

Tacoma should recognize Tollefson's achievements

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Kevin Freitas asked some legitimate questions in his Viewpoint last Sunday. Why should we be naming public places after former mayors? And why should we consider naming the place that is now known as Pacific Plaza after Mayor Harold Tollefson?

Former Mayors Hosmer, Sprague, Kandle, Huson, Fawcett, Wright, Seymour and Hyde have their names on streets, parks, schools and buildings. None of these mayors had the articulated vision of what downtown should be as did Mayor Tollefson. In fact, he was the mayor who established the groundwork for what our urban core has become.

In this regard, Tollefson served as president of the National League of Cities, was a close confidant to President Lyndon Johnson and was a personal friend of Vice President Hubert Humphrey. He helped write the Great Society legislation that passed Congress during the time that cities were considered important by the federal government. He worked closely with the vice president in developing the concept of a Marshall Plan for urban America. (Unfortunately, this did not come to pass.)

The mayor also knew Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy personally. I still remember JFK's quip about the power and influence of Harold and his brothers Thor (a member of Congress) and Erling (a judge) when he visited Tacoma in September 1963.

Locally, it was Mayor Tollefson who initiated the creation of the Arts and Landmarks Commissions. He also championed the formation of the Urban Rights Commission and the open housing ordinance. The later was defeated at the polls and likely led to Mayor Tollefson's loss in his re-election bid – a local profile in courage, in my view.

Mayor Tollefson grew up on Tacoma's East Side, graduated from Lincoln High School, and was educated at the University of Puget Sound and the University of Washington. He was a freeholder who helped write our current city charter and served three terms as mayor. He was an attorney who was elected as president of the local bar association.

All of this just scratches the surface of his many accomplishments. Of the 40 men and women who have served Tacoma as mayor, Tollefson (who died in 1985) has to be considered one of the most important and noteworthy. He deserves recognition, in my view.

The question now is: What is the process that leads to the consideration of naming a public place after a person?

First, a formal request has to be made to the mayor. This request came from the Tollefson family and Councilwoman Connie Ladenburg. On May 1, I discussed this request with the full council at a committee of the whole meeting. With no objection raised, I, along with council members Ladenburg and Rick Talbert, transmitted the request to the Landmarks Commission.

A June 13 article in The News Tribune noted that the commission would be hearing the request during a formal hearing. At that meeting, I, along with members of the Tollefson family, explained the rationale for the request.

One member of the commission pointed out that Pacific Plaza was not the official name but a placeholder. He commented that Pacific Plaza sounded more like a shopping mall than an urban public place. He suggested that Tollefson Square be considered.

Surrounding property owners were notified, and a one-month period was set aside for written public comment. The commission met again, considered the request based on the record, and has recommended the naming to the City Council.

It seems that any effort to name or rename a public place engenders some controversy. I remember the hue and cry when the council renamed K Street after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – another name from history. The naming of Jack Hyde Park was also disputed.

But I think it is important that we recognize those individuals who displayed the courage and vision to make Tacoma what it is today. Harold Tollefson was one of those people.

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