The Big Boy statue in Canton Township, Mich., is still standing tall Tuesday, despite a fight between city officials and the restaurant owner.

Controversy cooking over ‘Big Boy’ statue

CANTON, Mich.—Is a 7-foot statue of the “Big Boy” restaurant figure a piece of American-style art or just another sign beckoning customers to a franchise eatery?

That question is at the center of a dispute between a Michigan businessman who is fighting to keep the fiberglass statue and authorities who ticketed him for zoning violations.

Tony Matar was cited after officials declared the statue at his Big Boy restaurant is a sign. Zoning rules in the Detroit suburb of Canton restrict businesses to one sign per property. Matar already has one.

Matar insists the figure is a statue and not subject to the rule restricting signs. “It’s an icon,” said Matar, who owns two other Big Boy restaurants with similar statues.

Matar said he sought permission to erect the statue from the city’s zoning board in 2002, before the restaurant opened. The board denied his request, but he put it up anyway.

Meanwhile, a letter dated July 2003 from the township supervisor has complicated matters. It told Matar that Canton did “not object to the placement of Big Boy near your restaurant.”

“My letter clouded everything,” said Supervisor Tom Yack, explaining that he did not have authority to approve the statue.

Since March, Matar and his wife have gathered more than 3,000 signatures supporting their effort to keep the statue.

“We grew up with Big Boy,” said restaurant patron Janet Tracy, 54. “I can’t believe they don’t have better things to do.”

AT ISSUE

- A Big Boy restaurant owner erected a 7-foot statue of the franchise’s mascot.
- He was denied permission to erect the statue when he was building the restaurant.
- A subsequent letter from the township supervisor said the town didn’t have a problem with the statue.
- The supervisor now says he didn’t have authority to OK the statue.
- The restaurant owner has been cited for zoning violations.