Public debates image as tradition or stereotype

By JOAN KENT
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The fact that the "Hiawatha" statue in Riverside Park is a La Crosse tradition does not mean it should remain, several University of Wisconsin-La Crosse students told the Committee to Consider the Future of the Statue Hiawatha at a public hearing Tuesday.

"We oppose the statue as an outdated racist vestige that teaches children to stereotype other human beings," said Christopher Reopelle, a member of the Native American Student Association at UW-L. "Stereotypes create an environment of fear and discrimination. We are working hard to retain our culture in a country that still tries to obliterate us.

"We do not need a statue to honor us," he added. "We can do that, and you can do that as that our friends." The public hearing was held as the committee, appointed by Mayor John Medinger, prepares to make a recommendation to the Common Council on the statue's future. The students were among about 50 people who spoke, either to remove or keep the statue built by the late Anthony D. Zimmerhakl.

The colorful, 15-foot tall, 20-ton statue was built in Zimmerhakl's back yard and placed in the park in 1961. But it is crumbling and deteriorating, and needs thousands of dollars of restoration work. Holding a mug decorated with historical images of La Crosse, which he said Zimmerhakl made for him, Gary Padeisky noted that many of the local landmarks already are gone.

"The statue was built to honor Native Americans," he said. "I do not think of it to show disrespect, any more than Paul Bunyan is making fun of fat white guys with beards."

See HIAWATHA, A-8

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Hiawatha

After the statue, tomorrow they will be after something else. Nobody pictures a person with a doctorate, he said. "But if you come with a doctorate, people become interested in you. It doesn't matter what we think," he said. "The point is, we're Native Americans. It matters is what the people who represent think."

If they don't believe that the statue represents think, "we're going to change that," said a La Crosse Central Class of 1965, who had中铁 Class as a teacher. "We're going to respect each other, and that's the right thing to do," she said.