

If a makeshift committee has its way, a historic but increasingly unstable **totem pole** that has stood in downtown Tacoma for more than a century would be taken down and left to decay publicly as a piece of the city's "living history."

No formal decision has been made about the pole, but an ad hoc working group assigned to examine what to do with the rotting artifact has tentatively recommended it be removed from Fireman's Park at 9th and A streets and "laid to rest" elsewhere.

"I think there's something very beautiful about the idea of this pole laying in the ground, decaying and becoming part of the earth again," JD Elquist, a member of the group, recently told the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The idea, Elquist said, is to find a space for the pole - possibly in a local park - for a public exhibit with interpretive signs that would tell "the whole complete history of this pole as it's basically laid to rest."

Art and a landmark

The group's unofficial recommendation - made after consultation with an Alaskan Native cultural institution and a local Puyallup Indian woodcarver - has set into motion a formal process for both the city's landmarks commission and arts commission, each of which holds some authority over the pole.

Designated as a city landmark in 1975, the 110-year-old **totem pole** also has long been a part of the city's municipal art collection, putting it under an unusual dual jurisdiction of both commissions.

Reuben McKnight, Tacoma's historic preservation officer, said he is now working on a staff report to present to the landmarks commission for its June 12 meeting. The report will include historical and cultural context about the pole, as well as cost estimates for bracing it to keep it in place and for removing it for a public exhibit elsewhere. It also likely will relay the working group's recommendation, he said.

Meantime, the arts commission this week approved convening a "de-accession committee" to consider whether to remove the pole from Tacoma's art collection - a formal step that might need to be taken to eventually transfer the pole's ownership and allow it to be displayed in a public park, city arts administrator Amy McBride said. A meeting date has yet to be set but likely will occur before June 10, McBride said.

'Not the end'

Both McKnight and McBride stressed that a final decision on the pole's future has not been made

and won't be without public input.

"It's not the end of the discussion at all," McKnight said.

The dilemma of what to do with the aging 83-foot tall **totem pole** intensified last month, after structural engineers probed a cross-section and found it "compromised by at least 50 percent," according to an engineer's report to the city.

PCS Structural Solutions also concluded the pole should be considered "a falling hazard" and recommended it be "lowered to the ground or shored as a precaution."

City engineers have since fenced off the pole and temporarily braced it with a steel collar and rods anchored to concrete blocks. In all, the pole's assessment and shoring so far has cost the city about \$10,000, officials have said.

Last month, when a city engineer reported to the landmarks commission that his team was seeking to find a more permanent bracing solution to keep the pole up another 20 years or longer, several commissioners questioned whether that was the appropriate action. The panel directed McKnight to conduct further cultural research on the pole.

A working group

McKnight and McBride formed the working group, which included landmarks commission vice chair Ed Echtle and Elquist, who sits on both the landmarks and arts commission. The members - except for Echtle - held what Elquist described as an "impromptu" meeting last week, apparently without public notice.

Members also consulted with city public works staff and Shaun Peterson, a Puyallup tribal member who carved the Welcome Figure that now stands near Tollefson Plaza.

Peterson, who has noted totem poles aren't endemic of Washington's Coast Salish tribes, recently told The News Tribune that he believes the pole is the work of Alaska's Tlingit carvers who borrowed iconic motifs from the British Columbia-based Haida tribe.

"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."

'let it go'

That point was reiterated to Elquist, who consulted with the Sealaska Heritage Institute, a nonprofit Native organization in Juneau charged with perpetuating Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian tribal cultures.

"In an Alaskan village what will happen is that a pole will just fall to pieces there, or if it becomes a hazard, they will take it down, take it to the hillside, lay it down in the ground and let it go," Elquist said.

According to city historical records, Tacoma boosters Chester Thorne and William Sheard commissioned the pole for \$3,000, hiring two Alaskan or British Columbian Natives to carve it from a massive cedar log donated by the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Company.

Initially erected in May 1903 near the Tacoma Hotel at 10th and A streets, the eight-story artwork was subjectively hailed as "the largest **totem pole** in the world" - a direct jab at Seattle and its 60-foot tall **totem pole** stolen from an Alaskan village and erected in Pioneer Square in 1899.

The Tacoma **Totem Pole**, as its known, immediately became an attraction that drew tourists and helped establish the city as a gateway for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909.

'A strong argument'

"It's all part of a pretty big story," McKnight said. ". . . (T here's) really an opportunity here to sort of heighten the awareness of Tacoma citizens about this story and how it fits in, so it's not just a **totem pole** sitting in a park."

Before coming up with its recommendation, the working group discussed other options, including moving the pole to a museum. But group members concluded the pole's carving "wasn't of museum quality," Elquist said.

McBride added that, because the pole has been infested with carpenter ants, it likely would need to be frozen for several months before it could be placed indoors.

Landmarks commissioner Daniel Rahe, who works for an engineering firm, noted that from a structural perspective, "there are ways to preserve the thing in place.

"So I think we have to have a strong argument . . . to pursue the more culturally respectful approach," he said.

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