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#### Staff

Amy McBride, *Tacoma Arts Administrator*  
Naomi Strom-Avila, *Cultural Arts Specialist*

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# Summary Minutes Tacoma Arts Commission

## Community & Economic Development

### SPECIAL MEETING: De-Accession Review Panel

These minutes accompany the recorded meeting, which is available at  
[www.tacomaculture.org/arts/tac.asp](http://www.tacomaculture.org/arts/tac.asp).

Date: June 4, 2013

Location: City of Tacoma Municipal Building, Room 248

Time: 2:30 pm

#### *Panel Members in Attendance:*

Jack Curtright, *Proprietor, Curtright & Son*  
Ed Echtle, *Landmarks Preservation Commission*  
J.D. Elquist, *Tacoma Arts Commissioner/Landmarks Preservation Liaison*  
Lynette Miller, *Head of Collections, Washington State History Museum*  
Robin Wright, *Curator, Northwest Native American Art, Burke Museum*

#### *Staff/Consultants Present:*

Amy McBride, *Tacoma Arts Administrator*  
Reuben McKnight, *Historic Preservation Officer*  
Darius Thompson, *Associate Engineer*  
Frank Terrill, *Plans Examiner*  
Shaun Peterson, *Puyallup artist/carver/cultural consultant*

#### *Guests:*

Mardine Clark  
Lewis Kamb  
Peter Callaghan  
Patricia Lecy Davis  
Mike Sweney, *Tacoma Arts Commissioner*  
Don Lacky, *Tacoma Arts Commissioner*  
Marty Campbell, *Deputy Mayor*

#### **1. Call to Order**

**2:38 pm**

#### **2. Introductions**

Ms. McBride clarified that Mr. McKnight and she would be facilitating the process. She also shared that Marygrace Jennings sent her regrets and would not be participating in the panel. Voting members and subject matter experts at the table introduced themselves. Ms. McBride acknowledged Deputy Mayor Campbell and Tacoma Arts Commissioners in the audience.

#### **3. Background**

Ms. McBride shared that the Totem Pole is both in the Municipal Art Collection and a City Landmark and that the consideration for the meeting was whether or not to de-accession the Totem Pole from the Municipal Art Collection and, in addition, to benefit from the expertise in the room to inform any further recommendations. She clarified that this process is a review and

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discussion not a directive to remove the work from the collection. She shared that artworks that are part of the Municipal Art Collection are provided stewardship and protection.

Mr. McKnight described the role that the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) plays and provided a timeline of information beginning April 15, 2013 when an emergency action triggered the stabilization of the Tacoma Totem Pole. A stabilization plan was brought to the Landmarks Commission on April 24, 2013 and instruction was given to staff to explore questions around cultural best practices. Mr. McKnight described the many layers of historical significance both as a Native Alaskan Pole and as an artifact of the City of Tacoma's heritage. He discussed some of the history related to the commissioning of the pole. He then referred to some of the options for the pole, be it stabilization or potentially "laying to rest" as was mentioned as a possible cultural best practice. Mr. McKnight said that we are seeking information and expertise that may illuminate the LPC's discussion. Mr. McKnight said next steps for the LPC is to determine whether or not the LPC will allow the City either to stabilize the pole or to direct that the pole itself not be temporarily stabilized but be removed. If removal were directed, that process would be similar to the removal of a landmark from the City. Mr. McKnight clarified that the de-accession review is a different process than those of the LPC. They are not sequential, but inform each other.

#### **4. Review of De-accession Policy**

Ms. McBride reviewed the information included in the Totem Pole De-accession Review Packet. She then read through the De-accession policy. Life safety is the issue under which the Tacoma Totem Pole is being considered for de-accession.

#### **5. Review and Discussion of Tacoma Totem Pole Including:**

##### **a. Health and Safety**

The panel discussed the memos from PCS and City staff related to the structural integrity of the pole. Frank Terrill shared information based on his condition inspections, wind loads, location of the pole in Firemans Park and next to freeway, impact of carpenter ants, and his drawing of estimated voided spaces. Mr. Terrill said the pole may have reached the limits of its ability to stand on its own and something should be done this summer before being faced with high winds next winter. Mr. Terrill then shared a concept for stabilization with a steel pole on the back.

