

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

'Made in Oregon' sign not worth tension created

Editorial

By: Emerald Editorial Board

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Some have called it a sign of change, but considering the mounting conflicts surrounding it, the University's attempt to change the "Made In Oregon" sign atop the White Stag building in Portland to say "University of Oregon" has mostly become a sign of unnecessary drama.

University President Dave Frohnmayer rejected Portland City Commissioner Randy Leonard's proposal for the city to purchase the sign, so Leonard filed an ordinance Thursday to condemn the sign using eminent domain and thus take possession of it from its owners since 1940, Ramsay Signs.

"University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer's efforts to change the sign ... would confiscate a Portland community asset and exchange it for the exclusive benefit of the Eugene-based University," Leonard wrote in a blog post.

Public speculation and opinion on the debate range from outrage at changing a historic Portland landmark to support of changing the sign to keep up with the changing face of the city (the last time it was changed was in 1997). But after months of debate that continues to grow more heated, it has become clear that many people are not willing to let the sign go without a fight.

So, what are the University's motives for changing the sign that justify straining ties with the city of Portland and creating not only public unrest but bad press for the University itself?

The justification is ostensibly that it will be costly to operate the sign, and therefore against the University's interests to do so without having its own message upon it. If this is the case, though, why not just let the city purchase the sign and operate it itself? Or, better yet, why not let the issue drop altogether? From what the administration has said thus far, the University would not be getting nearly enough out of the change to justify such stubborn actions that have repercussions far beyond an issue of finances.

But Leonard offered Frohnmayer another sign to represent its presence that would be visible from the east side of the Willamette River, with which the University could gain its publicity. To that, administrators said the historic significance of the White Stag building keeps the University from creating another sign. But not from re-branding the one that's already there.

Frohnmayer's efforts reflect on the University campus and student body as a whole, and so far they seem needlessly arbitrary and inflexible, and, in the face of such resistance, border on arrogant.

If the administration had significant support in its desire to change the sign, from the student body as well as from the city of Portland, perhaps its actions would seem more appropriate. But it only seems to meet stronger resistance with every further step it takes.

It's clear that many see the sign as representative of more than just the tenant of the building on which it rests. To too many it is part of the city's identity, and of the identity of its citizens as Portlanders. True, the University has a long-standing presence in Portland, but this is only more reason for Frohnmayer to back down - such historic ties shouldn't be severed over a matter of electricity costs. What's more, Portland is experiencing burgeoning growth and development that has created a strong citywide identity and solidarity. Business and culture are thriving in the city, and those who live there are staunchly proud to call themselves Portlanders.

"Given the strong feelings in our community about the historic value of the 'Made in Oregon' sign, I fear that a public debate on the University of Oregon's proposal will spark a controversy that could overshadow the otherwise positive relationship the University is building in our community," Leonard wrote in his letter to Frohnmayer.

Fighting to change the sign, especially at this moment in time, is unwise and unproductive. It's important for the University president to take strategic business actions, but after such clear opposition, unless Frohnmayer can produce a more compelling argument for changing the sign, the wisest strategy would be to pick the University's battles more carefully.

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