

Jeffrey Malone

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### The Case of the Pink Flamingo

After a bout of controversy, the large pink flamingo outside Café Hon in Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood will remain in place. No, this is not a plot from one of the movies of Baltimore native John Waters. True, one of Waters' most famous films was the 1972 shock cinema classic *Pink Flamingos*, but that was not really about flamingos. This story, however, is about an actual pink flamingo (well, one made of bedsheets and wire).

On October 20, Café Hon owner Denise Whiting and the artist who constructed the flamingo removed the bird from Whiting's fire escape. This course of action came several weeks after Baltimore City's Department of General Services assessed Whiting an annual \$800 fee to pay for a "minor privilege" permit to keep the avian structure standing. The city investigated the flamingo and determined the fee in response to a complaint from another Hampden business entity. There were no reports of Whiting facing a financial struggle so great that the \$800 fee would be completely out of the question, but the decision of removal was a clear indicator that a significant increase of fees for maintaining Café Hon was simply out of the question.

The bird's disappearance became a rallying point for Hampden business owners who believed that the flamingo's presence in the neighborhood had attracted many new boutiques, artist galleries, cafés, and retail business owners in the seven years that it had been up. Cynthia Shea of the Soup's On café, noted that

the flamingo flap represented how “[t]he city of Baltimore makes it hard to be a small business owner in so many ways” and wondered if Baltimore just wants to have big stores and big businesses. The sentiment of many Hampden business owners seemed to be one of concern of potential lost business.

But there was also an equally vocal group among the locals that was not mourning the loss. David Wells of the Wine Source called the matter “much ado about nothing” and noted that there are “bigger fish to fry in Baltimore City.” Charles “Chick” Nott, a resident of 33<sup>rd</sup> Street, disagreed with the idea that the bird is even a symbol of Hampden.

It is, indeed, a little hard to believe that this goofy sculpture, artistically impressive though it may be, is so vital to the economy of Hampden. While it may be representative of the quirky, “Hon” culture of the neighborhood, that culture would hardly disappear along with the disappearance of the flamingo. The main attraction for patrons of Café Hon is most likely not the decorations, but the menu items, such as “Bawlmer’s Best Burgers,” which also capture the spirit of the “Hon” culture. But when considered from the realm of tourism, it is important to consider how many food options there are out there. While the quality of the burgers and the rest of the menu will ultimately be the most important factor in bringing back loyal customers, it is the truly unusual quirk, like a giant pink flamingo, that tempts a first-time visitor to take a chance. There is something to be said about the value of something different towards a city’s economy, as the subsequent events of Flamingogate made clear.

On October 27, nearly fifty supporters of Café Hon erected dozens of plastic pink flamingos on the grounds outside City Hall for a rally, making it clear that the Café Hon was an important symbol to many in the community. The city ultimately decided to halve the cost of the permit fee to \$400, which proved to be manageable for Whiting, who said that the flamingo would be reinstalled after refurbishing. Scott Peterson, a spokesman for Mayor Sheila Dixon, said that there was “absolutely no favoritism” in terms of the decision of lowering the cost. The price cut, instead, was based on a new measurement. The initial cost was based on treating the flamingo like a rectangle, and the cheaper cost was based on treating it like a triangle. While Peterson denies any favoritism, it is interesting to note that the city has promised to promote Hampden with signs along the Jones Falls Expressway. Mayor Dixon expressed hope that “Flamingogate will now be behind us,” but with the claims of favoritism being made by other business owners, the ramifications of this controversy may last longer than expected.