

Tacoma Landmarks Commission, Arts Commission now - News Tribune, The: Blogs (Tacoma, WA) - June 13, 2013

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No formal action was taken Wednesday night but the Tacoma Landmarks Commission directed city staff to pursue a plan to restore the city's historic **totem pole** and keep it standing in Fireman's Park in the northern section of downtown.

The commission's support for saving the pole follows a June 10 meeting of the city Arts Commission during which members approved a recommendation to keep the pole in the city's arts collection. The arts commission then approved a recommendation that the pole be stabilized and remain upright rather than be removed for restoration and displayed elsewhere. The commission also called for a long-term preservation plan be established. Temporary bracing now supports the pole. The Russell Building, future home of State Farm Insurance, is in the background. (Peter Haley, TNT, April 25, 2013)

Arts Administrator Amy McBride said there is some money in the city's arts budget for some work to be done to shore up the pole but not for a more-extensive restoration that might include repainting. A bid for full-restoration the city received in 2011 was set at \$36,000.

It was this approach that landmarks commissioners agreed to Wednesday.

The direction to staff seems to end a move, started by the Landmarks Commission itself, to remove the pole and find a place for it to decompose and return to the land. That idea turned out to be a mistaken conclusion that such acts were common among Alaska tribes that originated this form of art. Further investigation showed that many tribes now preserve poles as long as possible through artificial means including mechanical bracing and filling with epoxies.

The Tacoma pole was reported by engineers to be suffering from some rot and insect infestation. Fearing it could fall, city public works employees used bracing to secure it and fencing to keep people away. It was when those same staffers approached the landmarks commission for approval of a restoration plan that the commission said saving the pole might not be culturally sensitive.

Removing the pole would have required two official acts, first the removal of the pole for the arts collection — a process called de-accession — and then removal from the city's historic register. A special de-accession committee voted to keep it in the collection on June 4. The landmarks commissioners seemed to move away from taking the pole down after getting more information about Native practices and curatorial standards in Alaska.

Delisting the pole also would have been a rare move. According to historic preservation officer Reuben McKnight, past commissions have done so only twice — to allow the University of Washington Tacoma to demolish the Japanese Language School on Tacoma Avenue and to allow the city to tear down protected commercial buildings to make way for the convention center. When the city council voted to tear down another stretch of downtown on Pacific Avenue, it did so

over the objections of the landmarks commission.

There remains some sentiment toward taking the pole down and displaying it indoors. McBride, however, said there are no apparent homes for the 83-foot pole (displayed now with 10 feet buried in the ground). Others feared that taking it down could damage it beyond repair. And commissioner Megan Luce said the present location is important to the story it tells because it is near where it was first placed in 1903, the product of a campaign by business boosters to compete with Seattle as the gateway to Alaska.

Some commissioners were uncomfortable with one proposal to mount a steel pole behind the **totem pole** and attached bracing to keep it standing. While that is a common practice in Alaska, steel poles used there are well concealed. The pole proposed for use in Tacoma, currently a communications tower set to be taken down, would be obvious. Commissioner Katie Chase said it would be clear to visitors that it is not part of the historic pole and McKnight said it done correctly it would not diminish from the historic pole.

Commissions also want interpretive displays to tell visitors the story of the pole — how it was carved and how it fits into the city's history.

While most of historic register is made up of buildings, a few other items are protected by the city including the old Fireboat on the Ruston Way waterfront, the submerged wreckage of the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge, the "ghost signs" on the sides of the brick buildings that make up the University of Washington Tacoma and the neon sign that marks the 50s era Frisko Freeze drive in on Division Avenue.

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