

Let's call it the Great Tacoma **Totem Pole** Controversy . . . that wasn't.

On Tuesday, Tacoma's arts commission will begin a process that could lead to the loss of a pole that has been displayed for 110 years. A de-accession committee could decide whether to remove the pole from the city's art collection. Later, the city Landmarks Commission could decide whether to remove the pole from the protection of the register of historic places.

Both of those actions would further a recommendation of a Landmarks Commission subcommittee that the culturally sensitive response to troubling decay of the pole is to take it down, lay it in some wooded area and let it decompose.

It is not that the pole couldn't be restored, the commissioners were told; it is that it shouldn't be restored.

"I personally spoke with the Sealaska Heritage Institute in Juneau . . . and it seemed to be kind of the case that totem poles do have a natural life span," said JD Elquist, a member of both the Arts Commission and the Landmarks Commission. "And what happens when a **totem pole** basically decays is that they go back to the earth."

His recommendation to both groups has led them to consider that the pole should be taken down. Our coverage of the issue, however, has revealed a lot of affection for the 80-foot pole that has been mostly hidden away in Fireman's Park on the edge of downtown.

And now I've found that the Haida and Tlingit traditions described to the commission are not as strict as portrayed. While Alaska Native tribes in the past would not have tried to restore their totems - for practical reasons more than sacred - they have more recently been influenced by conservation and restoration standards of Euro-American historians. Alaska tribes themselves restore poles, as does the National Park Service, as does the state of Alaska.

Of the experts I interviewed, not one said the Tacoma pole was beyond saving or that it should be returned "to the earth" regardless of its condition.

"It is true that old, decaying poles for which there is no hope of repairing should be put to rest to die," wrote Rosita Kaahani Worl, the president of the Sealaska Heritage Institute. "However, if it can be repaired, it should be."

And it can be repaired. As city historic preservation officer Reuben McKnight said, "nobody thinks it can't be done."

Neither is the cost prohibitive, likely in the \$10,000 range. Compared with what Sealaska Heritage Institute charges for new poles produced by its Native carving program - \$4,000 a foot - that's a bargain. And if local businesses and volunteers are enlisted - something that happened several

times over the last century when this pole needed repairs or was relocated - the cost would be even less.

Ellen Carrlee is the conservator of the Alaska State Museums and an expert on the maintenance and restoration of totem poles. She said a beloved pole in the Juneau area was cleaned by volunteers under the direction of conservation experts.

Carrlee said many methods are used to repair the decay that seems to have affected our pole, including using epoxies to replace damaged wood and attaching weakened poles to new cedar logs or steel supports. While poles don't last forever, they can have longer lives if regular maintenance is done, including removal of moss, application of sodium borate solutions as a fungicide, and the use of water-repellent metal caps to protect poles from the rain.

Carrlee said there has been debate and discussion over the years as to the proper response to decaying poles. While once old poles were taken down and replicated, that has changed. She noted that the Ketchikan Totem Heritage Center, which in the mid-1970s relocated 19th century totems from unoccupied villages, was created by Haida and Tlingit members.

The apparent belief by some in Tacoma that there is only one way to deal with a pole in need of restoration is incorrect, she said.

"It's ignoring that there are more than 100 poles being preserved in Alaska," Carrlee said. "I can't think of any organized situations of putting a pole into the woods to decompose." And while Tacoma's pole is not an authentic Haida or Tlingit pole, "there are a ton of totems that are murky in their cultural authenticity, but there is still a desire to preserve them.

"The National Park Service is preserving poles, as are many Alaska Native communities and various municipalities. What you are doing flies in the face of that."

Jo Antonson, the Alaska state historian and assistant state historic preservation officer, said the practice there is to "preserve as long as it has useful life."

Even poles that can't stand on their own are frequently displayed horizontally in cradles. Said Mary Kowalczyk, the ranger assigned to Totem Bight State Historical Park: "You won't believe how much people enjoy looking at poles that are lying down."

"People really love totemic art," Antonson said.

What about Tacoma's pole? From pictures and a description of its story, Antonson said: "It sounds like a pretty neat reflection of the history of Tacoma and a pretty significant structure.

"It sounds like it is clearly worthy of preservation."

Once the two city commissions realize that as well, we can move toward repairing and then relocating to a more prominent location - perhaps along the Prairie Line Trail - Tacoma's iconic **totem pole**.

Peter Callaghan: 253-597-8657 peter.callaghan@thenewstribune.com
blog.thenewstribune.com/politics @CallaghanPeter

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

PETER CALLAGHAN; Staff writer, 'Letting totem rot is not the only Native way', *News Tribune, The* (online), 2 Jun 2013 1 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/146B54FBCA77B3E8>>

Copyright (c) 2013 The News Tribune (Tacoma, WA)