

A misunderstanding " or two " appears to be at the root of a city councilor's frustration over a tree planting ceremony at Gathering Place last week. Park officials Friday planted an American Elm grown from a seedling of the Survivor Tree, which withstood the April 1995 bombing that killed 168 people at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The tree was a donation from Oklahoma City's Scissortail Park, which earlier in the year had been given a cottonwood tree by Gathering Place. The donation paid homage to Gathering Place's Reading Tree, the oldest and largest cottonwood in the park. After reading a news report about the donation, City Councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper posted on message Saturday on her Facebook page questioning why the park had chosen to honor survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing but not the victims of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. "ARE YOU KIDDING ME??? I'm not saying the victims of OKC don't need to be honored but we can't even get a memorial for the victims of the massacre whose bodies were dumped in the river right in the backyard of The Gathering Place," Hall-Harper wrote. The city councilor went on to say that she had asked Gathering Place officials to create a memorial for the massacre victims but was denied. "They said it was too controversial," the city councilor wrote. Park Executive Director Tony Moore said Tuesday that he understood how Hall-Harper might interpret the donation as a memorial to the OKC bombing victims. "By no means was it a memorial, and by no means is the Gathering Place saying that one memorial is more important than the other, or one incident is more significant than the other," Moore said. "Any loss of human life is a loss, regardless of the time." Moore said Friday's event was Scissortail's opportunity to give back to Gathering Place for the cottonwood it presented to the Oklahoma City park as a show of unity. "There is no way to accept such a gift and not draw acknowledgement and reverence to what it represents, so that was done," he said. Moore said he spoke with Hall-Harper about her concerns Saturday, telling

her he wanted the park to stay neutral and that he did not want to create themed areas in the park. That did not mean he was opposed to having any kind of recognition of the 1921 Race Massacre at the park, he said. "I will take responsibility if I misunderstood" Hall-Harper's request, Moore said. Hall-Harper said Tuesday that state and local leaders have for too long failed to acknowledge what took place in the Greenwood District in 1921. Gathering Place "which fronts the Arkansas River" is an appropriate place to commemorate the massacre because there are accounts of massacre victims being dumped in the river, she said. "There are historical accounts where there were people all down the Arkansas River miles and miles from Tulsa that were pulling bodies out of the river and burying them on the banks," Hall-Harper said. The massacre, which was known as the Tulsa race riot for generations, occurred May 31-June 1, 1921. Dozens of deaths were confirmed, but some estimate that hundreds of people were killed. Hundreds more were injured, and thousands were left homeless. The prosperous black business district on Greenwood Avenue was destroyed, as was much of the black residential area. Whether bodies were disposed of in the Arkansas River has been a matter of debate since the massacre occurred. Some people believe it is true that bodies were put in the river, but it has never been proved or disproved. Moore stressed that Gathering Place supports Hall-Harper's efforts to draw attention to the massacre and that he is open to discussing how the park can recognize it. Gathering Place has already heard from other members of the African-American community about how that might be accomplished. "We are having very healthy discussions in defining and understanding what could be proposed and what could be a possibility," Moore said. Gathering Place has already taken steps to acknowledge the 1921 Race Massacre in the time capsule it is creating. "We have a journal that was given to us by Hannibal (Johnson)" a historical journal documentation of the massacre and his perspective," Moore said. Johnson is an author who has written extensively about the massacre.

He is also a member of the Race Massacre Centennial Commission. The time capsule will also include recollections of the event from Lessie Randle, one of the last survivors of the massacre. The city of Tulsa and the local philanthropic community is working to raise \$30 million to expand and renovate the Greenwood Cultural Center as part of the commemoration of the 1921 Race Massacre. Twitter: @aWorldofKC Kevin Canfield 918-645-5452 kevin.canfield @tulsaworld.com Be the first to know Get local news delivered to your inbox! Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.