

# Madison can save the Annie C. Stewart Fountain, but should it?

Ed Treleven | Wisconsin State Journal



*City residents are being asked to weigh in on repair options for the Annie C. Stewart Fountain, shown here in 2020, which is in dire condition. It is located near the intersection of Wingra and Erin streets on Madison's Near West Side.*

## STATE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

The fate of a nearly 100-year-old fountain near the Henry Vilas Zoo, which has fallen badly into disrepair despite repeated attempts to rescue it, could be influenced by local residents who take part in an online survey that's underway as part of an evaluation and plan by a restoration consultant.

Where the Annie C. Stewart Fountain ends up, and how much of it is restored or re-created, are all questions that city officials, the Annie Stewart Working Group and a Chicago consultant, Conservation of Sculpture & Objects Studio (CSOS) are working to determine.

As part of that work, the Madison Arts Commission is soliciting opinions and ideas from the public through [a short survey](#) that will collect data through March 20. The survey could finally help formulate a plan for saving Madison's oldest surviving piece of public art.

Karin Wolf, city arts and culture administrator, said saving the fountain was one of three goals she had hoped to accomplish when she took the job in 2006, and is the only one of those goals left to finish.

"It's been a long time," she said. "It's been 17 years, and it's now going to get done."

With the consultant presenting options and efforts to involve more of the public in the process, Wolf said, getting to a point of finally restoring the fountain "has never been this close, and yet it's so far."

### **Historic piece**

Since 1925, the Stewart fountain has stood near the corner of Wingra and Erin streets on Madison's Near West Side, on a piece of Vilas Park that once served as the zoo's entrance.

The fountain was funded in large part by Mary Stewart, who contributed \$2,000 of its \$5,700 cost as a memorial to her daughter, Annie, who suffered from depression and took her own life in 1905. Annie Stewart was a charter member of Attic Angel, a Madison nonprofit.



*Annie Stewart Fountain 1926*  
*The Annie C. Stewart Fountain as it appeared in 1926.*  
WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Frederick J. Clasgens, a Cincinnati sculptor, built the fountain between 1917 and 1925. A mermaid stands at the center, and water once poured from two Triton figures on the sides, but vandalism and Wisconsin winters have taken their toll and the fountain has for a long time not operated.

The Triton figures have vanished, and overall, the fountain is nearly beyond repair. The city Parks Division has covered the remaining central sculptures during winter months in recent years to keep them from degrading any further.

Though it's off the beaten track along a residential side street, Wolf said, the fountain "belongs to the whole city."

#### **Repair options**

Wolf said that when discussions began anew about ways to save the Stewart fountain, she was asked how much different actions and options would cost — questions she said she could not answer.

That was part of the mission for CSOS, to create a matrix of options for repair or restoration and provide estimated costs for each of those options.

A [preliminary report](#) by CSOS, which will complete its full report after it receives the results of the survey, states that the fountain is in overall "very poor" condition, though the sculpture figures that remain are in good condition.

To blame for the poor condition, CSOS says, are extensive cracking, broken stone and missing material, patches and coatings added over the years that have caused further damage, the growth of plants between cracks, discoloration or deposits from weather conditions, and the corrosion of internal steel supports.

A thorough repair of the fountain where it currently stands is not feasible, CSOS said. A complete rebuilding and restoration in place is the most expensive of the options on the matrix CSOS created, which estimates that cost at up to \$425,000.

But there are several other options that involve minimal or less-extensive repairs or restorations, or moving the fountain to a new site and rebuilding it there. Those options range anywhere from \$154,000 for minimal repair to \$415,000 for relocating and rebuilding the fountain elsewhere.

The survey presents a choice of six options, with costs, and provides space for additional suggestions. Wolf said every comment will be read by the Arts Commission.

#### **Preliminary report**

Wolf said nothing in the CSOS preliminary report surprised her.

"I knew that the condition was very poor, that it would be very expensive to fix it in place," she said.

If relocated, Wolf said, the fountain would be placed not far from its current location, but somewhere more visible. While she said she has generally favored keeping the fountain where it is and restoring it there, she is open to anything.

"I'm okay with any of these options," she said. "The only thing that slightly scares me is if people would choose to do nothing."

Survey comments so far have raised some interesting questions, Wolf said, about the location of the fountain amid a group of effigy mounds where it would not be placed if built today, and the appropriateness of spending large sums of money on a project that does not provide more equal representation of people of color in Madison's public art.

Wolf said she favors providing more public art that allows everyone to be better represented, but also believes the city should "value the pieces that exist."

Once the survey and the final report from CSOS are completed, Wolf said, they'll be discussed by the working group and the Arts Commission. Whatever decision comes out of the Arts Commission would go to the City Council.

Any repair or restoration would likely be funded through a combination of public and privately raised money, Wolf said.