

Downtown Tacoma's 110-year-old **totem pole** will be saved - at least for now - by erecting a shorter, metal pole beside it.

Members of the Tacoma Landmarks Preservation Commission approved a plan Wednesday to install a steel support system next to the 80-foot wooden **totem pole** in Fireman's Park to keep it from falling over.

The city will attach a 50-foot steel pole in two spots on the back of the wooden landmark, which stands near 9th and A streets in downtown Tacoma.

The design favored by the commissioners uses bolts and steel plates to join the **totem pole** to the support structure, but avoids encircling the carved **totem pole** with metal cuffs, as an alternate idea would have.

"It is visually the least intrusive, from an aesthetic standpoint," said commissioner James Steel.

City public works staff found in April that the **totem pole** had been weakened by rot and insect infestation, leading them to fence it off and brace it temporarily with steel rods.

Wednesday's decision by the Landmarks Preservation Commission means construction could begin on the permanent support system in two or three months, said Darius Thompson, a project manager with the City of Tacoma.

Building the steel support and its concrete foundation will cost Tacoma about \$40,000, according to estimates provided by PCS Structural Solutions, an engineering firm hired by the city.

The Tacoma **totem pole** dates to 1903, when city boosters commissioned it to impress visiting president Theodore Roosevelt and to outshine a 60-foot **totem pole** installed in Seattle.

It's unclear whether the pole's carvings were completed by tribal members or nonnative artists, though. While a report prepared for the Landmarks Preservation Commission said the carvings "are suggestive of the Haida style of northwestern British Columbia," the report also noted the decoration is "atypical in dimension and design."

Earlier suggestions for dealing with the **totem pole** included laying it down and letting it rot away, as some tribes have done with aging poles. But the totem's uncertain origin makes it hard to determine if that's the culturally appropriate path, said JD Elquist, a commissioner who originally had favored letting the pole deteriorate.

Another idea was to remove the pole and preserve it indoors, but city officials said there was no place to store it, and some worried it could be damaged if moved.

Still, not all members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission agreed with the plan the commission approved Wednesday. Commissioner Daniel Rahe said he didn't think the city had done enough research on the best way to preserve the **totem pole** and abstained from voting.

Another commissioner, Megan Luce, voted no, saying she worried sticking bolts through the **totem pole** could damage it further.

"If it's an architectural artifact, I feel we don't want to penetrate the surface at all," Luce said.

Reuben McKnight, Tacoma's historic preservation officer, said the city still needs to rid the pole of insects and deal with the long-term issue of rot. Bracing the **totem pole** buys officials time, he said.

"My understanding is this should keep it pretty well for the next couple decades at least, giving us time to engage in a broader discussion of what its future should be," McKnight said Wednesday.

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