Indian statue repairs on hold

Park board looking for more input from residents

By JOAN KENT
Of the Tribune staff

The Board of Park Commissioners wants to know if La Crosse residents favor restoring the Big Indian in Riverside Park. At its Thursday meeting, the board postponed a decision for 30 days on whether to repair the deteriorating statue, pending public input and possible contributions.

A structural report estimated it would cost about $10,000 to repair the landmark built by the late Anthony Zimmerhakl and his family. A fiberglass copy probably could be made for $15,000 to $20,000, said Park Director Bob Berg.

"No matter what we do, someone is going to object to it," said Mavis Conley. "Most of the people I know do not want to see it destroyed." The city already has spent considerable money to paint and maintain the statue, which was the idea of local gas station owners to promote tourism to the area, said Berg.

"The girders inside are beginning to corrode," said board member Greg Sheehan. "I would hate to see it fall on someone." Some board members questioned whether American Indians want to keep the statue. "I do not believe the Ho-Chunk will want it perpetuated, and others will object to refurbishing it though the general public probably would want it," said Donald Meinert.

Wayne Young, a resident attending the meeting, suggested that the city ask the American Indian community if they want to replace the statue to honor someone.

Members discussed several possible solutions, including covering the statue or moving it indoors, giving it to the Children's Museum and housing it in the new Health Science Center. Berg said he would refer the repairs to the 2001 capital improvement budget in hopes that contributions could fund at least half the cost.

Commissioned in the late 1860s by a group of La Crosse civic leaders, the statue took four years to build. It was moved from the Zimmerhakl's backyard in a long procession in October 1961 and dedicated as part of the first Oktoberfest.

In another matter, the board voted to build a new shelter in Leath Park, near West Avenue and La Crosse Street. Plans for the $200,000 shelter are being drawn by HSR Associates Inc. so that it could be bid in August and built by the end of the year, Berg said. The shelter will be funded through Community Development Block grants, he said.

The skate park, built on the north end of the park, has a bad reputation, said board member Betty Woodruff. She declined to be specific. But she and Berg said that most of the skateboarders are "good kids." The problems occur late at night, she said, suggesting the park be better patrolled by La Crosse Police.

The board also approved a request by the Petriebene Boat Club to spend about $100,000 to replace docks, and to put a lien on the improvements for a short-term borrowing toward the cost.

The club leases property, east of the Cass Street Bridge, from the city. It has already spent $276,000, the amount it is required to spend by the time its lease ends at the end of 2007, said Commodore Mark Hyde. But the docks have deteriorated, and need replacing, he said. The refurbishing will include installing steel frame docks and upgrading the lighting, Hyde said. "It will be much more stable than what's there."

The board also approved a request by the West Side Boat Club to renew its lease near Black River and east of Mosher Road for five more years.