

Tacoma canceled city's fake totem pole. When will - News Tribune, The: Blogs (Tacoma, WA) - June 30, 2021

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Roughly a month.

That's how long we'll have to wait until the faux **totem pole** that has stood in Tacoma since 1903 is gone.

In other words, about 120 years too long.

On Tuesday, the Tacoma City Council finally got with the times, voting unanimously to take the **totem pole** in Firefighter's Park downtown off the city's historic register. The move followed the decision by the city's Arts Commission in March to remove the pole from Tacoma's municipal art collection, which was kind of a no-brainer since it has never legitimately reflected Indigenous art and has always been a clear case of white cultural appropriation.

Nixing the pole from the historic register was the next step, ending the protection it was granted in the 1970s. It was also the final hurdle to clear before the city's Office of Arts and Cultural Vitality could begin the overdue task of taking it down.

According to Tacoma Arts administrator Amy McBride, the council's vote Tuesday night means that work is anticipated to begin in the coming weeks, in hopes of having the 72-foot-tall monument removed entirely by August. After consultation with Tacoma Public Utilities — which McBride noted during the Tuesday, June 29 City Council study session "is accustomed to working with poles of this size" — it will likely be cut into pieces, she said, and removed one inglorious piece at a time. The hope is to commission a new piece of tribal artwork at Firefighter's Park, McBride said.

When crews fire up their saws, it will be a fitting end for a monument that never should have been. It will also — hopefully — be another meaningful step toward repairing Tacoma's relationship with the Puyallup Tribe. As Tribal Council member Annette Bryan told me earlier this year when asked about the pole and the message it sends to Native people, "There has been a lot of trauma, and we have to tell the true story in order to be able to heal."

That's indisputable.

For those in city government, there are a few more important lessons to be learned as we consider the demise of Tacoma's fake **totem pole**.

During the Tuesday study session, several council members spoke of "hindsight" and ostensibly the \$58,000 the city spent to brace the aging **totem pole** against collapse in 2014.

"This is a great example of what happens when we don't do our homework," opined Council member Lilian Hunter.

"It comes back to haunt us."

Hunter — who wasn't on the council in 2014, and like every other current member of the elected governing body supported the removal of the **totem pole** from the city's historic register — had a point, to some extent.

If Tacoma leaders would have considered the hurt the pole inflicted on Indigenous people, a lot of pain and taxpayer money could have been saved.

At the same time, no one should confuse the city's mistake for honest ignorance. Some local tribal members have long been critical of the **totem pole**, and all the arguments that proved persuasive this time have been there to consider, if only the city, its staff and residents fighting for its protection had been interested in hearing them.

First hoisted in front of the Tacoma Hotel at the turn of the 20th Century — and made famous in the 1927 silent film "Eyes of the Totem" — we've always known that the pole was paid for by white Tacoma businessmen and boosters with an interest in profit and one-upping Seattle. It originally was said the pole was carved by two anonymous Alaska natives working on Vashon Island. More recently the veracity of that claim has been thrown into serious question. The News Tribune was reporting as much in 2013.

As former TNT reporter Lewis Kamb reported at the time, "Native art authorities" convened on a panel that year "agreed the iconography appears inauthentic and the carving less than expert."

As David Nicandri, the former director of the Washington State Historical Society, told the TNT's Peter Callaghan the same year, "It is an artifact of the city's cultural and commercial history. ... It is an example of the city's outlook on itself and its rivalry with another city at a time when the outcome of that rivalry was still in doubt."

During Tuesday's council study session, the conversation veered toward what comes next for the **totem pole**. McBride revealed there's a possibility an outside entity — like the Tacoma Historical Society — might take possession of a piece of it, like the top, as long as any future display or use contains a full telling of its history, including the bad and ugly.

It seems like a fair outcome, provided there's a local organization that's up to the task of doing the complicated context justice. History is important, but only when it's told in full.

So what will a full telling of Tacoma's fake **totem pole** saga reveal to future generations?

One thing is certain: A lack of homework wasn't the problem.

At best, the city and many residents failed to listen to local Indigenous people.

At worst, we failed to care.

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