



NCC approves monument against 'oppression'

Decision made despite confusion over what work even commemorates

By Cassandra Drudi, The Ottawa Citizen, September 11, 2009

A new monument in Ottawa to commemorate the victims of some sort of oppression was approved by the National Capital Commission's board of directors Thursday, but the decision has left those proposing the monument confused as to what, exactly, was approved.

"We don't really understand the decision at this point," said Tim Egan of High Park Group, which is representing one of the groups behind the proposal. "We really do need to talk to our board to assess the implications."

The NCC board passed a motion supporting the concept of the commemoration, "but perhaps with a different title," after objections about the title were raised by nearly all members who spoke.

The title -- "monument to the victims of totalitarian communism" -- has already been changed once. In the first proposals, one by a non-profit group called Tribute to Liberty, the other by Open Book Group, it was to be called "monument to the victims of communism."

After beginning discussions with the NCC in March 2008, the groups had back-and-forth discussions with a committee of experts who suggested that the title be changed because it could be perceived as "unduly critical of Canadians who might associate themselves with communism," Egan said.

The group then changed the name to include the word "totalitarian." The title still did not sit well with the board.

"I was unsettled by this name, and other members of the committee agreed with me," said HÃ©lÃ©ne Grand-MaÃ®tre, speaking in French. "We should make sure that we are politically correct in this designation."

Board member Adel Ayad said the name was troubling for its "very tight definition" and for the presence of the word "communism" in the title, as Canada has a communist party.

"It's not communism itself that we should be fighting here. It is rather totalitarianism we are against in any form," he said.

Richard Jennings suggested replacing "totalitarian communism" with the phrase "oppressive regimes."

Some also suggested that the monument should focus more on Canada as a refuge for victims of oppressive regimes.

The criticism that the monument's focus is too narrow came as a surprise to Zuzana Hahn of the Open Book Group, who points out that the monument represents people from three of the world's seven continents.

"We feel that we are just broad enough," she said. "We represent everybody from Vietnam to South America and through Europe."

The monument aims to honour the 100 million people who died under communist regimes across the world and to recognize the experiences of Canadians who emigrated from communist countries. The monument will also thank Canada for its role in providing a homeland for those coming from communist regimes.

The monument has a \$1.5-million budget, all of which will come from private-sector fundraising, according to the proposal.

In addition to support from communities of diverse heritage and letters of support from ambassadors, the monument also has political champions, including Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney. Earlier this year, Kenney told the National Post that he took the idea to the prime minister some time after a meeting with the Czech and Slovak Association in Toronto three years ago when he was secretary of state for multiculturalism.

In a letter to Kenney last year, the prime minister said he "would strongly support the idea of such a monument."

According to the NCC's submission to the board, monuments to victims of communism are found in some cities in former communist countries, as well as in Washington, D.C.

In Toronto, a monument to the victims of communism, depicting a Christ-like figure crucified on a hammer and sickle, is in the gardens of a Czechoslovakian community centre. A small replica of that monument is on display in Gatineau City Hall.

The next steps of the project were to include the NCC working with the groups involved over the fall and winter to develop the "project approach" and a national competition to design the monument in the spring and summer of next year, with an unveiling in November 2011. A public announcement about the project on Nov. 9 was to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But given Thursday's conditional approval, the groups involved are not sure what's next for the proposed monument.

"We have to meet with our board and we have to reconsider," Hahn said.

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