



TO: Elizabeth A. Pauli, City Manager
FROM: Reuben McKnight, Historic Preservation Officer, Planning and Development Services
Peter Huffman, Director, Planning and Development Services
COPY: City Council and City Clerk
SUBJECT: Resolution – Rescinding Historic Designation of the Tacoma Totem Pole in Firefighter’s Park
DATE: June 29, 2021

SUMMARY AND PURPOSE:

A resolution rescinding the designation of the Tacoma Totem Pole to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places.

BACKGROUND:

This department’s recommendation is based on the Landmarks Preservation Commission (Landmarks Commission) findings and recommendations of May 26, 2021, regarding the proposed removal of the Tacoma Totem Pole from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places, and the Tacoma Arts Commission’s action to deaccession the totem pole from the Municipal Arts Collection, and related recommendations.

In making this recommendation, the Landmarks Commission found that the Tacoma Totem Pole is inauthentic and is an example of cultural appropriation, and that its continued status as a City Landmark is harmful to the community and counter to the City’s commitment to antiracism and reconciliation.

The Tacoma Totem Pole was commissioned by local businesspersons and carved by unknown individuals in 1903. The pole was likely intended to reflect a Tlingit or Haida aesthetic, however City consultations with art historians and tribal representatives suggest that the artists were not native carvers. The primary motive for the creation of the pole was economic competition, particularly with Seattle, and the pole was intended to symbolize Tacoma’s connection with the Alaskan trade. The pole is currently in its third location, and was added to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places in 1975.

Upon review, the Landmarks Commission found that the original nomination form contained factual inaccuracies, including the assertion that the pole was carved by native carvers from British Columbia. Tlingit and Haida tribal representatives do not believe the pole has any authentic ceremonial or clan origins and claim no association with it. During the course of discussions of both deaccessioning from the Arts Collection and rescission of the historic status of the pole, tribal members and representatives of the Puyallup, Tlingit and Haida have clearly stated that the pole is harmful, including the fact that the faux Northern style contributes to and perpetuates misinformation about the art and culture of Coast Salish peoples of this region.

On March 14, 2021, the Landmarks Commission voted to begin consideration of “rescission of landmarks designation” per its process in Tacoma Municipal Code 13.07.055. On May 12, 2021, the Landmarks Commission conducted a public hearing and continued to accept comments through May 22, 2021. Comments received from the public were largely in favor of the delisting of the pole. The Landmarks Commission unanimously voted to recommend removal of the pole from the historic register on May 26, 2021, following review of the testimony.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ CUSTOMER RESEARCH:

The engagement process includes both the Landmarks Commission and the Tacoma Arts Commission. On February 25, 2021, the Tacoma Arts Commission convened a Deaccession Panel to consider the appropriateness of the totem pole’s status as a piece in the Municipal Art Collection. This panel was centered on native voices, and also included representatives of the Arts and Landmarks Commissions.

The Landmarks Commission review also included close coordination with tribal representatives and members. In addition, the hearing notice was advertised in The News Tribune, sent to a 400 foot radius of property owners and occupants near the site, sent to the hearing and mailing lists for the Landmarks Commission and Arts Commission, and broadcast on social media.

2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

Equity and Accessibility:

Removal of the Tacoma Totem Pole from the historic register will remove a barrier to reconciliation and inclusion with the Puyallup Tribe and other native and indigenous people, by ending the celebration of an item of cultural appropriation.

Civic Engagement: *Equity Index Score:* Select Index Score.

Increase the percentage of residents who believe they are able to have a positive impact on the community and express trust in the public institutions in Tacoma.

Explain how your legislation will affect the selected indicator(s).

This recommendation is made in part based upon input received from native and indigenous voices, including representatives and members of the Puyallup, Tlingit and Haida tribes.

ALTERNATIVES:

Presumably, your recommendation is not the only potential course of action; please discuss other alternatives or actions that City Council or staff could take. Please use table below.

Alternative(s)	Positive Impact(s)	Negative Impact(s)
The pole is not “delisted” from the historic register.	The pole would remain on the historic register and under the review of the Landmarks Commission. This may offer opportunities to “recontextualize” the proper historical narrative surrounding the pole.	This would be counter to the expressed wishes of tribal members and representatives, which could undermine the relationships between the City and the respective tribes and communities. It is likely that there would be an application to the Landmarks Commission to relocate or destroy the pole at a future time.



City of Tacoma

City Council Action Memorandum

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW UP:

Staff from the Office of Cultural Vitality and Historic Preservation Office will continue to coordinate and update the City Council on future art installations in this area, and discussions on disposition of the pole.

STAFF/SPONSOR RECOMMENDATION:

The Landmarks Commission recommends that the Tacoma Totem Pole be removed from the Tacoma Register of Historic Places. Staff concurs with this recommendation.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact from the rescission of landmark designation.