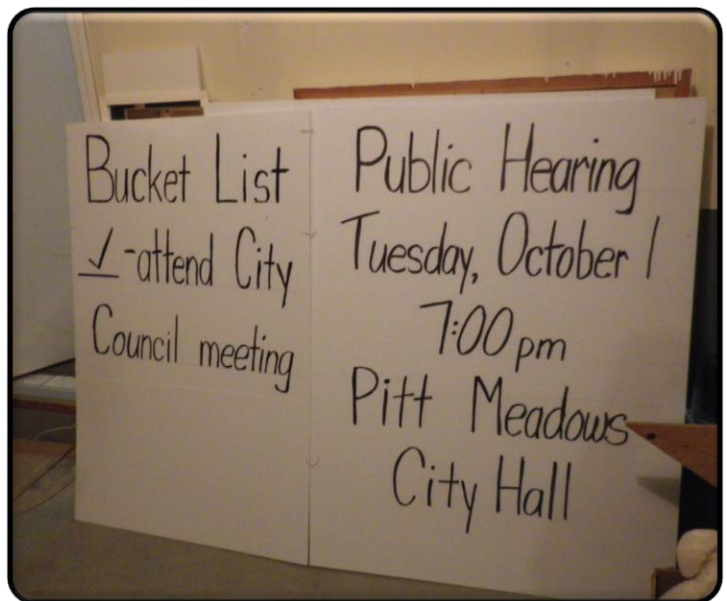
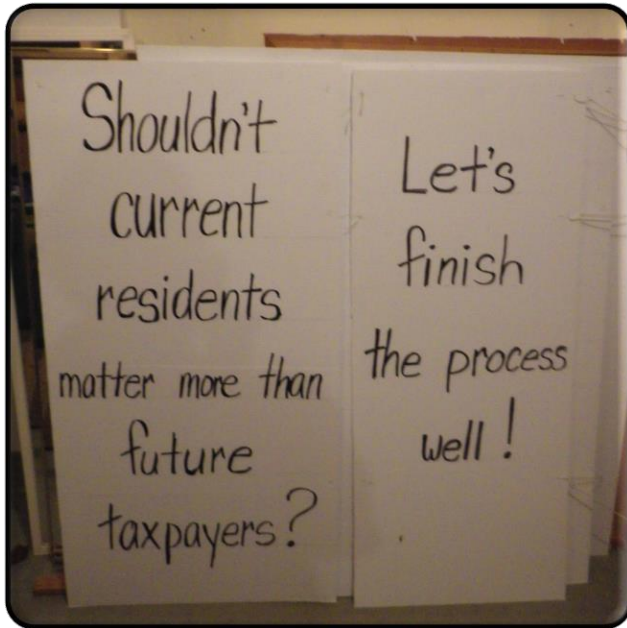
From 20' away

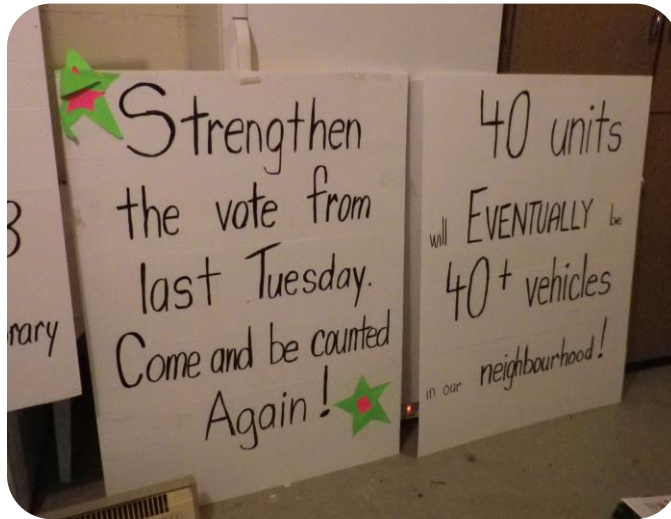


From 25' away

These are some of the signs used during my neighbourhood campaign.

Imperfect but VERY effective.





