

THE RETURN OF THE `BIG BIRD'

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COLUMN: Gaye LeBaron's Notebook

Santa Rosa's Cultural Heritage Board takes landmark designations very seriously. So when **Pierre Ehret**, owner of the Flamingo, applied for landmark status for the hotel's 1950s' style tower sign, board members not only approved, they took it a step farther back.

The resolution sent to the City Council after the board's meeting last week not only recommends landmark status for the tower, but calls for a return of the neon-outlined pink flamingo that once stood atop the tower, giving the hotel its nickname -- the Big Bird.

When the Flamingo, the county's first ``garden hotel," was built in 1955, the sign was an eye-catcher. But, in the '80s, in one of its many remodels, city officials ruled that the revolving neon bird was in violation of a sign ordinance adopted by the council long after the sign was built. The tower sign could be refurbished, said the community development department, only if the bird came down.

So it came down, eight or 10 years ago. But now, because they believe in authenticity -- not to mention nostalgia -- the Cultural Heritage Board members want to see it back up there. And the owner, of course, is delighted to comply.

The matter still has to go to the Design Review Board. And final approval will come from the City Council. But plans are being drawn.

The original flamingo has been lost, the owners say. But they will make a new one from the original design. No one, not the board members nor the present owners, can say for certain that the original bird revolved. There is, however, a drum on top the tower that makes it possible.

I seem to remember that it went around. And I agree with the board members. If it turned, then let it turn again. Landmarks should be as they really, truly were.

Remembering the public outcry when the city tried to stop the Coddington sign from revolving, I foresee a continuing story in this pink flamingo.

It's not exactly a life-or-death issue. But it's one of the few things to come before government in this age of complex issues that we can actually understand.

The questions are simple and direct. Should there be a pink neon Flamingo on top of the sign? Should it be allowed to revolve?

They are questions that can be answered yes or no. Let the games begin?