Ms. McBride quoted the PCS memo: "PCS recommends the pole be lowered to the ground or shored as a precaution."



Scott Beard's City structural engineer's memo suggested the same thing. Ms. McBride acknowledged that no one thinks the pole can stand on its own. It either needs to be shored up or taken down.

**b. Cultural Significance**

LPC Commissioner Echtle discussed why he felt it was important to explore the potential cultural significance of the pole. He wanted to be sure that we had experts review the pole. Shaun Peterson was called upon (33:06) to provide a local Native American cultural perspective and artistic expertise. Peterson commented on the quality of the pole. He shared that the pole is not from this region and cultural suppression during the turn of the last century made an opening for Alaskan poles to be allowed/accepted in this region.

Robin Wright was then called upon (38:15) to speak to the pole's iconography/origins. Ms. Wright commented that the story of who carved the pole has been unclear and has changed over time. Ms. Wright said that the pole does not fit into any one style. She noted that the pole looks strangely stretched because of the goal to make it the tallest totem pole and that trees coming from this area were taller than those in Alaska. She also noted that this pole is interesting because of what it tells us about Tacoma business men and that era around the Alaska Yukon Pacific exposition. "The fact that it was raised in 1903 is most interesting to me because that was really early." She discussed how curio shops would commission poles and how many of the tourist poles were spurious. Ms. Wright commented on the restorations making the point that the form lines of the aprons were done by Loren White and weren't original.

Jack Curtright said that the pole's cultural (Salish/Alaskan Native) value is in question but not its value to Tacoma culture as an icon.

Ms. Wright shared that there is a long history of native artists commissioned to create artwork for commercial endeavors just like they are now. Ms. Wright reiterated that she would love to know who carved the pole.

Mr. Peterson mentioned that if two native carvers received a \$3,000 commission in that day, it would have been a big deal. The news would have been hard to keep quiet.

Ms. McBride (45:59) clarified with the panel that this was not a sacred pole but a tourist pole. She then introduced the discussion about the culturally acceptable practice of preserving poles currently.

Lynette Miller (46:22) commented that in the past, the technology didn't exist to preserve poles but, now that it does, many poles in villages are preserved. Ms. Wright clarified that mortuary



poles are allowed to rot, but those are grave poles. Any tribe wealthy enough to have a cultural center will have poles on display both vertically and horizontally.

Mr. Terrill asked Ms. Wright if they repainted the poles or let them go to silver. Ms. Wright responded that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they would let them go silver and go back to the earth. If they were to be repainted, they would have to be potlatched again and rededicated, an expensive endeavor.

Commissioner Elquist (48:07) shared that he had spoken to Ellen Carrlee at the Sealaska Heritage Institute and that, from her perspective, poles should absolutely be preserved.

## **6. De-accession Review and Discussion**

Ms. McBride reviewed the process (1:11:55) and informed the panel that if the recommendation is to de-accession the artwork, that recommendation would go to the Arts Commission and then would need to be approved by resolution to City Council.

Mr. McKnight shared that the future courses of action (stabilization or removal) need to be brought before the LPC. The LPC will vote on what changes are proposed and whether or not the proposed action is acceptable.

Mr. Echtle asked (1:16:28) if the pole can be removed and displayed in a different way. Ms. McBride clarified that it could.

Mr. Echtle then referred to criterion D in the De-accession policy. In the case where the costs to repair exceed the market value of a piece, it can be considered for de-accession. Ms. McBride clarified that the market value of the pole, to recreate a similar pole would be \$320,000. To stabilize in place would range from \$34,000 – \$44,000 and to fully conserve would cost about \$36,000 - \$45,000. Basic conservation, arresting bug damage, etc... would cost much less. Moving the pole to an indoor location would cost \$20,000 however she clarified that we do not currently have an indoor location secured.

