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Buried treasure uncovered at Seattle zoo's entrance

Mural feared lost could be recovered, thanks to new spray technique

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Pete Hall of Surface Cleaning Technologies takes paint off a mural at Woodland Park Zoo on Thursday. The mural was accidentally painted over by city workers after complaints to the city's graffiti hot line. (Kristine Paulsen / P-I)

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The crowd stared at a wall grayer than most Seattle days, doubting the animals hidden in a Woodland Park Zoo tunnel could be recaptured.

Pete Hall, determined to disprove the naysayers, grabbed a nozzle as his employees handed out earplugs. It took him a mere five minutes to expose some elephant parts.

"I am amazed. I am really impressed," said Phinney Ridge resident Greg Zuhl, clapping along with other onlookers Thursday.

Zuhl was referring not to pachyderm anatomy but to the seemingly magical recovery of an iconic zoo-animal mural that he and others feared had been lost to a layer of bureaucratic gray paint.

"Even the neighborhood kids missed it," said Zuhl, one of the original painters of the 14-year-old mural. "They'd come and chalk their own animals. It was kind of sad."

A communication snafu spanning several city departments recently prompted deployment of the "Graffiti Rangers," city-contracted workers who remove graffiti in response to complaints on the city's graffiti hot line. But for reasons still being sorted out, the Rangers painted over the entire mural instead of removing just the graffiti that had triggered local concern.

"Everyone was working with the best of intentions, but something was lost in communication; the end result was unfortunate," said Marybeth Turner, spokeswoman for the Seattle Department of Transportation, which owns the tunnel site.

Hall, general manager of Bellevue-based Surface Cleaning Technologies, lifted hopes after demonstrating how the eco-friendly firm removes unwanted layers of paint while saving what's underneath.

Deploying warmed water mixed with fine, ashlike volcanic crystal, he kept power washing a section of the tunnel wall, just west of the zoo's north parking lot. The wall morphed from gray to chrome, shortly revealing the purple belly of an elephant with yellow and black hind legs and a gray, curvy tail.

"I'm thrilled," Zuhl said. "Nobody really thought we'd get the mural back."

The question now is: Will the neighborhood get the whole mural back or will it have to start from scratch?

"The mural had some damage, and we're trying to sort out what's best," Turner said. "Would it be more effective to restore the old mural by using the (demonstrated) technique, or to have the community do a whole new one?"

The original mural was created in 1994 with help from a \$2,000 city grant and neighborhood volunteers such as Zuhl who helped paint. The mural was designed by artist Josh Howard, now living in New York City.

Hall roughly estimated that it would cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to restore the 13-foot-tall by 50-foot-long mural by removing all the gray paint.

Davis Edwards, sales manager of Northwest Concrete Enterprises in Bellevue, said his firm could help protect the old mural -- or any new one -- with eco-friendly soy-based paint which does not degrade as much as oil-based paint.

"It becomes a cost issue, certainly," Turner said.

The Department of Neighborhoods is conducting an inventory of city murals and graffiti and will work with neighborhoods, transportation officials and

Seattle Public Utilities, which contracts with the Graffiti Rangers, to figure out the next step.

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