Time to listen on ‘Hiawatha’ issue

A special committee looking into the future of the “Hiawatha” statue in Riverside Park is taking the right approach to this often-controversial issue.

Committee chairman John Satory, a member of the La Crosse Common Council, wants to hear from as many La Crosse residents as possible.

Tonight, the committee will hold a public hearing at 7:30 in the fifth floor conference room at City Hall.

And Satory wants committee members to listen. At a later meeting, the committee will discuss it. But tonight, Satory just wants to hear from people.

That makes sense.

This is a tough issue — one that artist Anthony Zimmerhakl would never have anticipated when he built the statue in the 1960s.

Zimmerhakl intended it as a symbol of respect for native people. But 40 years after its construction, attitudes have changed among some people.

While the Ho-Chunk Nation has released a statement saying that it would like to see the statue remain in the park, not all tribal members agree.

Some argue very strongly that the statue is offensive and stereotypical.

Satory said that, as an artist himself, he has new respect for the process by which the statue was built after seeing videos provided by the family.

“They worked on it for years,” Satory said. “It was really a family project. They built it horizontally and then tipped it up vertically. It was done really well.

“When you see the whole procedure of putting it on the bed of a truck and slowly moving it through Front Street and seeing it slowly moving through the park and being slowly hoisted, it’s eerie.”

This is a good opportunity to make your views known. Committee members are right to want to take the time to listen to people first.