Case #: HS2023-001
Staff: Michelle M. McCullough

Applicant: Christy Cox Spencer
Owner: Same

LOCATION

Sign: Arby’s
Street: Originally at 400 Knollwood Street
Proposed to be installed at 1355 North Martin Luther King Jr. Drive
City: Winston-Salem, NC

REQUEST

• Approval of the Arby’s Sign as a Historic Sign

BACKGROUND

The Arby’s sign was installed ca. 1968 at the corner of Knollwood Street and South Stratford Road. The sign was constructed of metal with fluorescent bulbs surrounding the perimeter as well as neon that surrounds the interior letters. The sign was shaped in the Arby’s trademark cowboy hat, which became the restaurant’s trademark when it was established in 1964 due to the popularity of westerns at that time.

The sign stood at this location until May 1, 2023, when it was removed due to the closure of the restaurant. The building and site have recently been sold and neither the new owner nor any party associated with the restaurant chain and/or franchise wanted the sign. The owner had planned to dispose of it as scrap metal and wanted the sign removed immediately. Ms. Spencer received an email from Ethanie Good with Greater Winston-Salem attempting to locate an interested party to save and relocate the sign. Due to Ms. Spencer’s quick response and willingness to remove and relocate the sign immediately, she was awarded ownership of this iconic sign.

At the time of removal, the sign was disassembled piece by piece, all the original neon and bulbs were removed, and the metal cowboy hat was taken down in three large pieces. Currently, the new owner is making necessary repairs to the metal, reconnecting wiring for the neon and electric bulbs, and establishing how to engineer the necessary, code required footing.

The new location being proposed for the sign is 1355 North Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. This is the current site of the Winston Cup Museum. The sign will be installed at the rear of the property adjacent to East 9th Street and the parking lot for the museum. The sign, when installed, will be displayed in a manner as if it were located near a companion restaurant building, in a median between the parking lot and the street. It will be visible due to its height of 30’. The location and siting of the sign are similar to its orientation and positioning at the original location, making this location appropriate.

Section 6.5.1(F)(5) of the Unified Development Ordinances provides for the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission to classify a sign as a Historic Sign prior to issuance of a zoning permit.
REQUIRED HISTORIC FINDINGS

To be classified as a Historic Sign, an application for classification shall be filed with the Historic Resources Commission staff, and the Commission must find the following:

1. The sign bears a close resemblance to its appearance when originally installed;
2. The original sign was erected twenty-five (25) years prior to application for classification; and
3. The sign meets at least three (3) of the following criteria:
   a. Bears a national or local emblem, logo, or other graphic that is unique to the property or the establishment, or that is a remnant of an advertising program that is no longer used by the parent company.
   b. Is significant as reflecting the history of the building, structure, object, property or the development of the area, or recognized as important to the culture or history of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County.
   c. Possesses unique characteristics or incorporates materials, design or craftsmanship not commonly found in newer signs.
   d. Is unique, notably aesthetic or creative, so as to make a significant contribution as a work of art.
   e. Is recognized as a popular focal point within the community.
   f. Is associated with historical individuals, events or places.
   g. Is characteristic of a specific time period.
   h. Exhibits unique or rare characteristics that enhance the streetscape or the community at large.

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

Commission staff finds that the application meets the required findings to be classified as a historic sign because:

1) The sign bears a close resemblance to the original sign.

2) The sign was installed in 1968, fifty-five (55) years ago, therefore was erected twenty-five (25) years prior to application for classification.

3) The sign meets six (6) of the criteria for classification:
   a. The sign bears a national logo that is unique to the establishment and is a remnant of an advertising program that is no longer used by the parent company. The Arby’s sign was installed ca. 1968 at the corner of Knollwood Street and South Stratford Road as part of Arby’s national ad campaign using their trademark cowboy hat as the logo, which became the restaurant’s trademark when it was established in 1964 due to the popularity of westerns at that time and was updated to a more modern looking cowboy hat in 1969.
   b. The sign possesses unique characteristics that incorporates materials, design, and craftsmanship not commonly found in newer signs. The Arby’s sign was constructed of metal with fluorescent bulbs surrounding the perimeter, as well as neon that surrounds the interior letters. The large neon lite cowboy hat was iconic and one of the last major neon sign campaigns by a major fast-food corporation. Neon was first introduced in 1910 by George Claude, a French engineer, at the Paris Motor Show. In 1923, Claude brought neon signs to the United States. The popularity of neon signs in the United States was from the 1920s until the 1960s, waning in popularity and use due to safety concerns, inefficiency, and expense.
c. The sign is unique, notably aesthetic, and creative and makes a significant contribution as a work of art. This is one of the last known signs remaining of this design and style. It is a unique and actually aesthetic sign because of its design, size, scale, and materials.

d. The sign is recognized as a popular focal point within the community. The sign stood at its original location until May 1, 2023, when it was removed due to the closure of the restaurant. Neither the new owner nor any party associated with the restaurant chain and/or franchise wanted the sign. The owner had planned to dispose of it as scrap metal and wanted the sign removed immediately. There was an immediate public outcry to save this iconic sign proving that it was an important contribution to the community’s history.

e. The sign is characteristic of a specific time period. As mentioned above this large, neon lite sign demonstrates the last era of popularity for sign of this design. In the 1970s there was a movement towards signs that were more affordable to maintain and light.

f. The sign exhibits unique and rare characteristics that enhance the streetscape and the community at large. The public outcry and comments, at the time of removal, show that this iconic sign played a large part history of the community, especially in the days of “cruising” on Stratford Road. Nationally, this original cowboy hat sign campaign is known to be one of the best logos and signs for fast food campaigns that ever existed, leaving a trail of memories in the path of brightly lit neon bulbs.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Commission approve classification of the Arby’s sign as a historic sign, to be located at 1355 North Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.