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Restaurant's big wheel seeks new home

Owners of now-closed Alban's hope to save neon landmark on Woodward.

Jennifer Chambers / The Detroit News

BIRMINGHAM -- Locked doors, covered windows and darkness envelope Alban's restaurant, now closed after five decades of business on Woodward Avenue.

Yet standing proud just outside the eatery is a towering circle of yellow neon, the famous Alban's wheel sign, a landmark that needs a home before a wrecking ball claims another vestige of cruising history in Metro Detroit.

"That sign is really important. It's historic," said Marjorie DeCapite, who owned Alban's with her husband, Armando.

"It's been there forever. People recognize it. It really is a landmark. When I would tell people how to get to the restaurant, the answer was 'look for the big wheel sign.' "

For the last two weeks, Marjorie DeCapite has been desperately trying to find someone to take the sign. She has called The Henry Ford, the Birmingham Historical Society, Cranbrook and the Detroit Historical Society, but none of the organizations has room to keep such a large object, she said.

DeCapite found help through the Woodward Avenue Action Association, which has arranged to have the sign stored with one of its member businesses -- Grand Central Storage in Ferndale -- until a permanent home is found.

"We are trying to figure out logistics now," said Nina Butler, with the association. "It definitely has to come down. She really wants to preserve this sign, and we want to help her do it."

It was with a heavy heart that the DeCapites shuttered the restaurant in 2006 and finally the wine shop last February, after Armando DeCapite suffered a stroke and business continued to decline.

Marjorie DeCapite, who managed the restaurant while her husband thrived as the on-site wine expert, said the sign must go now that a physician's office is moving onto the site, north of Maple Road.

The idea of destroying the symbol -- which has stood there since the 1940s when Alban's was first opened and operated by its namesake owners -- is too much for Marjorie to bear.

The sign, which is about 10 feet across and 2 feet deep, is all exposed neon, a dinosaur in today's LED world.

The DeCapites hired a sign specialist -- Clyde Canko of Lakeview Sign -- to maintain it, change burned-out bulbs and make electrical repairs in order to keep it lit at all times.

There are more than 250 tiny yellow bulbs around both sides of the circle, which beckons drivers to "STOP: Turn in For a Big Wheel Sandwich," the trademark meal at Alban's with specially baked bread shaped like a car wheel.

"Those lights burned out regularly. As soon as anything looked not right I called Clyde," Marjorie DeCapite said. "It was important I kept it lit ... it meant too much to look anything but perfect."

Even after shuttering the wine shop, it took her months to turn the sign off, which finally happened in July. Bill McElhone, executive director of the Birmingham Historical Museum, said he hopes the DeCapites can save the sign.

"It's an iconic sign along Woodward. When the WAAA got involved, it was fitting. It's a roadside artifact," McElhone said.

DeCapite's children have joked that she should simply take the sign to the family's cottage on Torch Lake.

"Everyone would know how to find us," DeCapite jokes. "But that sign, of all things it would just break my

heart if it has to be demolished."

You can reach Jennifer Chambers at (248) 647-7402 or jchambers@detnews.com.

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