



STAFF REPORT - ADDENDUM

May 26, 2021

RESCISSION OF LANDMARK STATUS – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

Agenda Item 4A: Totem Pole located in Fireman's Park, 801 A Street

The following draft findings and recommendations have been drafted for the Commission's review and discussion at its May 26 meeting.

DRAFT FINDINGS

PROCESS

1. On February 25, 2021, the Tacoma Arts Commission convened a deaccession panel to consider the removal of the Tacoma Totem Pole from the Tacoma Municipal Art Collection. The panel voted unanimously to recommend deaccessioning of the Totem Pole, as inauthentic and of poor aesthetic quality.
2. On March 8, the Tacoma Arts Commission unanimously voted to remove the Totem Pole from the Municipal Arts Collection, as well as recommended that the City consider removing the pole from Firefighter's Park and de-listing (rescission) from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places.
3. Rescission from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places is defined in the Tacoma Municipal Code 13.07.055, and requires a public hearing. Following public comment, if the Commission finds that retention of a property on the historic register is not consistent with historic preservation goals and policies, it may recommend removal of the property from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places.
4. On March 14, the Landmarks Preservation Commission voted to begin consideration de-listing of the Totem Pole and scheduled a public hearing for May 12.
5. Notice was sent to the Commission's hearing list, property owners and occupants within 400' of the Totem Pole, as well as interested stakeholders. Notice was also published in the Tacoma News Tribune on April 29 and shared via social media.
6. In response to the hearing notice, 6 written comments were received, and 7 individuals gave oral testimony. Of these comments, 11 were supportive of removing the Totem Pole from the Historic Register, whereas 2 comments were not.
7. Comments in favor of rescission noted that the Pole is inauthentic, that it is cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of Native art and culture, and that its presence is hurtful as a reminder of past mistreatment and disrespect of Native peoples. Comments opposed to rescission noted that it is an historical artifact that represents a specific period in Tacoma's history related to commercial competition with Seattle. All comments concurred on the need to remove the Pole from its current prominent location in Firefighter's Park, and several comments noted that the Pole is historically significant and should be properly contextualized.
8. The Landmarks Preservation Commission kept the comment period open until May 22.

BACKGROUND

9. The Tacoma Totem Pole was commissioned by Tacoma businesspersons Chester Thorne and William Sheard in 1903.
10. The identities of the creators of the pole is unknown. The Historic Register form states that "two British Columbian Indians" carved the pole in secret; however, City consultations with art historians and representatives of the Tlingit and Haida Tribes suggest that this is likely to be false.

11. The Totem Pole was originally installed in front of the Tacoma Hotel. Subsequently it has been moved several times, repainted and reduced in size. It is currently in its third location in Firefighter's Park at 801 A Street.
12. The Totem Pole was added to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places in 1975.
13. In 2013, the City was informed that the Totem Pole was structurally unsound and in danger of collapse. At the time, members of the Landmarks Commission first questioned whether the Pole should be preserved, and the Tacoma Arts Commission convened a de-accession panel. During these discussions, tribal members and art historians called into question the claimed origins of the Pole, based upon the quality and appearance of the carving and the unknown artists, as well as its geographic inappropriateness. Ultimately, the Pole remained in the art collection. Subsequently, the Landmarks Preservation Commission voted to approve a stabilization plan, including an external brace, which remains in place today.

RESCISSION

14. The historic nomination of the Tacoma Totem Pole likely contains factual inaccuracies. Although the nomination states that the pole was carved by "British Columbian Indians" in secrecy, this is unlikely.
15. While some historical records claim its original artists were Alaskan, specifically Tlingit, representatives from the Tlingit and Haida tribes do not believe the Tacoma Totem Pole has any authentic ceremonial or clan origins, and thereby claim no association with it.
16. The style, method of carving, and secrecy surrounding the creation of the Tacoma Totem Pole indicate it is just as likely that it was created by non-Native Americans poorly appropriating a Native American aesthetic. This theory has been backed by tribal consultants as well as the deaccession panelists.
17. Anti-racism, equity, inclusion and reconciliation are core principles in City Policies. Tribal representatives and members have been very clear about what the Totem Pole represents to Native and indigenous communities.
18. The Tacoma Totem Pole is associated with commerce and boosterism in early 20th century Tacoma. There are many examples of architecture and landmarks related to those same themes that exist. The Totem Pole is representative of a particularly harmful part of that history, related to cultural appropriation and domination, and mistreatment of Native peoples
19. The faux Northern style of the carving also contributes to misinformation about the art forms of the Coast Salish peoples of this region.
20. The Totem Pole has been well documented over time, including photography, condition reports and analyses, and film.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

1. The Tacoma Totem Pole is inauthentic and is an example of cultural appropriation.
2. The Tacoma Totem Pole's continued status as a City of Tacoma Landmark is harmful to the community and the City of Tacoma's commitment to antiracism and reconciliation.
3. Pursuant to TMC 13.07.055, the Landmarks Preservation Commission therefore recommends to City Council that the Tacoma Totem Pole be removed from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places.