



Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report

LIVING WITH HISTORY

HPC meeting date: 9/8/2025
Staff reviewer: Andrew Stern

CCF # 250119
Ald. Bauman

Property 1203 N. 10th St. Pabst Brewery Historic District

Owner/Applicant Neighborhood Improvement District 1 - The Brewery District
1125 N 9th St Suite J
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Proposal

NID No.1 is requesting approval to replace the neon lighting that is currently being used to illuminate the Historic Pabst Bridge sign that crosses over W. Juneau Ave at 10th Street. The proposal includes repainting both the interior and exterior of each letter casing with paint matching the current color and removing the neon lighting components and installing new LED Aurora Flex RGB lighting strips. The light strips themselves would be laid out within the letters in the same location as the current neon lines and during non-illumination times, the applicants state there would be no visual difference.

Staff comments

The neon "PABST" sign is attached to the east side of the bridge over Juneau Avenue that connects the historic malt house (building #25) to the engine, mill, and refrigeration machines building (building #2), now respectively The Malt House apartments building and The Brewhouse Inn & Suites building. The National Register Registration Form indicates a construction date of circa 1891 for the bridge construction, but brewing historian John Steiner places the bridge's construction into the 1950s. A sign over Juneau Avenue at the brewery complex can be traced back to at least the 1880s, prior to the renaming the brewery from Best Brewing Co to Pabst Brewing Company in 1889. The Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory dates the neon sign to 1930 but, again, brewing historian John Steiner places the construction to the 1950s. Photographs from the late-1920s and mid-1930s show the bridge and sign with the same design that is presently there, though the neon lighting within the sign may not have been present at that time. Neon signs first appeared in the 1920s and reached their height of popularity in the 1940s. Both the sign and bridge are contributing features to the Pabst Brewing Company Complex National Register District.

The applicants wish to replace the neon component of the sign with new Aurora Flex RBG LED light strips. The applicants report problems with the current neon sign, including outdated electrical components, difficulty sourcing parts, and expensive fixtures. The application narrative states that "during non-illumination times, there would be no visual difference" between the neon lighting and the LED lighting and that during illumination "the average person will notice very little difference. A trained eye to this product may notice that the new LED is a true red color and not the orange-red that is currently present."

The preservation guidelines for trim and ornamentation in the historic district state:

There shall be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance.

The Pabst neon bridge sign has stood as an icon in the district for decades. The bridge and neon sign are depicted in countless photographs and postcards of the brewery. The neon Pabst bridge neon sign, along with perhaps the Leon's Custard neon signage, are two of the few remaining iconic pieces of neon signage within the city. The National Park Service's *Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs* has the following to say about signs as icons:

Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners-or from many vantage points across the city-for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as

vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.

At the June HPC meeting, the commission recommended a mock-up be prepared to view the proposed LED lighting against the existing historic neon lighting. A mock-up letter T was prepared at approximately 1/3 scale of the existing historic letters and installed on the bridge next to the existing signage. HPC commissioners were invited to view the mock-up on the evening of August 28th.

While HPC has approved new signage in the district with faux neon lighting, the preservation guidelines and the iconic status of the neon sign do not support removal of the historic neon lighting and replacement with modern LED lighting. After viewing the mock-up, staff still finds that the color of the LED lighting will differ from the historic neon and the profile of the LED lighting strip will differ in appearance from the neon tubes. The NID has indicated that the primary problem with the existing lights is moisture entering the transformers, causing the GFCI protection to trip and turn off individual letters. Staff recommends working with an electrician or sign contractor to remedy this issue and more thoroughly waterproof the transformers. Staff recommends The Brewery NID No. 1 continue their stewardship and care of the historic neon lighting within the iconic Pabst sign. Updating the electrical components is practical and feasible, continuing to use the dated electronics rather than replacing them is not cause for changing the character of the sign. Neon signs are still made and there are craftspeople still making them in Wisconsin. Staff recommends denial of the LED lighting.

Recommendation Recommend denial of the installation of LED lighting.

Conditions

Previous HPC action

Previous Council action