

Is it time for Tacoma's 'cartoonish' totem pole to - News Tribune, The: Blogs (Tacoma, WA) - March 17, 2021

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The story of Tacoma's nearly 120-year-old **totem pole** — all 72 feet of it, now standing with the aid of steel supports in Fireman's Park downtown — should continue to be told. It should not be forgotten.

But the pole's story also should be told in full, and it doesn't need to stay upright to do it.

Its time as a blind-eye historical landmark — and remnant from the city Tacoma once was — has expired. So have arguments in favor of keeping the **totem pole** on prominent display, which continue to gloss over or ignore the pain it has caused local Native Americans.

Take it down, at long last, and let the annals of history reflect what it has always been: a mistake.

Earlier this month, the Tacoma Arts Commission voted to remove the **totem pole** from the city's municipal art collection. Coming in response to a request from members of the Puyallup Tribe and a recommendation from a deaccession panel that was formed to weigh in on the matter, it was a good first step. Next, the city's Landmarks Commission will consider delisting it, creating a path for the pole's ultimate removal and hopefully its replacement by legitimate tribal artwork.

Removing the pole from Fireman's Park should be a no-brainer, according to Puyallup Tribal Council member Annette Bryan, considering the torment it has caused indigenous people.

Bryan noted that the Puyallup Tribal Council has no jurisdiction to officially vote on the matter, but she described her view as consistent with the "collective" opinion of the body.

While some local tribal members who were part of the Tacoma Arts Commission's deaccession panel told The News Tribune they would like to see the pole destroyed — likely with a ceremony of some sort to honor the cedar tree it was created from — Bryan said that ultimately the "burden" of that decision rests on the city.

Regardless of what becomes of the **totem pole**, Bryan said, taking it down would be "an opportunity to educate folks."

"There has been a lot of trauma, and we have to tell the true story in order to be able to heal," Bryan said.

She's exactly right. Here are the facts:

The **totem pole** is faux. Always has been. Erected in 1903 near the old Tacoma Hotel, it was paid for by white Tacoma businessmen and boosters with an interest in profit and one-upping Seattle, which raised a shorter, stolen **totem pole** in Pioneer Square a few years earlier. Whether Tacoma's pole was actually made by two anonymous Alaska natives working on Vashon Island —

as was originally claimed — remains a matter of mystery and dispute. What's certain, according to historical experts and local Salish tribal members, is that it fails to reflect the culture or art of the indigenous people who were here long before European settlers set foot in the area.

The pole is basically a huge cigar store Indian that served its intended purpose for a city with lofty aspirations and regional jealousies. It soon became a prized tourist attraction — and something to show off to Teddy Roosevelt when he visited — at a time when considering the harm it would cause local tribes was an afterthought, at best.

Strangely, arguments in favor of keeping Tacoma's **totem pole** over the last decade have acknowledged most of this, if not all of it. This logic suggests that because the pole was never really intended to represent local Native American art, it's unfair to judge it by those standards.

What that conveniently disregards, of course, is the very real suffering the **totem pole** has caused for local Native Americans who feel overlooked, insulted and cheaply stereotyped by its existence and the history of cultural appropriation it represents, whether the insults were intended or not.

So will we listen this time?

According to Connie McCloud, the Puyallup Tribe's cultural director, the fact that the **totem pole** has stood on display in Tacoma for 120 years — on the historical land of the tribe — is a constant reminder of old wounds.

It also feels like intentional erasure, she said.

"The Puyallup people are here. We didn't go away. We didn't disappear, and we're not lost," McCloud said. "We are very much a present person, place, thing and spirit in this community."

Catherine Edwards, the first vice president of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska and a member of the art commission's deaccession panel, described Tacoma's **totem pole** as a lasting emblem of colonization. While totem poles are part of Tlingit and Haida tribal culture, Edwards noted that Tacoma's pole isn't believed to have any connection to those tribes.

"This is a fake **totem pole** that ... was purposefully created to extract resources and generate income, which is the same thing that people have done to our tribal communities since contact," Edwards told The News Tribune.

Although virtually none of this information is included on the small metal plaque that rests at the **totem pole**'s feet — which dubiously touts it as "the largest **totem pole** in the world" — none of it is particularly new, either.

In 2013, the city's arts and landmarks commissions discussed all of it while trying to decide if the pole — which had rotted and been infested by termites — was worth saving.

At the time — and despite the objections of some local tribal members — Tacoma's **totem pole** survived, with the assistance of a 50-foot support, which was approved by members of Tacoma Landmarks Preservation Commission. A vocal contingent of historic preservation types

championed saving the pole, particularly after the idea of taking it down and leaving it to decompose in the woods had been raised.

Eight years later, the tables seem to have turned decidedly.

Historian and former Tacoma historic preservation officer Michael Sullivan was one of a number of prominent locals who, in 2013, favored protecting the **totem pole** and keeping it at Fireman's Park.

Today, Sullivan feels differently. While he believes the pole should be preserved in some fashion — because of its connection to Tacoma's silent film industry and the story of civic boosterism it tells — he also said he's become much more aware of how and why the **totem pole** is hurtful and offensive to Native Americans.

"If for cultural reasons the pole is offensive or hurtful, especially for Native folks, then having it as part of the city's collection and on full display ... is wrong and should be corrected," Sullivan said. "I totally get that."

Former Tacoma Mayor Bill Baarsma, who's also president of the Tacoma Historical Society, has experienced a similar shift. Growing up, Baarsma recalls the **totem pole** as "very iconic to Tacoma's history."

After "thinking it through," however, Baarsma said he has come to "understand the rationale" for removing it.

Like Sullivan, Baarsma said the pole should be preserved — so it might be part of a museum display focused on early Tacoma history or the silent film industry — but he also believes that there has been an overdue societal recognition of the pain that insensitive monuments and cultural appropriation can cause.

Publicly displaying the **totem pole** at Fireman's Park is a wrong that should no longer be ignored, Baarsma said.

"It really is kind of a cartoonish representation of what a totem really represents," Baarsma said. "We need to find an end game with it. We need to find a place for it."

According to Tacoma Arts administrator Amy McBride, the Tacoma Historical Society has been approached about potentially taking possession of the pole if it is removed from Fireman's Park.

If that happens, McBride said, the transfer would likely include a stipulation that the pole "cannot cause harm in public display again" and would require that however it is shown would "contextualize the whole story ... the good, the bad and the ugly."

In hindsight, McBride said that the 2013 decision to keep the **totem pole** at Fireman's Park was made without "centering the voices" of the indigenous people. In an attempt to correct that mistake, McBride said, this time around the deaccession panel assembled by the arts commission was made up largely of local tribal members.

Andrew Strobel is a member of the Tlingit tribe who works for the Puyallup Tribe as a planning director.

A Tacoma resident, Strobel was on the deaccession panel and said he knows that any effort to remove the **totem pole** likely will get thrust into the fraught national conversation regarding political correctness and "cancel culture."

Arguments in favor of keeping the pole in place at Fireman's Park miss the larger point, Strobel believes.

"This is an object that has canceled many of our cultures, through misrepresentation," he said.

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