

CASE STUDY

the ROAD BECKONS

BEST PRACTICES FOR BYWAYS

CONSERVATION

RESTORATION OF HISTORIC NEON SIGNS
ON NEW MEXICO'S ROUTE 66

New Mexico



RESTORATION OF HISTORIC NEON SIGNS ON NEW MEXICO'S ROUTE 66

It is the most famous highway in the United States, and possibly the world! Of the eight states through which the historic route passes, New Mexico has the largest remaining inventory of roadside architecture related to Route 66. Many reminders of the "Mother Road" can still be found along the 604 miles that cross the state.

Emblematic of the roadside culture of Route 66 are the neon signs that once burned brightly in front of many of the businesses along the route. Recognizing their value as objects of cultural significance, the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division (NMHPD) added a selection of vintage Route 66 neon signs to the State Register of Cultural Properties. Thanks to the commitment of the National Park Service, the NMHPD and the New Mexico Route 66 Association, a project is currently underway to restore 9 of these signs to their former glory.

WINNING ELEMENTS:

VALUING UNIQUE RESOURCES. Designed as advertisements for businesses along the Route, the neon signs became so much more. Fanciful in design and scale, they soon became attractions in and of themselves. Characterized by regional motifs, cowboys and Indians, lassos and teepees glowed, blinked, gyrated and beckoned travelers to stop and stay awhile. Over the years as travel and land use patterns changed, many of the businesses either closed their doors or were demolished, and the signs that adorned them fell into a state of disrepair. The New Mexico Historic Preservation Division



Westward Ho, Albuquerque NM, restored February 2003 (right). Lexington Hotel (shown during install), Gallup, NM, restored January 2003 (opposite).



recognized the intrinsic value of the signs, and obtained designation for a select group of signs on the State Register of Cultural Properties.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY. In 1999, Congress authorized the Department of the Interior to invest up to \$1 million annually (2000–2009) to preserve the celebrated highway’s cultural resources (Public Law 106-45, August 10, 1999). Charged with administering the program, the National Park Service issued the call for proposals. In 2000, New Mexico’s Historic Preservation Division submitted a nomination to restore a series of neon signs along Route 66 in New Mexico. Upon selection, the NMHPD selected the byway manager, the New Mexico Route 66 Association, to oversee the project. Funding stipulated that 5 neon signs be restored.

TIMELINE

- 2001 “Route 66 Historic Commercial Signs” listed as one of New Mexico’s Most Endangered Places by the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance
Funding awarded under provisions of Public Law 106-45 to restore 5 neon signs along Route 66 in New Mexico
- 2002 Classic neon signs included in the New Mexico State Register of Cultural Properties
Signs selected for restoration
- 2003 Multiple property listing in the National Register of Historic Places
Restoration of 9 neon signs completed
Funding awarded under provisions of Public Law 106-45 for restoration of architectural/ornamental neon
(Spring): applications accepted for architectural/ornamental neon
(Fall): anticipated completion date of architectural neon project

RECRUITING THE RIGHT TALENT. To implement the project, an all-star panel was assembled. A talented group, members included a well known historian with expertise on historic Route 66 properties; a neon aficionado, artist and author; a Pulitzer Prize nominated author, speaker and champion of “The Mother Road;” and a writer well-versed in the byway’s legendary architecture.

Working together, the panel identified nomination criteria, compiled the application and issued a request for nominations. Sixteen eligible projects were submitted for consideration. Selection was based on historical significance, the sign’s potential for adding value to an existing enterprise, and its overall aesthetics.

SHARING THE COSTS. To enhance “buy in” and expand the scope of work, added merit was assigned to proposals that included matching funds, labor and materials.



CREATING AWARENESS, APPRECIATION

AND SUPPORT FOR THE RESOURCE. With over 600 miles of byway, public outreach was critical to the success of the project. To raise awareness for the project, press releases were issued and over 4,500 copies of a special neon edition of the byway magazine, *Route 66 New Mexico*, were distributed. In each city along the byway (including Tucumcari, Santa Rosa, Moriarty, Albuquerque, Grants and Gallup), local chambers of commerce conducted meetings to raise awareness for the project and to help identify and submit projects for funding. Main Street programs and local advocacy groups got involved by contributing funds and services. By fostering new partnerships and securing community involvement, byway funds and resources were identified to increase the size of the project from the restoration

of 5 to 9 neon signs. Seven of the projects have been completed and the remaining 2 are near completion. The stunning results can be seen online at www.rt66nm.org/restogallery.html.

The project has gone a long way to revitalize both pride in and protection of these important local resources. Commemorative plaques will be installed at each location to acknowledge the contributors responsible for each sign restoration.

INCREASING PRIDE AND LEVERAGING

INVESTMENT. Local advocates realize this project is “about more than some pretty signs.” Restoration of the signs has renewed community pride and triggered investment in local properties. In one instance, after rehabilitation of a sign, the business owner reupholstered restaurant-seating areas, printed a new menu, and painted interior walls. Recently, a benefactor in town donated \$1,000 to paint the exterior of the building. It is anticipated that the project will spark additional investments of this kind.

DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS. Lessons learned in New Mexico are being shared across the country. The local PBS television station has been documenting the restoration project and is producing a documentary film. In addition, the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, was selected to write a model sign ordinance to protect Route 66 historic signs. The project involved producing a brochure on the rescue and restoration of neon signs and the provision of the model sign ordinance

to communities along the entire length of Route 66. The ordinance can be accessed online at www.nmheritage.org.

