

The Salt Lake Tribune

Robert Gehrke: Utah's state flag is fine, but maybe an update wouldn't hurt



(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Robert Gehrke has come around to the idea of replacing Utah's old state flag.



By Robert Gehrke • Published: February 19
Updated: February 19, 2020

Chances are we've all been there, puttering around in an old car, one that maybe does its job, but doesn't really make you proud to drive and doesn't turn a head unless it backfires.

In the eyes of a seemingly growing number of Utah legislators, that's how they feel about the Utah flag. You know the one, the royal blue background with the state symbol — the bald eagle above a gigantic beehive (seriously, don't mess with these bees) with a pair of American flags on either side.

Sure, the old flag still does its job, not that it's a terribly difficult job to do. But it doesn't really instill any state pride. You don't see it on T-shirts the way you see California's flag, or hats like Colorado's. My friend Ryen went and bought a hat with Utah's flag on it just to be contrary.



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Lake Tribune staff portraits. Robert Gehrke.

Last year, Rep. Stephen Handy, R-Bountiful, sponsored a bill to create a commission and a public process to come up with a replacement for the old Birds and Beehives. It passed the House easily but didn't make it through the Senate before the end of the 2019 session.

My colleague Benjamin Wood has covered Flagquest with an almost fanatical passion. To get things kickstarted this year, Sen. Dan McCay, R-Riverton, the Senate sponsor of the flag bill, got in touch with Ben Barnes from the Utah Jazz marketing department to mock up what a new flag might look like.

It's important to note here that the designs Barnes came up with are NOT the flag the state will adopt. The bill that Handy and McCay are running would launch an extensive process of gathering public input and looking at different designs.

"If you don't go through a process of helping people see what our values are ... then the process is bankrupt," McCay said. The process is important enough that McCay wouldn't let me have images of the designs beyond what I could get with my phone.

It's also probably worth noting that Barnes is among the most sought-after graphic artists in the country. As Jazz beat writer and aspiring art critic Andy Larsen highlighted last year, Barnes collaborated on logos for the San Francisco 49ers and Miami Heat. He created the Lion logo for Real Salt Lake and then redesigned the Utah Jazz look, including the yellow-to-red gradient uniforms inspired by Utah's red rocks.

On the side, he has helped redesign logos for the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans, Sacramento Kings and Charlotte Hornets.

The original Utah flag, Barnes said Tuesday, feels like Utah was trying to show the federal government what the federal government wanted to see — the giant eagle and American flags. But it was done at the expense of being distinctively Utah.

He focused on three concepts: Industry, represented in his designs by a beehive or the kind of hexagonal cell in a honeycomb; Perseverance, represented by the rugged Segoe Lily, Utah's state flower; and Leadership, embodied in a compass star, symbolizing inspiration and Utah's status as a crossroads of the West.

Here's the thing: I've never been one of those who wanted to change the flag. I thought it was fine. Not the greatest, but it served its purpose, whatever that is. But these? These were really slick with all the bells and whistles. These are flags you'd wear on a T-shirt, even if they were just prototypes.

Some looked familiar, like the Dutch flag, red at the top, blue at the bottom, but flipped with blue at top and red at the bottom (most worked mainly in red, white and blue) with a symbol in the middle, a simple four-pointed compass star or a stylized sego lily. Some were more basic, a plain blue background with a traditional gold beehive or a white sego lily in a gold hexagon. Others brought in a sort of colored cross design, some a mountain silhouette with a symbol over the top.

And suddenly, like I was slipping into heated seats in a new car, Utah's ragged old flag suddenly felt inadequate. It hadn't changed, but I was a convert and I understood what Ben Wood had been ranting about all these months: We need this.

We need a new flag.

Not only that, we have an opportunity to do it right. Not just with broad public engagement, which is a must, but we could build an entire curriculum for students around it, blending history and art and civics. Solicit entries from the public — people

like Barnes to people like you — then whittle down the field and have two weeks of online voting for the winner.

No, it's not the most important issue that will come up during the 45-day legislative session. No, it won't make Utahns lives better or ease the pain of those in need.

But maybe it would foster a little state pride. And wouldn't it be nice to turn a few heads for a change?



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