

Sitka Historic Preservation Commission

City and Borough of Sitka
100 Lincoln Street
Sitka, Alaska 99835

November 9, 2009

Department of Health and Social Services
350 Main Street, Room 404
PO Box 110601
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0601

Greetings,

Thank you for the opportunity for the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission to review and recommend on your Department's planned renovations to Totem Square in Sitka. As noted in previous communication, this is a very special National Register site for the history it conveys to our citizens and visitors, and is a vital component of our visitor industry as well as one of the few green spaces within our downtown area. We very much appreciate the time and efforts all parties have spent on these plans and further encourage a publicly-advertised meeting on the matter before ground breaking to prepare citizens for the construction and changes which will take place.

The following list of recommendations from our Commission is based upon the *Guidelines for Rehabilitating Cultural Landscapes – Standards for Rehabilitation* set forth by the National Park Service per the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Rehabilitation - the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.

The first three Standards for Rehabilitation are of special consideration while undertaking the project at Totem Square. They are: (1) A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships; (2) the historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alterations of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided; (3) each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historical properties, will not be undertaken.

The Sitka Historic Preservation Commission's Recommendations:

1. The concrete pathway in front of the seawall should be no more than six feet wide and benches should not be retained in this area. We believe benches would be more appropriate along the northeast pathway as this conforms to the natural way people use the square. The benches impede the viewscape cited in the nomination of this property to the National Register and alter the spatial relationships of the landscape. The benches along the southwest side of the

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Square will only encourage stagnation in the area, which will facilitate climbing on the seawall. Secondly, the seawall would obstruct the view of the Sitka Channel from the proposed benches.

2. Benches should be constructed of wood to minimize the introduction of metal to the site.

The Commission suggests creating benches similar to those around downtown that are halved cedar logs. This will also match nicely with the cedar logs on top of the seawall and may even be less expensive as these are local materials constructed by local craftsmen.

3. We recommend no further lighting necessary in the Square. The Square is already a very well lit area where additional lighting would impede the view in the evening especially for the residents of the Pioneer Home.

4. Vegetation should consist of indigenous species or those that are in use in the area.

Perhaps we could plant Sitka Roses along this edge to match planting at the Pioneer Home. We further recommend consultation with the Kayaani Commission of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska (<http://www.sitkatribes.org/kayaani/>) who are the experts in our area in this field.

5. Mitigate the removal of the historic curb on the northwest side of the Square. This curb is constructed of the same material as the seawall and is a historic feature of the Square.

Potential mitigation measures of this feature could be a condition survey of the Totem Pole, the Square's most significant feature that is to be removed and addressed in Phase II of this project.

6. Include a Condition Survey of the current Totem in this initial phase of the project. As the Square is aptly named Totem Square, it is vital to the community and our visitor economy that we have a pole in this Square. It is the most significant historic feature of the site and deserves to be addressed in this regard in this initial phase. By doing so, we can mitigate the effects to the site and ensure we are quickly moving in the direction of repair or replacement. In either case, the Commission looks forward to assisting in fund-raising efforts to get a totem back in our Totem Square as soon as possible.

7. Archaeological monitoring of earth-disturbing activities. Personal communications between former U.S. Forest Service Sitka Ranger District Archaeologist Jeremy Karchet, now Denali Nat'l Park Archaeologist, myself and Ms. Klein note the possibility of Russian coins uncovered in Totem Square by a local citizen. In my own experience conducting archaeology in Sitka I have found that even though much of the earth around the downtown area is fill, it is historic fill, hence the possibility of Russian artifacts. Per a telephone conversation with Alaska State Archaeologist Dave McMahan, and in reference to the Sitka National Historical Park's Historic Context Study, *A Construction History of Sitka, Alaska, as Documented in the Records of the Russian-American Company*, in the immediate vicinity of Totem Square was located a foundry, stockade, and shipyard. It is also the prehistoric site of the Herring Rock, an area of traditional use by local Tlingit people to harvest herring in the spring. Also of note was the discovery of a misengraved historic grave marker uncovered while Pioneer Home staff were replacing and adding fencing to the home grounds.

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8. Leave the existing historic interpretive sign and historic rock/concrete pad in front of the seawall. There doesn't seem to be much reason to remove this historic feature only to reconstruct it less than five feet away. This outcropping connects to the seawall and blends very well esthetically with it.

9. Temporary construction sign as to where the Totem is and the future plans for this feature in Totem Square. To avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication about the project, as the citizens of Sitka as well as visitors will be greatly concerned when they see the Square without a totem; a small, inexpensive sign noting the plans for the Square is highly recommended.

10. Define timeline of "Phase II" of the plans for the Square. In informal discussion between Ms. Klein and myself, we developed some idea of dealing with the issue of the Totem in a Phase II portion of the project. The Commission understands nothing formally has been discussed or adopted by the Totem Square working group, but the Commission is very concerned about the time frame for replacing this significant feature.

Thank you for reviewing these recommendations and much gratitude to Ms. Klein for the hours and hours she has spent on this project and to the State of Alaska for caring for historic properties held dear to Sitkans.

Sincerely,

/s/ Anne Pollnow

Anne Pollnow

Chair, Sitka Historic Preservation Commission

cc: Judith Bittner, Deputy SHPO, Jim Dinley, CBS Administrator, Scott McAdams, CBS Mayor, Colleen Inman, CBS Municipal Clerk, Wells Williams, CBS Planning Director