RECRUITING THE TALENT AND

ADMINISTERING THE FUNDING. All of the firms selected to perform the restoration work were based in New Mexico and had a deep appreciation for and knowledge of the signs they were being asked to bring back to life (each participated in a competitive bid process). Individual performance contracts were drawn up between the New Mexico Route 66 Association and the neon contractors. The terms specified a formal Statement of Work and Contract Performance schedule to keep things on track. Upon signing the contract, matching funds were deposited

into an escrow account for disbursement to the neon contractor. Contractors were paid in 2 installments, with the final installment paid upon project completion and a satisfactory inspection by the Route 66 Association Project Manager.

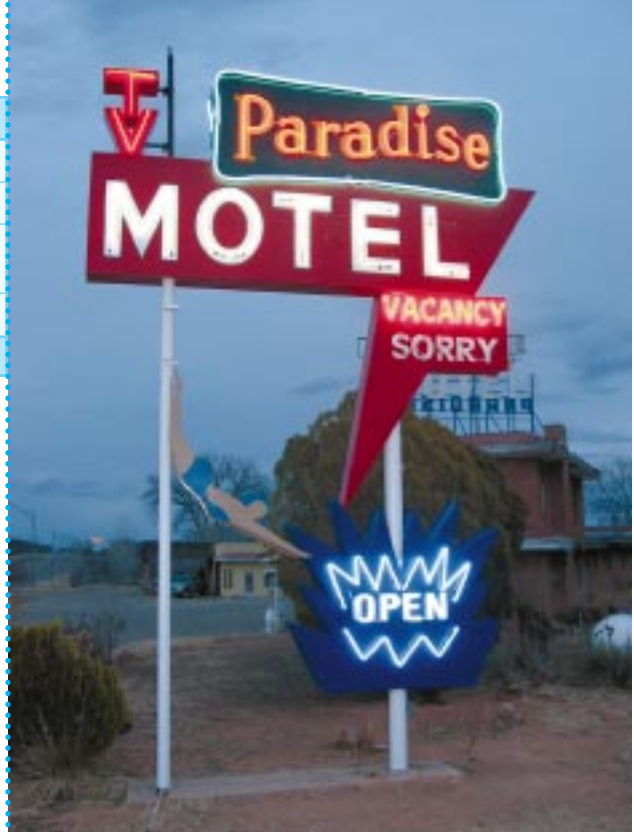
SEEING THE LIGHT: PARLAYING ONE

SUCCESS INTO ANOTHER. In 2003, the National Park Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Office announced that the New Mexico Route 66 Association had been awarded a follow-up grant to restore architectural neon. (Architectural and ornamental neon is typically found along the eaves or on the walls of a building.) During the neon sign restoration nomination process, several applications were submitted for the restoration of architectural



FUNDING SHARE & SOURCES	DOLLARS	PERCENTAGE
STATE SHARE	\$50,000	66%
COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS	\$5,500	7%
PRIVATE SHARE:		
Cash	\$17,884	24%
In-kind	\$2,500	3%
TOTAL COST	\$75,884	100%

neon, which fell outside the scope of the project. Thanks in large part to the success of the neon sign restoration project; the add-on funding was provided for the complementary initiative. Together, it is anticipated that these projects will help renew appreciation for the use of neon and stimulate both continued restorations and new installations of neon to relight Route 66.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: “LESSONS FROM THE ROAD”

During this project we learned:

- The intrinsic values of the byway are endangered
- The cultural significance of historic neon signage
- Teamwork and partnering are essential for success
- Local cash resources are strained

If we were to do it again, we would:

- Allow more time to investigate the adaptation that neon signs have undergone over time. More time was needed to locate vintage photographs that illustrated the original configuration of the signs.



Paradise Motel, Tucumcari, NM, before restoration (left).
The Paradise Motel after restoration in December 2002 (above).

ASSESSING YOUR EFFORTS

This project was successful because of a number of factors. Is your byway implementing similar best practices?



Neon lights the way for travelers on New Mexico's Route 66.

ASSESSMENT
1 2 3 4

1: Never 2: Sometimes 3: Frequently 4: Always

1. We honor the historical significance of our road when planning byway projects and initiatives.
2. We have taken an imaginative look at the resources along our byway to enhance the visitor experience.
3. We are implementing strategies to protect the character and resources of our corridor.
4. We recruit the right talent for byway projects, tapping into people with special skills and expertise that can help us accomplish our goals.
5. We understand the requirements to use federal funds and the administrative responsibilities associated with these funds.
6. We have found ways to educate the public and build awareness of our byway (e.g., Route 66 magazine).
7. We align ourselves with agencies and organizations that will adopt and advance our byway initiatives.

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RESOURCES

Route 66 New Mexico Magazine (special neon issue, spring 2002 volume 10, number 1), web site www.rt66nm.org (information on the neon sign restoration project and details related to the architectural neon restoration grant process and key milestones can be found here), Public Law 106-45, August 10, 1999 (106th Congress) which applies to structures and other cultural resources found along the Route 66 corridor, Final project report: *New Mexico Route 66 Historic Neon Sign Restoration Project*. Model sign ordinance to protect Route 66 historic signs www.nmheritage.org.

ROAD WORK AHEAD

1. What can we learn from this case study?
2. Are there aspects of this case study that we would like to incorporate into our byway plans and initiatives?
3. What are our *conservation* success stories? In what ways are we working to protect the visual integrity of our byway?
4. What steps would we like to take to improve and enhance our *scenic conservation* efforts?
5. What would we like to know more about related to this case study?



Grants Café, Grants, MN, restored April 2003.



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Case studies are drawn from the 2001 and 2003 Best Practices for Byways competitions.