Hiawatha
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Zimmerhak family is very grateful to the citizens of La Crosse for their support in the renovation of the Indian statue.

Parks and Recreation Director Bob Berg also lauded the work. "I think it's great," he said. "It looks really nice. The project turned out well and is something that should last now for quite some time."

Representatives of the Ho-Chunk Nation, who consulted with Kimmets on the colors, were not available for comment.

"It looks like it's brand new," Tartanwal said. "All the cracks are sealed. All the pieces that were falling off are adhered."

In addition to painting the statue, he said that Kimmets bored some holes into it to let out moisture. When moisture builds up, it turns to steam and causes expansion of the statue, Tartanwal said. Expansion and contraction have been one of the causes of the cracks.

Kimmets has given the city a 10-year warranty on the labor and materials. The city paid $35,000 for the refurbishing. The money included $16,995 in private donations to the Native American Statue Fund and $18,605 from the 2000 Capital Improvement Budget.

Kimmets would like to also get a plaque on the statue and a sign near it.

The landmark once had a bronze plaque and sign giving the history of why the statue was put at that location, he said. "It explained that it is where the Mississippi, Black and La Crosse rivers come together, and that Native Americans believed there would never be a storm and people would be safe where three rivers come together."

"We definitely want the input of Native Americans on the sign and plaque," Kimmets said, in order to avoid further controversy.

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Hiawatha restoration finished

By JOAN KENT
Of the Tribune staff

The Hiawatha statue in Riverside Park looks as good as new. After months of controversy, the landmark statue overlooking the point where three rivers meet has been restored.

The 30-ton, 15-foot statue, also known as the Big Indian, was created by the late artist Anthony Zimmerhak in 1961. When it had deteriorated to the point of requiring repair, supporters argued that it should be refurbished and kept at the park because it is a landmark. But opponents argued that it was a caricature insulting to Native Americans. A committee voted 5-4 to keep the statue last December.

Viroqua-area artist Ben Kimmets completed the refurbishing on Sept. 25 after about a month and a half of work, said City Engineer Randy Tartanwal.

"Ben Kimmets did a beautiful job," Steve Kimmets, a friend of the Zimmerhak family who fought to keep the statue in the park, said after viewing it Friday. "It looks majestic again. With the renovation of the statue, I think the area is back in Riverside Park."