

COMMUNITY HERITAGE COMMISSION

*HIS WORSHIP, THE MAYOR
AND COUNCILLORS*

**SUBJECT: CIVIC ACQUISITION OF THE "SWING GIRL" NEON SIGN AS A
HEIGHTS LANDMARK**

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THAT Council approve the proposed acquisition and conservation of the "Swinging Girl" neon sign as a Heights landmark, as outlined in this report.
2. THAT Council approve the expenditure of Gaming Funds to finance up to \$21,200 (inclusive of 6% GST rebate) of the project cost to complete the restoration and relocation of the "Swinging Girl" neon sign, as outlined in this report.
3. THAT Council forward a copy of this report to the Heights Merchants Association.

REPORT

The Community Heritage Commission, at its meeting held on 2007 September 06, received and adopted the *attached* report outlining a proposal for the civic acquisition and conservation of the "Swinging Girl" neon sign as a Heights landmark. The "Swinging Girl" neon sign is a much-loved community landmark on East Hastings Street. The Sicon Group has agreed to transfer ownership of the sign as part of a contract to undertake the sign's restoration, reinstallation, and ongoing maintenance as a permanent heritage landmark feature.

Respectfully submitted,

Councillor C. Jordan
Chair

Councillor G. Begin
Vice Chair

Copied to:	City Manager Director Finance Director Engineering City Solicitor Chief Building Inspector Risk Manager Purchasing Manager Director Planning & Building
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TO: CHAIR AND MEMBERS
COMMUNITY HERITAGE COMMISSION

DATE: 2007 August 24

FROM: DIRECTOR PLANNING AND BUILDING

FILE: 77000 05

SUBJECT: CIVIC ACQUISITION OF THE “SWINGING GIRL” NEON SIGN AS A HEIGHTS LANDMARK

PURPOSE: To outline a proposal for the civic acquisition and conservation of the “Swinging Girl” neon sign as a Heights landmark.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **THAT** the Commission request Council approval of the proposed acquisition and conservation of the “Swinging Girl” neon sign as a Heights landmark, as outlined in this report.
2. **THAT** the Commission request Council approve the expenditure of Gaming Funds to finance up to \$21,200 (inclusive of 6% GST rebate) of the project cost to complete the restoration and relocation of the “Swinging Girl” neon sign as outlined in this report.
3. **THAT** the Commission request Council to forward a copy of this report to the Heights Merchants Association.

REPORT**1.0 BACKGROUND**

At its Closed meeting of 2007 February 05, Council authorized staff to enter into negotiations with Mrs. Helen Arnold, owner of Helen’s Children’s Wear at 4142 East Hastings Street, and Sicon Signs to discuss the potential acquisition of the landmark “Swinging Girl” neon sign. This initiative reflects a broader city and community interest in providing for the preservation of this widely recognized heritage landmark. This report outlines a proposal for the retention of the sign in the Heights shopping district and seeks Council approval to acquire the sign and fund its conservation through the use of Gaming funds.

2.0 HISTORY & HERITAGE VALUE

Mrs. Helen Arnold opened Helen’s Children’s Wear in the store adjacent to her current location in 1948. Her first neon sign was in the store window and featured a stork with a baby bundle. In 1955, after the old Burnaby Municipal offices moved out of 4142 East Hastings Street, Elgin and

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Helen Arnold purchased the property and completed extensive renovations to transform the space into a commercial storefront.

As part of the renovations, Helen Arnold enlisted the assistance of her friend Mr. James Wallace, owner of Vancouver's Wallace Neon Company, to build and install a new sign for her expanded business. Mr. Reeve, one of the neon company's design employees, conceived and created the neon sign in 1956 composed of the "Swinging Girl" under a cloud shape with the name "Helen's". It is a nine-foot-six high and nine feet wide double-sided sign made of metal with the girl and name both painted and highlighted by neon. The girl is kept swinging by means of a small electric motor hidden in the sign's hollow core.

The "Swinging Girl" sign immediately became a landmark of Burnaby's business area on East Hastings Street, now known as the Heights. With the loss of so many examples of neon signs since their heyday in the 1950s, the Helen's sign gradually became known as one of the best surviving examples of kinetic neon art in British Columbia. It has been included in international neon publications and has been a destination for local neon night tours operated by the Vancouver Museum. The Helen's sign has survived intact because of the ongoing commitment of its lease-holder to ensure that it remained as the company's logo and business icon, despite ongoing maintenance and operation costs since it was installed in 1956.

