

TO: Historic Preservation Commission
FROM: Chuck Denney, Parks and Recreation Director
DATE: September 17, 2026
SUBJECT: Carlyon Bridge Painting

1) Recommended Action:

Requested Information Item

2) Background:

Before Interstate 5 was built, the Pacific Highway offered the main route between Seattle and Portland. That highway made several 90 degree turns as it crossed the Deschutes River in Tumwater. This circuitous route was straightened in 1937-38 by the construction of the Carlyon Bridge, named for Senator P. H. Carlyon who was active in the Good Roads movement of the time.

The bridge was not just a river crossing, but also offered an opportunity to create public art. Four concrete totem poles and their associated concrete pylons and decorative railings adorn the bridge deck. The totems have been touted as the world's only concrete, electrified totem poles.

The totems and pylons were originally plain, unpainted concrete. In 1951, Peter G. Schmidt of the Olympia Brewing Company received permission from the State Highway Department to paint the totems and pylons in bright colors. A letter from Peter noted, "We are very happy that the Highway Department gave us the privilege of painting them [the totems] in regular totem colors and which, by the way, was done by a native Alaskan painter whose mother was a full blood native Alaskan, and he did a fine job in selecting colors."

When Interstate 5 was completed in the late 1950s, the bridge was deeded to the City of Tumwater. The bridge was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. In 1989-90, the City of Tumwater cleaned the bridge, rewired the lamps, and repainted the totems and pylons in cream, coral, and turquoise. The bridge was rededicated on July 23, 1990.

3) Alternatives:

Discussion may include the history of the bridge/pylons/totems, painting, colors, interpretive signage and tribal considerations.

4) Attachments:

None