Korean War monument rejected

By Russ Britt

Backers of a proposed Korean War monument were dealt an unexpected blow Thursday when the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Commission rejected the proposed sculpture at Angel Garden Park in San Pedro.

Saying it was incompatible with the adjacent Korean Friendship Bell, the commission effectively killed the project with its surprising 5-0 vote.

The decision forces the International Korean War Memorial Committee to either come up with a new design or find another suitable location.

It also appears the commission's decision will not be overturned and a public hearing scheduled next week on the monument could be canceled, city officials said.

The commission approved the project in concept in 1986, but sided with monument opponents Thursday, saying that a dozen 10-foot-high bronze statues of soldiers in battle would violate the tranquil environment at the park, a former military reservation.

"This is a very confrontational piece and I don't see what would be served by this," said commission President Kerry Norris, "I just don't know that this is the appropriate way to memorialize veterans."

Visibly upset by the commission's decision, committee Executive Director Jack Stites refused to comment afterward and rushed out of the meeting room, wheeling a 200-pound replica of the sculpture with him.

The committee has raised about half the $4 million needed to build the monument and surrounding plaza. They were forging ahead with plans and set June 25, the 39th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, as a ground-breaking date.

When it appeared the commission would reject the monument Thursday, Stites made one last passionate appeal.

"If you believe this is violent, then obviously you don't go to movies or watch TV," Stites said.

And he scoffed at suggestions that it be designed similar to the Vietnam War memorial wall.

Calling that monument a "tombstone," Stites said he wanted to memorialize those who returned from battle as well as those who died.

Stites said his colleagues on the committee voted for this design and he was powerless to change it.

Jubilant afterward, the Friends of the Friendship Bell seemed confident their unexpected victory would stand.

They had felt the commission hearing would be their best chance at killing the project since they objected primarily to its design and relation to the bell.

Richard Chenowith objected to a planned series of flags from 22 countries involved in the war that would surround the monument and fly around the clock.

"I would liken it to a used car lot," Chenowith said.

City officials said they do not plan to challenge the commission's decision, even though Mayor Tom Bradley approved the project in concept and City Councilwoman Joan Milke Flores said she personally supported it.

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