Given its high heritage value, the "Swinging Girl" sign was listed on Burnaby's heritage inventory in 1988 and is eligible for legal protection through Council's approval of its listing on the Community Heritage Register and designation through by-law as a civic heritage landmark. Once installation of the sign is completed a Heritage Designation Bylaw report will be advanced for Council consideration and approval.

3.0 CIVIC ACQUISITION

One of the unique challenges of conserving the "Swinging Girl" sign in its former location is that its ownership is vested with the sign company which leased the sign to Helen's Children's Wear. In 2007 Elgin and Helen Arnold, who own the commercial property at 4142 East Hastings Street, sold the property to the Coffi family, long-established merchants of the Heights. Although the new property owners do not wish to retain the sign as part of their new business, they are supportive of City efforts to preserve the sign in a new location on the road right-of way in front of the original Helen's Store location.

Wallace Neon Limited, which built the sign in 1956, was sold in 1976 to Sicon Signs of Richmond, B.C. and the sign's lease agreement and ownership transferred to the new company. Sicon has maintained the sign in good operating and physical condition and on July 10, 2007 removed the sign from its former location and placed it in the company's storage facility pending a decision regarding the sign's disposition.

As authorized by Council, staff have pursued negotiations with Sicon Signs to secure the City of Burnaby's interest in acquiring the "Swinging Girl" sign for public ownership. Sicon has agreed

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to transfer legal ownership of the sign to the City of Burnaby as part of a contract to provide for its relocation, restoration and a fixed term of maintenance as outline in section 5.0 of this report. This contract would be based on the proposal to retain the sign as a Heights landmark as outlined below.

4.0 PROPOSED USE

4.1 Heights Landmark Sign

Staff, in consultation with the Board of Directors of the Heights Merchants' Association, has identified a preferred Heritage conservation Plan for the sign. It is proposed that the sign be relocated to a free-standing pole on the City-owned sidewalk right-of-way to serve as a heritage landmark to identify and sign the Heights shopping district (see *attachment 1*).

The conservation of the sign for this purpose conforms to a number of Burnaby's Official Community Plan goals that include civic acquisition and stewardship of significant heritage resources and the revitalization of the Heights area as an urban village. The conservation and use of the "Swinging Girl" sign as a landmark would contribute to the expressed goals and vision for the improvement of the Heights streetscape.

Based on the City's approved heritage conservation policies, the primary goal for the conservation of the sign would be to retain its primary "character defining elements." An assessment of the sign's heritage values have established that it is important that the sign remain in working condition. This will include ensuring that the sign's neon tubing remains lit and that the neon girl continues to swing. It is also considered important that the sign retain its original context as a street-front sign overhanging the sidewalk on Hastings Street to provide visibility and to retain its unique contribution to the overall streetscape.

In order that the sign continue to be relevant as a landmark to mark the Heights shopping district, it is proposed to replace the existing typography of "Helen's" with similarly designed neon lettering using the word "Heights" (see *attachment 2*). This proposed change to the sign's design would not significantly diminish any "character defining elements" or its heritage values. This alteration is technically feasible with minimal alteration to the original fabric of the sign. The proposed change is supported by the Heights Merchants Association and by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.

The 'Swinging Girl' sign under this proposed Conservation Plan will in essence be a heritage landmark that will serve the dual purposes of being a piece of 'urban art' and a new area sign for the Heights shopping district.

4.2 Location

It is recommended that the Swinging Girl be restored near its original location on Hastings Street. However, civic-ownership of the sign determines that it be located on public road right-

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of way rather than its former location on the roof at 4142 Hastings Street. It will be mounted onto on a free-standing pole located on the sidewalk within the road right-of-way adjacent to 4142 Hastings Street to serve as a heritage landmark. This location relates to the existing "Heritage on the Heights" sign plaque which was mounted in front of the store in 2004 to tell the story of the former Municipal Office located formerly in the Helen's store and the history of the "Swinging Girl" sign.

City staff have worked with the new property owners to ensure their agreement for the new location of the sign in order not to interfere with their current storefront business entrance and proposed awning signage. The sign will be moved to the west of the storefront entrance of 4142 Hastings and mounted on a pole that will be placed within the road right-of way. In order to provide for the sign's prominence in the streetscape, the height of the sign will be raised by four to five feet. This will also ensure that it is not blocked visually by any future store awnings that may be approved for any adjacent properties. The sign at its proposed location will not interfere with any future redevelopment of adjacent properties under the existing C8 district zoning. The design of the installation will be to the approval of the Director of Engineering.