Mr. Peterson asked if the pole were to be braced in place, after 20 years, would it be too fragile to move indoors. He questioned whether it makes sense to move it indoors now. He also noted that at the Capital, the Shelton pole is in storage with no place to put it.

## **7. Recommendation(s)**

Ms. McBride asked for a motion (1:19:44) regarding the recommendation for de-accession.



There was a motion: “I make a motion that the de-accession committee does not de-accession the Tacoma Totem Pole from the Municipal Art Collection.”

Motion: J. D. Elquist

Second: Ed Echtle

Motion: Carried

Ms. McBride asked some specific follow up questions:

**A. Thoughts on stabilizing in place with an architectural brace system costing \$44,000.**

(1:21) Mr. Elquist said he is not adamantly opposed but wants to know where money comes from. It was confirmed that there is money to implement a structural brace. He would like to see a maintenance and preservation plan and interpretive signage that tells the story where it is currently standing.

Mr. Curtright noted that if the pole does come down and into storage, something would need to be commissioned in its place. It will be cheaper in today’s dollars and easier to find the right timber.

Ms. McBride asked “what if there is money to stabilize but not to replace this work with another?”

If the pole were to come down, possible storage places to pursue include the Foss Waterway Seaport and Washington State History Museum. Lynette Miller from WSHM shared that they don’t have a place for it but brought up the issue of ownership, liability, and care. Most institutions won’t have the funds for stewardship. Ms. Miller also said that any museum would require it to be fumigated for bugs (1:24).

Mr. Elquist reiterated that he would like to see the impact of costs related to the various scenarios; he would like to be strategic and have a curatorial plan and interpretive signage no matter what. (1:25)

Mr. Thompson shared that the City has a location at the old Sea Scout building that could store the pole for a few months, if need be.

Mr. Elquist shared his concern that a totem pole is supposed to stand on its own; that bracing it compromises its historic integrity. He is more inclined to see the pole come down and be housed and preserved in an interior location if one can be found. Mr. Elquist clarified that he is no longer interested in having a pole return to the earth but to stay around as long as possible.



Ms. Wright supported the need to tell the story of the pole, “it is a teachable moment. I will tell my students about this pole and would like it to exist for them to see it.” (1:27)

**B. Thoughts on storing it but not knowing its final location**

(1:27:48) Mr. Curtright noted that in the time it takes to make decisions, there may be a place in the future.

Mr. Terrill asked if the committee feels it would be better to remove the pole from the elements and put under cover or stabilized and not conserved but to arrest deterioration and catastrophic failure.

Ms. Miller shared that she feels the pole needs to be conserved in addition to stabilizing.

The committee discussed various scenarios.

Mr. McKnight mentioned developing a long term curatorial plan for the pole, whether standing or not. The committee discussed various scenarios of conservation including a basic maintenance schedule. (1:29:50) Mr. McKnight acknowledged the inherent risks in relocation. Mr. Peterson discussed some methods for conservation. He noted (1:33:01) that the different stages of change/conservation that have occurred with the pole should be documented. For example, we know that Doug Granum and Loren White both worked on the pole. Documentation should include that history.

Mr. McKnight said we can investigate the needs for analysis and specifics of conservation and stabilization.

Ms. McBride said there are funds to stabilize the pole and funds to remove it. Whether there are funds to do anything beyond that is not guaranteed.

Mr. Elquist said there are two options (1:36:11): stabilize with a pole in the back or remove it and find another place for it but preserve it and remove it from the elements with interpretive signage.

Ms. McBride expressed her concern that works that have been removed from public view take a very long time, if ever, to get returned to public space.

Mr. McKnight acknowledged that the City has to do something about the pole. Just letting it stay as it is, is not an option.



**8. Next Steps**

Recommendation will be shared with the Tacoma Arts Commission on June 10, 2013 and Landmarks Preservation Commission on June 12, 2013.

**Meeting adjourned at 4:19 pm**

