

I really should be delighted now that the Tacoma Landmarks Commission has approved a plan to save the city's 110-year-old **totem pole**.

The vote last week probably means that an odd controversy over the pole's future is over. Those who argued either that the pole is insensitive to tribal culture and should be removed or that it is an actual tribal artifact . . . and should be removed, probably won't get their chance.

And since that is the result I was hoping for, it should be reason for celebration.

But the preservation plan is one that only an engineer could love. A 50-foot steel pole will be embedded in concrete several feet behind the 80-foot totem. At 25 feet and 50 feet, 8-inch steel pipes will be attached to the support pole and then attached to the **totem pole**. The engineers presented several ways of securing the pipe to the wooden pole, all with negative repercussions - either a steel sleeve that would wrap around the pole or stays that would be lag-bolted through the wood.

The commission was assured that the support pole would be painted black "to both be distinguishable from the historic pole as well as be visually subservient," which is good because if you have 50 feet of steel pole at your back, you want it to be subservient.

The commission seemed uninspired but ultimately approved the plan. Not all voted yes, but none questioned whether there are other ideas - better ideas - to keep the pole standing and secure. They all appear to have accepted another engineering report that said interior damage from dry rot and insects puts the pole both at risk of falling and at risk of breaking apart if taken down.

But only structural engineers were consulted, not the people who make a living preserving and restoring totem poles in Alaska. Perhaps the methods they have used for decades to repair damaged totems and unobtrusively mount them on steel supports would have worked in Tacoma.

One landmarks commissioner who abstained from the vote wrote the next day that he should have voted no. Daniel Rahe, who edits the online magazine PostDefiance.com, said the city staff did not present the commission with all possible options.

"Like too many things at City Hall, all three options we were shown struck me as a bit rushed, late, unimpressive, bargain-basement and make-do," Rahe wrote. "I got the feeling we were there to help clean an item off a to-do list.

"The thing is, I don't think anyone had the incentive or resources to develop anything but a 'pretty good' plan for the **totem pole**'s preservation. So we got a 'pretty good plan.' We didn't get a 'great plan' and we certainly didn't try to determine a 'best plan.' "

Rahe seems to be agnostic in the debate over whether the Tacoma totem is a kitschy piece of

turn-of-the-century Western boosterism or a legitimate tribal artifact or both.

"Since the public demonstrated interest in its preservation, it behooves us to treat it as such, not merely as a vertical object that must remain vertical," he wrote. And he regrets that he didn't try to persuade the other commissioners to demand a better solution, perhaps after consulting experts not just in structural engineering but in art and archeology.

He's right, of course. And I should be urging the city to slow down and get more information before proceeding with an ugly and intrusive plan.

But to do so might also give more time to those who want the pole taken down and left to rot in the woods someplace. Delay might give the trolls on the City Council an opportunity to overturn the decision of three different city boards and committees to keep and preserve the pole.

Tacoma lawyer Erik Bjornson, whose office neighbors Fireman's Park and the totem, describes those who want the pole gone as having long knives and predicted that if it were ever taken out of the ground for repairs it would never be reinstalled.

So those who want to save this bit of history in a better way are restrained so as to not give the pole haters a chance to see it destroyed. That's what passes as victory around here.

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