

TACOMA

It has towered over the bluffs of downtown Tacoma for more than a century, but now a prominent piece of Northwest Indian art is showing severe signs of decay and faces an uncertain future.

Age, rot and insects have combined to weaken the carved cedar log known simply as the "Tacoma Totem Pole" - a city-owned attraction some 8 1/2 stories tall that adorns Fireman's Park at 9th and A streets.

Commissioned by civic boosters in 1903 and subjectively hailed as the "largest totem pole in the world," the artwork was meant as a finger in the eye of the city's bigger rival to the north.

But with its physical decline in recent years, the designated historic landmark now poses safety hazards to the public, city officials say.

"The pole itself is 110 years old, so it's got issues," said Reuben McKnight, Tacoma's historic preservation officer. "But recently we discovered that there's a bigger concern with stability than previously thought."

Last month, after inspectors probed the base of the old pole and found it rotting, public works officials scrambled to shore it up.

"We found a contractor with a 15-foot pole holder to brace it in time for the Daffodil Parade," said Darius Thompson, an associate city engineer. "That was a short-term fix."

A more thorough inspection by PCS Structural Solutions determined a cross section of the pole "has been compromised by at least 50 percent" in some spots, an April 15 memo to the city says. The engineers also found the pole falls well below city wind load standards, appears seismically unstable and generally is wet, soft and deteriorating.

"(T)he pole should be considered unreliable or unstable and a falling hazard," the memo concluded. "We recommend that the pole be lowered to the ground or shored as a precaution."

The city has since further buttressed the roughly 83-foot pole by collaring it about 15 feet up and bracing it with steel rods anchored in concrete. The pole is also fenced off to keep the public at bay. In all, the work has cost about \$10,000, city officials said.

With it temporarily stabilized, public works officials are now searching for a permanent solution.

"We want to install a brace system to keep it up for 20-plus more years," Thompson told the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission last week.

But some commissioners questioned whether removing the pole might be a better answer - if not for safety and preservation reasons, out of cultural sensitivity.

Edward Echtle, a historian who serves as the commission's vice chair, noted that based on the city's historic records, the pole was commissioned but secretly carved - potentially a sign that its carvers used taboo iconography.

Noting specific totem images "belong" to certain Native American families, Echtle said Tacoma's pole actually could be displaying stolen symbolism.

"Some people might see it as the city of Tacoma owns the log," he said, "but the tribe owns the images."

He suggested the city consult with the University of Washington's Burke Museum or the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology to try to determine which tribe might be tied to the artwork.

"Then we can find out what they want us to do with it," Echtle added.

And that's what the city now intends to do, McKnight said. Among other consultation, city officials last week requested Shaun Peterson, a Puyallup Indian who carved the city's "welcome figure" in Tollefson Plaza, to help research the pole's origins.

"The commission gave us some direction to do some further cultural research," McKnight said. "We really don't know much about the carvings at all."

What is known about the pole largely comes from a 1975 narrative written by Washington State Historical Society archivist Caroline Gallacci, who prepared its application for city landmark status, granted later that year.

By Gallacci's account, Tacoma booster Chester Thorne and explorer William Sheard commissioned the artwork for \$3,000, hiring natives either from British Columbia or Alaska (records conflict on this point) to carve a massive cedar pole prepared by the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Company.

Four years earlier, Seattle civic leaders erected in Pioneer Square a 60-foot-tall **totem pole** stolen from a tribal village in Alaska. Tacoma's boosters, who'd "become irritated by articles describing Seattle's **Totem Pole**," sought to out-do their Seattle counterparts by commissioning a taller, legally obtained pole.

According to Gallacci, the Indian carvers sculpted the pole at Quartermaster Harbor on Vashon Island before Thorne and Sheard raised it publicly - a day before President Theodore Roosevelt visited town in May 1903. With a wolf at its foot and an eagle at its crown - and six animal or half-human icons carved in between - the pole stood initially at 10th and A Streets, near Sheard's curio shop and the storied Tacoma Hotel.

"The pole immediately became one of the major tourist attractions to the city," Gallacci wrote.

Fifty years later, the pole was moved a block north on A Street to Fireman's Park, where it has since undergone several repaintings and restorations. A plaque at its foot heralds it as the world's largest, though at least a half dozen taller poles can be quickly found through a basic Internet search.

"Sometimes, there was hyperbole in the descriptions of old tourist attractions," McKnight said.

But what's unquestionable is the pole's worsening condition. In recent months, carpenter ants infested it, and dry rot now runs at least 15 feet up its base, if not higher, Thompson said.

Peterson, the Puyallup carver, noted such poles aren't endemic of Washington's Coast Salish tribes, but traditional of Alaska and British Columbia natives. His research so far leads him to believe Tacoma's pole was the work of B.C.-based carvers, possibly Tlingits using general Haida motifs.

"In those territories, it's sort of understood that poles have a lifespan," Peterson added. "They're left to return to the earth and the idea is to replace them."

In 2010, after conservators made a similarly grim structural assessment of the famed 70-year-old pole on the Washington State Capitol grounds carved by the late Snohomish Chief William Shelton, officials decided its time had come. The pole was removed, cut into six sections and is stored in the now-defunct Capitol greenhouse.

"We're not sure what its future is," said Marygrace Jennings, cultural resources manager of the state Capitol campus. "The current task is to get it stored in a climate-controlled facility to prevent any further deterioration, if possible."

As for Tacoma's pole, once all of the consultation and research has concluded, the Landmarks Commission will decide its fate.

"For now, it's safe, and the city is working on finding a permanent solution for stabilizing it," McKnight said. "But stabilizing the pole might not be the appropriate action."

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Shaun Peterson, Puyallup - Indian who carved the "welcome figure" in Tacoma's Tollefson Plaza

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