Park board to discuss fate of Hiawatha statue

By JOAN KENT
Of the Tribune staff

When people familiar with La Crosse learn that Lisa Slonka is Anthony Zimmerhakl’s daughter, they say, “Oh, your dad did the Big Indian.”

“It’s been part of our family for years,” said Slonka, a graphic artist at Empire Screen Printing Inc. “I was the youngest. I was 8 when it was put up.”

The late Zimmerhakl, an art teacher at the former Longfellow Junior High School, and his family built the statue over four years in their back yard at 416 S. 19th St.

Slonka, her mother, Elnora Zimmerhakl of Bella Vista, Ark., and her brother Stefan, an art teacher in Joplin, Mo., will attend Thursday’s meeting of the Board of Park Commissioners, where the fate of the La Crosse landmark will be debated.

The board put off deciding what to do about the deteriorating statue last month, pending public input. According to a structural report, it will cost about $50,000 to repair the statue.

A statement from the Ho-Chunk Nation Tuesday indicated the nation will not object to the statue being refurbished. American Indians have varied opinions on the statue, the statement said, “but as in all landmarks that people have grown accustomed to, it would be unnatural to go to Riverside Park and not see the ‘Big Indian’ we have grown so accustomed to. It shows our presence was noteworthy ever since its dedication in 1961.”

The suggestion to put a statue in Red Cloud Park is good, the statement added, “but if the Big Indian is removed, there is no guarantee that the Ho-Chunk presence in the downtown area may ever be replaced.”

Ho-Chunks who speak out against native mascots, the Big Indian and related issues usually are those raised in many waterway pr.,
been put on hold,” King said.

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white foster homes rather than in Ho-Chunk culture, the statement said. “The Ho-Chunks who were raised within their own cultural surroundings were strong in their spirits and have a greater and deeper understanding and more patience for the sometimes unrealistic depiction of Natives.”

Stefan Zimmerhakl is willing to help repair and repaint the statue, his mother said. He has been researching paints and types of cement to patch it, she said. “If the city agrees, he would like to do it this summer, before school starts,” she said.

Steve Kiedrowski, an art inspector at Empire Screen Printing, would like to help Stefan Zimmerhakl restore the statue. “Lisa and I have been talking for years about how bad it looks,” he said. “It would be a nice twist if his son Stefan could do it. The statue has big cracks, and chunks have fallen off. It needs a total renovation. There was a metal fence, but now there’s just a dillapidated snow fence, and there was a metal plaque, but it’s gone.”

The family and Kiedrowski do not agree with criticism that the statue is insulting to American Indians. “Zimmerhakl was an Indian buff,” Kiedrowski said. “He did a lot on heritage before he ever sketched this out. He did the style of the Indian in the 1700s and 1800s. I think we should preserve our Native American history.”

The important issue regarding art work of all types is that it be respectful of American Indian people, the Ho-Chunk statement said. “As any ethnic people who struggled to survive, only artwork depicting the true story of its people is desired. We believe that we deserve respectful depictions ... in any art form. We have a history, and we are making our presence known in the business world today. As a people, we have paid our dues.”

The park board last month discussed the possibility of taking the statue downtown or moving it. But Elnora Zimmerhakl said that would be difficult. “We always laughed that anything he built was to last 500 years,” she said.

“It’s not just a block of cement. For about every inch of cement, there is wire mesh. And my brother, who was in welding, made the I-beams that go down into the ground,” she said. “They’d really have a job taking it down.”