4.3 Legal Authority

It is proposed that the "Swinging Girl" sign be protected by a Heritage Designation Bylaw to acknowledge its heritage values as part of the City's standard stewardship practice for city heritage features. With Council approval of the acquisition and installation of the sign, a separate report outlining the Heritage Designation bylaw for this landmark neon sign will be advanced for Council approval. Once the sign is protected by bylaw as a "heritage site", it will have all of the legal protection as authorized under the Local Government Act. Any future proposed changes to the sign's location or design would require Council approval of a Heritage Alteration Permit.

5.0 CONSERVATION AND MAINTENANCE PLAN

5.1 Proposed Sign Conservation and Installation

As outlined previously, the sign was removed from the former Helen's store and temporarily moved to the Sicon Sign shop where it is awaiting restoration. Staff have worked with Sicon Signs to develop a proposal for the Conservation of this heritage neon sign and its remounting on a new pole. This work would include an extensive cleaning and rebuilding of the sign's electrical and mechanical systems. The original neon tubing of the sign's frame and swinging girl will be retained and replaced with like materials where required. The metal work will be cleaned and repainted using its historic colours and design. New pink neon tubing will be created and mounted for the new "Heights" lettering on the sign. A new reliable and energy-efficient mechanical motor will replace the original system that operates the "Swinging Girl." This work will substantially improve the sign's operating efficiency and reduce maintenance and operating costs. Sicon Signs will also fabricate and install the new free-standing pole for the "Swinging

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Girl" and complete its new electrical connection. This total estimate for this work to be completed by Sicon Signs is \$10,000. A further \$10,000 is required in order complete civic works associated with its installation in the City-owned sidewalk area including an updated interpretation sign. The Engineering Department has reviewed the preliminary pole design, location and underground electrical supply and will review and approve the final design work and installation.

5.2 Capital Funding

Council approval is sought for the use of Gaming funds to provide for the completion of this project not to exceed to \$21,200 (inclusive of 6% GST rebate). A capital allocation is available under the Heritage Buildings Section of the Land Assembly and Development component of the 2007-2011 Capital Program. The use of Gaming funds for this project is consistent with Council guidelines to support heritage, cultural and environmental projects.

5.3 Maintenance Costs

The ongoing care, maintenance and operational costs for this project are proposed to be managed by the City in cooperation with the Heights Merchants' Association. It will be necessary to ensure the good care of the sign through ongoing maintenance. The proposed restoration of the sign will lower the previous \$400.00 monthly maintenance cost to \$150.00 per month or \$1,800 per year. Sicon sign would undertake this maintenance under contract at this fixed-rate for a 36 month term. At the conclusion of the contract it would be renewed based on established civic purchasing practices. Review of this proposal by the Purchasing Department has established that the proposal for the restoration and maintenance represents fair market value for the services provided. Staff would note that Sicon is one of the only local sign companies that have extensive experience and knowledge of the repair and maintenance of historic neon signs.

Heights Merchants' Association have committed to partner with the City to assume the annual operational costs of this Business Improvement Area feature through its annual budget. The Merchants' Association would repay the City on an annual basis for the \$1,800.00 per year maintenance costs. The costs associated with the sign's power supply and any extra-ordinary costs associated with the maintenance of the sign would be accommodated in city's established operating budget for heritage sites.


6.0 NEXT STEPS

The "Swinging Girl" neon sign is a much-loved community landmark on East Hastings Street. With the concurrence of the Community Heritage Commission and Council, staff will pursue conclusion of an agreement with Sicon for the civic acquisition of the sign and its conservation,

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relocation and maintenance as outlined in this report. The Sicon Group has agreed to transfer ownership of the sign as part of a contract to undertake the sign's restoration, reinstallation, and ongoing maintenance as a permanent heritage landmark feature. Staff would also conclude the agreement with the Heights Merchants Association to fund its ongoing regular maintenance.

As this initiative proceeds, staff would report back to the Commission and Council with regard to the Heritage Designation Bylaw to coincide with the re-installation of the "Swinging Girl" sign in its Hastings Street location.


B. Luksun, Director
for PLANNING AND BUILDING

JW:tn

- City Manager
- Director Finance
- Director Engineering
- City Solicitor
- Chief Building Inspector
- Risk Manager
- Purchasing Manager

Attachments

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Attachment 1
 Propoc Sign Stand and location at 4142 Hastings Street



Attachment 2
Proposed design change for the "Swinging Girl" neon sign