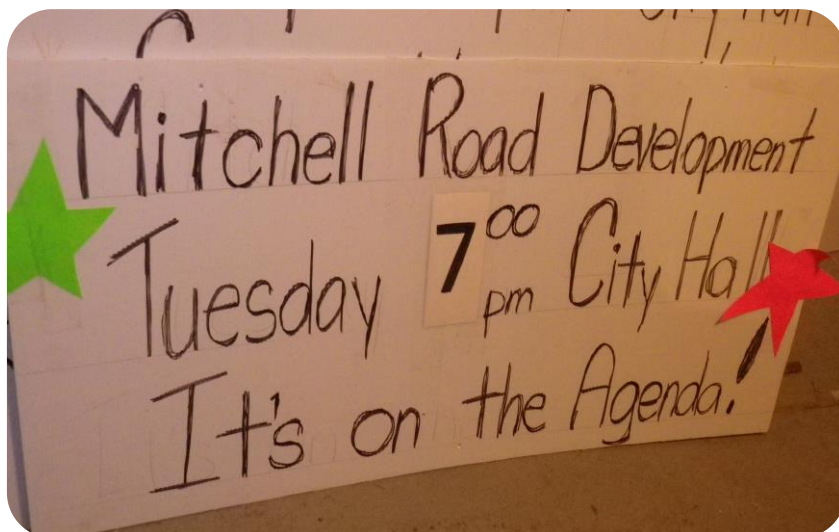
Lesson learned:

The words I chose were good BUT ...
the printing needed to be darker.



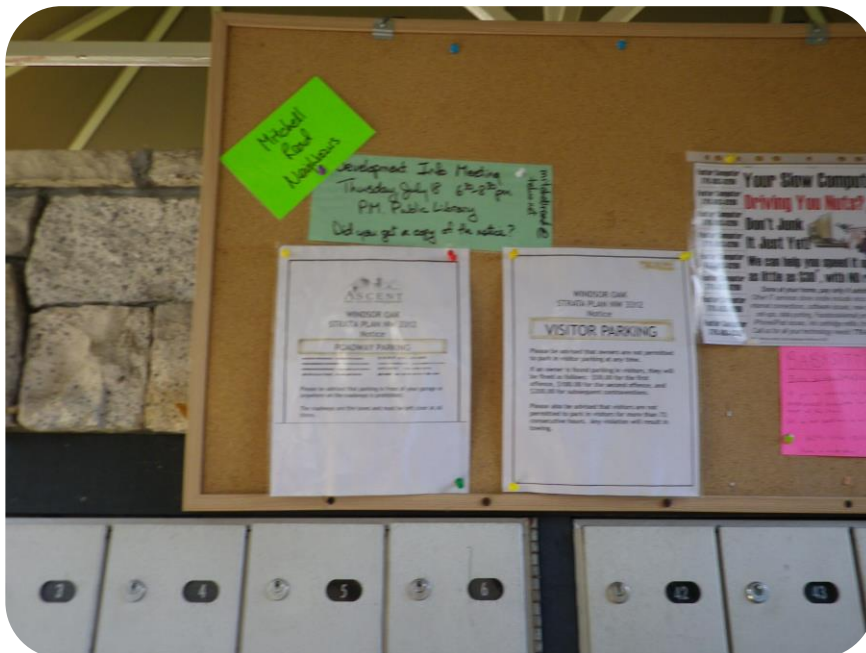
Lessons learned:

Font size was good BUT ...
the printing needed to be DARKER.





While signs at neighborhood mailboxes might have helped to get the word out however standing and talking with neighbors during their evening commute would have been more effective.



Lesson learned:

Yes, you can read the words BUT... they are spaced too far apart and make the words feel disconnected.

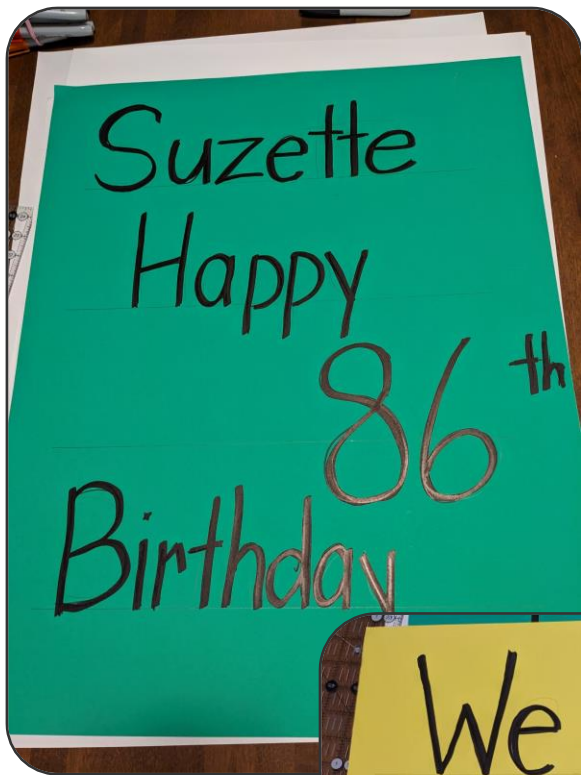


Can you even spot these signs?

Tiny signs on front lawns,
even on NEON paper,
were a complete **FAIL!**



During Covid,
these signs effectively communicated
with a loved one in a care facility,
reinforcing the fact that...



**BIGGER
IS
BETTER!**

