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Gimme a P? Crews dismantle historic Yellow Pages sign above Lodge Freeway



Crews dismantle iconic Yellow Pages sign in Detroit...: Piece by piece parts of the well-known and beloved Find it Fast Yellow Pages sign is coming down. Demo crews started dismantling a large part of the sign last week. / Mike Brookbank / Detroit Free Press 12/6/2011

It took some perseverance, but Tim Whiting finally figured out how to get a stubborn letter P from its perch, high above the city of Detroit.

On a lift, 150-feet in the air, Whiting sawed, hammered and then plucked the nearly 12-foot piece of Detroit history from view last Thursday.

That was the P, the first letter to come down on the iconic Find it Fast Yellow Pages sign on the old Michigan Bell Co. building on Oakman Boulevard.

The new owner of the historic building, Neighborhood Service Organization, is paying \$15,000-\$20,000 to have the sign removed as it turns the 255,000 square-foot building into 155 apartments for the city's homeless.

"The biggest issue really is the structural issues with the sign. There's corrosion on some of the supports," said Joe Heaphy, vice president of real estate development for NSO.

“All apartments are one-bedroom, permanent housing. This is not transitional housing. It’s not a shelter,” Heaphy said.

The yellow sign, shaped like a phone book, with a small desk telephone underneath, is 1,536 square feet. It is so large that three of the new apartments would fit on it.

Crews are currently in the process of removing the mammoth sign, a mainstay along the Lodge Freeway in Detroit for half a century, as renovation work continues on the inside.

Parts of the Yellow Pages sign are getting a second shot at life. NSO hopes to put the phone back together to use in its 24-hour emergency telephone center and save some of the letters that will reflect the history of the sign, although there’s no word on where they may end up.

Heaphy says NSO has reached out to several museums and historic preservationists, but the Yellow Pages sign was just too large to be accommodated in its entirety.

Tim Whiting, a 15-year employee with Blue Star Demolition out of Warren, expects the job to take some time.

“Probably going to take a couple of weeks to get it down ... The lift we have there goes up 150-foot and it is not high enough to reach the top. So we’re going to have a crane here later to finish it off with,” Whiting said.

The loss of the sign will certainly change the landscape – and give Detroiters one less landmark to use when giving directions.

“I’ve done that a 1,000 times. Especially when they are going toward Oakman, trying to find Oakman, I just tell them look for the sign, the Yellow Pages sign,” Detroiters Kevin Edwards said.

“This has just been a landmark you see on the Lodge Freeway,” said Deborah Beard.

So what are folks like Beard going to do now?

“I’ll just have to manage,” Beard said. “They have Google now and Mapquest.”