

NEWS – February 13, 2013 – Robert Whale news reporter

City, veterans groups considering American-Vietnamese war memorial

There may be a joint American-Vietnamese war memorial one day at Veterans Memorial Park.

But to get one, veterans groups must sit down together and work things out.

It also could take some soothing of feathers ruffled by poor communication and misunderstandings about the size and scope of one such memorial.

The City's Municipal Services Committee on Monday heard from veteran Tom Stoddard, a freelance writer for Veteran's Affairs, who has worked with the Vietnamese Community for 10 years to make a memorial happen.

The idea, Stoddard said, began 10 years ago as an effort by a Vietnamese-American woman in Tumwater to place a memorial in Olympia, thanking American veterans for their services to her country during the war in South Vietnam.

For various reasons, the Olympia project didn't work out.

But Auburn, home to the largest Veterans Day parade west of the Mississippi and Veterans Memorial Park, had a lot to recommend it.

The idea, Stoddard said, would be to place the memorial in the park with the existing memorial as part of a much larger scene.

"One of the things that we considered was to make it educational, so that it's more than just a statue of soldiers, but to somehow build into it some sort of teaching," Stoddard said. "The benefit to the city is that it is expected to enhance the present memorial park. It's an additional aspect to the Auburn Veterans Day parade and helps integrate and recognize Auburn's Vietnamese community.

"With the project's educational aspect, it should be an addition to the quality of life in the city of Auburn."

Proponents expect to hold fundraisers or to use a grant writer. The idea, Stoddard said, is that there should be no costs to the City, which owns the park. As of today, there is no final design, no set location in the park.

"Basically, nothing is set in stone right now," Stoddard said.

But that was the assumption some veterans made.

Learning about the proposed memorial, members of American Legion Auburn Post 78 recently downloaded a copy of what they assumed was the plan. Roger Olson, past commander of the Auburn post and its present chaplain, explained what happened.

"Basically, what we saw is that the size and height of the memorial is at or out of scale with the current Veterans Memorial. We envisioned a memorial of much smaller scale to complement the existing Veterans Memorial, not a memorial that competes with it or is larger," Olson said.

Olson said the post was also "totally against" the permanent display of the South Vietnamese flag, which, he noted, is the emblem of a country that went out of existence in 1975.

"The plan to pick two flagpoles of equal height is not appropriate, as the American flag is superior to all other national flags displayed in this country. The only time you see two flags displayed equally is with our neighbor, Canada," Olson said.

Finally, Olson questioned whether Auburn's Parks, Arts and Recreation Department or the City itself had contacted the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the Inter-Tribal Warrior Society to let those groups know about the plans.

Committee chair Bill Pelozza, a member of VFW Post 1741, said the post had not yet discussed the idea formally.

"Basically, as a result of the meeting last Wednesday night, based on those plans, we find it inappropriate, and we were opposed to it by vote," Olson said.

Daryl Faber, director of Auburn's Parks, Arts and Recreation department, said there were misunderstandings about the size and scale.

Faber said that in walking through the park with the proponents it became clear right away that the scale of the Olympia plan wouldn't work for Auburn. Proponents, he added, were also keen to ensure that the proposed memorial would not compete with the existing one.

"There's lot of items we have to work our way through if this is going to happen," Faber said, adding that the hope is the different veterans groups to sit down and reach a compromise.

Mayor Pete Lewis complained that, as a member of the American Legion and the VFW, the issue put him in an awkward position.

"Sometimes barriers get set up where there don't need to be barriers, and I would prefer that no barriers are set up now. As you just heard, there's a difference just because nobody asked the questions, and you should have asked," Lewis said to Legion members.

Lewis said he will set up a process where people can ask and talk about something they can do together, without barriers.

"I think that in this town of all towns, with our collective experience with our veterans and with our national place with veterans, there is something that can be done together," Lewis said. "Plans that were set up for other communities don't have anything to with us, and it shouldn't be taken that way. So, before any other votes are done, please check and we will be bringing this along."

- ROBERT WHALE, *Auburn Reporter News reporter*