

# In Rio Vista historic neon signs will get a face-lift

*By Roni Gehlke For the Times*

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RIO VISTA -- The neon sign over the Raul's Striper Café has lost some of its shine over the past few years, but the 80-year-old icon is about to get a face-lift that will not only help restore it, but also the city's downtown, organizers hope.

The sign restoration is part of the small Delta community's efforts to help revitalize the town's business economy.

Several years ago a group of local volunteers approached the American Institute of Architects Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team Program, an organization known for helping small towns with downtown revitalization projects, to assess Rio Vista's downtown business district.

"We wanted to find out about perking up our business community and attract business to the downtown," said Jim Wheeler, executive director of Rio Visions, a grass-roots nonprofit made up of local residents and concerned parties of the downtown area.

One of the immediate suggestions was to spruce up the looks of the downtown, adding sidewalk planters, parklets and signage.

"An anonymous donor came forward with money to restore two downtown neon signs," Wheeler said. One of those signs was Raul's Striper Café with its giant fish; the other was Foster's Bighorn Restaurant, whose sign features a martini glass and bighorn ram.

When the Striper's Café sign was first built back in the 1930s, neon signs were a popular way to advertise restaurants, theaters and hotels. However, these types of electric signs, once lighted by long luminous gas-discharge tubes that contain neon or other gases, aren't made in the same manner today. Raul's Striper Café owner, Raul Rodriguez, said that it wasn't easy to find someone who could restore the sign to its original look.

"I really wanted to see the sign restored to the original appearance," Rodriguez said. "I really like keeping things classic."

While both signs are relatively the same age, Wheeler said that they are quite different.

"The Striper Café sign is an easier job of patterning the paint on the sign and making the neon tubes to run through it," he explained. "The Fosters' sign is porcelain -- and not painted -- and will take a little more work."

The company the group hired is out of Modesto and specializes in old signs and making sure they are refurbished close to the original and kept to current codes. Wheeler explained that the price of refurbishing the two signs was a little higher than first estimated and the group needed to get more donations for the work.

"A second anonymous donor and the owners of each restaurant kicked in some money to get the work done," Wheeler said.

"Doing something like this can have a very real historical value for the downtown," Rodriguez said. "I'm really glad to be doing this for the community."

The new sign on Raul's Striper Café should be up in the next few weeks and then the committee will begin work on the Foster's Bighorn sign. That sign is expected to take several months to complete.

