

Towering Jiffy Box to Grace Chelsea

Replica's a "mural," and as such exempt from sign ordinance

By Chong W. Pyen - August 15, 2002
News Staff Writer

Chelsea -- A mural is not a commercial sign, declared the Chelsea Village Council, clearing the way for the Chelsea Milling Co. to display a towering depiction of a Jiffy corn muffin box on one of its buildings.

The enlarged replica of the company's premier product - complete with "add egg and milk" and "NET WT 8½ OZ (240 g)" - will grace downtown Chelsea across from another landmark, the Clock Tower, by the end of the year. But it took a personal appeal by Howdy Holmes, the company's president.

When the company first presented the proposal to village officials, the initial response was that it came under the village's sign ordinance, which prohibits signs larger than 200 square feet in any commercial or industrial district.

At 23 feet wide and 50 feet high, the mural will be produced by transferring a photographed image of the box onto vinyl fabric and then attaching it to the tower's surface, at a cost of about \$15,000. So the mural would total 1,150 square feet plus "HOME OF," painted above it. It will cover the facade of the 85-foot-tall bran and midds (a byproduct of wheat) tower west of Main Street and south of the flour mill.

As suggested by the zoning office, Chelsea Milling applied for variance from the sign regulation. The Zoning Board of Appeals first considered the matter May 15, but the issue was tabled for six months. So Holmes - a retired Indy 500 racer - went before the Village Council and explained that the mural is a community identification project

rather than an advertisement or self-promotion.

"Our company doesn't do advertising. We're not a retailer establishment. We don't sell here," said Holmes, whose grandmother, Mabel White Holmes, developed and introduced the first prepared baking product, Jiffy Baking Mix, in 1930. The company currently offers 17 Jiffy mixes. Its products are shipped to all 50 states plus some foreign countries through the military. Chelsea Milling calls itself a complete manufacturer: storing wheat, milling wheat into flour, producing mixes from the flour and even making the little blue boxes. Holmes said about 15,000 people tour the facilities each year, and they are directed to local parks, restaurants and other locations to spend some time in the community.

"We don't think we're going to sell an additional case of corn meal mix (as a result of the mural)," Holmes said. "The intent was to symbolically recognize the relationship which is already existing between Chelsea Milling and Chelsea, Michigan. The heritage started in 1887. We're proud of where we're from. Not many people have heard of Chelsea, but usually everyone's heard of Jiffy Mix."

The Village Council agreed. A motion was passed unanimously "to support the mural of our heritage as presented by Chelsea Milling." The council viewed the mural as "art work, and not a sign," said Jacalyn Branson, village clerk-treasurer.

But will the council-sanctioned mural set a precedent, inviting

other businesses to come up with similar ideas and turning Chelsea into a mural capital of the Midwest? Zoning Administrator James Drolett, who initially concluded that the Jiffy sign comes under the sign regulations, could not be reached for comment. But Holmes said that won't be the case.

"I would be shocked if anybody had that reaction. It's not about us getting special treatment at all. Here, we have been promoting the village because it's the right thing to do."

Muffin Mural



ELLI GURFINKEL, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

An employee of Burkett Signs Co. of Climax, Mich., attaches a giant advertising mural to a loading tower Thursday at Chelsea Milling co., creator and manufacturer of Jiffy Mixes. Workers were expected to finish the work in downtown Chelsea Thursday after having to leave the sight Wednesday due to high winds.