



Paul Soglin calls for removal of all Philosopher's Grove stones this week



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Citing public safety concerns, Madison Mayor Paul Soglin has instructed city staff to remove all of the granite and bronze stones in the downtown public art installation known as Philosopher's Grove.

Situated at the top of State Street at the intersection with West Mifflin Street, the area and its 44 stones have drawn increased scrutiny from city officials over the past year as business owners and residents have complained about negative behavior in the

area.

In May, 11 of the stones were removed, opening a pathway through the middle of the installation to increase foot traffic. This summer, the Madison Central Business Improvement District has initiated programming at the site to draw more activity to the space. And last month, the city approved removal of a bus stop at the corner of West Mifflin Street and State Street.

Now, at the request of the Madison Police Department, Soglin has directed staff to remove all of the stones this week, initiating the most drastic change to the space yet.

"While I appreciate the continued efforts of the State Street BID to plan events in the area, there continue to be many complaints and concerns raised by business owners, visitors and residents," Soglin said in a press release sent by the mayor's office Monday morning.

The release said officers have had increasing calls to the area for numerous violations including vandalism, fights, assaults and the sale of illegal narcotics. According to the release, police officials have reported that the matter is one of public safety.

Soglin said it "is really unfortunate that this step is needed," as the stones are part of a piece of art that has been part of the grove for more than 10 years.

Wisconsin artist Jill Sebastian created the artwork, which consists of 34 granite stones and 10 hollow bronze forms. Titled "Philosophers' Stones," the piece was commissioned in 2004 and "is conceived as providing low key cues for individuals to behave in interesting, unexpected ways," according to her website.

"When I was initially enlisted to create something, basically I was asked to create a democratic space, a space that was open to all and that you didn't have to buy a cup of coffee in order to spend time on State Street," Sebastian said.

She said the stones were initially a gathering place for children and families when the Madison Children's Museum was located nearby. As that museum moved and properties along the grove became empty, she said the area changed.

"Now that a couple of those storefronts have businesses in them, they're suffering the lack of attention to a public area," Sebastian said. "What I see is I see a convergence of quite a number of factors, of neglect in the cityscape around it and that I have no control over that."

Though consulted for the initial removal of 11 stones, Sebastian said she was not consulted about this full removal and she disagrees with it.

"The solution to the problem isn't taking out the stones," she said, citing pictures she has of people sitting on milk crates in the grove.

"It isn't a matter of whether they have a place to sit or not, it's a behavioral thing."

As for whether she would relocate the stones elsewhere, she said that would be a completely different piece of art and would interrupt the original idea of stones starting at the top of State Street, connecting to Elizabeth Link Peace Park and then to the bottom of Bascom Hill.

"The piece was designed to be site-specific," Sebastian said. "It was meant to encourage the kind of diversity and variety of conversations and the dynamism that happens on State Street."

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Bryna Godar joined The Capital Times in 2014, where she primarily covers city and county government. She previously worked for the Rochester (Minn.) Post-Bulletin and the Minnesota Daily.



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