

# Sign of the times

The "Made in Oregon" sign is up for grabs

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Illustration by Kira Meyrick

Seattle has the Space Needle, New York City has the Empire State Building and Portland has a neon advertisement for a gift store in the mall. City officials and developers alike are hunting for control of the iconic White Stag block's "Made in Oregon" sign.

The sign itself remains shut off, a symbol of the struggle behind the scenes between two men to decide its future. City Commissioner Randy Leonard and Darryl Paulsen of Ramsay Signs continue to debate over an issue that arose when University of Oregon, the White Stag block's new tenants, wanted to purchase the sign and change it to read "University of Oregon." After months of talks fell through, Paulsen, the owner of the sign, is seeking a new lessee. Leonard, the voice of the opposition, wants to buy the sign using city money and have it read, "Portland, Oregon." He feels the sign is held in commercial interest but has come to represent Portland culture and should belong to the public.

Leonard says the sign is nationally and internationally known and brings in valuable tourist dollars. I find it hard to believe that people travel from all over the world to Portland to see a neon deer. I think we have more to offer than that. But I will admit that the sign is the only interesting thing about our skyline and does inspire some warm feelings after I've been away for a while.

“Made in Oregon” is a slogan denoting toughness and a self-awareness the state is renowned for. The lingering battle over who will pay for it is slowly tarnishing the image Portlanders have worked so hard to achieve.

Maintenance of the sign will cost taxpayers \$1,500 a month on top of the \$500,000 needed to purchase the sign.

If Leonard goes through with his remodel, the costs may double. Couldn't Portland Public Schools or our struggling economy use that money?

Leonard's main reason for buying the sign was to protect the sign from an outsider, the Eugene-based University of Oregon. In his city blog, Leonard wrote that Portland State is offended that University of Oregon would “come into its back yard and stake claim” to the iconic sign. Leonard lists the previous lessees of the sign that were Portland-based and “whose identities were as closely tied to Portland as their products were.” Leonard is talking about White Satin Sugar Co. and White Stag, both names that were on the sign before “Made in Oregon.”

That's right, the sign has only read “Made in Oregon” since 1995.

The sign has gone through numerous facelifts in the past, with commercial owners of the sign always getting the final say on its design. Leonard chooses to ignore this particular tradition. In an interview with The Oregonian, Leonard expressed worry that since anyone could buy the sign (and under Oregon's free speech laws), even a pornography business could advertise above the White Stag block for the right price. Leonard wants the city to control what the sign says. The sign has always evolved with the building it rests on and Portlanders have loved it for generations even if the words were for a business. It just so happens that the most recent tenants had a very catchy name.

I like anachronism. A part of me wishes the “Portland” sign adorning the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall still read “Paramount” from its days as a movie house. But I also can't stand when natural, organic progress is stifled and preserved, effectively killing what made the attraction so unique in the first place.

In this case, however, I have to agree with Leonard. Portland has been lucky in the past: Since 1940, only

two companies have leased the sign. The new owners could actually use the sign for its intended purpose of advertising. The fear of drastic change to a symbol of Portland outweighs my distaste for landmarks becoming generic and “Disney-fied.”

But Leonard is stepping outside of his purview if he believes he has the right to choose the new design. He's not spending his own money, he's spending ours. Let Portland decide the fate of its own icon. By giving Portlanders a say in this preservation buy, we are setting up a model for future city acquisitions of private landmarks. Whatever the city decides, we can be sure this is a sign of things to come.