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**Statue**

4 messages

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**David Nestler** <dnestler@townofsylva.org> Wed, Jun 17, 2020 at 9:09 PM  
To: "brianmcmahan@jacksonnc.org" <brianmcmahan@jacksonnc.org>, "Mickey Luker (mickeyluker@jacksonnc.org)" <mickeyluker@jacksonnc.org>, "Ron Mau (ronmau@jacksonnc.org)" <ronmau@jacksonnc.org>, Gayle Woody <gaylewoody@jacksonnc.org>, "Boyce Dietz (boycedeit@jacksonnc.org)" <boycedeit@jacksonnc.org>

First off I want to make it very clear that I am writing you all as a citizen of Jackson County and not as a Sylva Commissioner.

I was disappointed in the responses I read in this week's Smoky Mountain News article. I'm not going to try to convince you that your statue in our town is racist because it doesn't matter whether or not *you* see it as racist. What needs to be understood here is that a large portion of your community, especially people of color, are personally hurt by it's presence. Any defense of it is painful and insulting to those people. I saw a comment a friend of mine made online the other day, a person of color that I grew up with. Hearing her describe her shame in having this statue in our town hurt me on a whole new level. I felt so ashamed to represent a town that has this statue in it. I never had to really think about that statue when I was growing up. And none of you had to either and it shows. She had to think about it though. And she has to sit by and watch y'all try to pawn the decision off onto a committee. We know this committee is just a way for y'all to avoid personal controversy. I know there are people out there in our community who don't think this statue is racist and that it symbolizes their heritage and that they feel hurt by people wanting to take the statue down. But their attachment to this statue doesn't give them any right to have it located in the most prominent spot in our community. Relocating it to a place appropriate for a memorial is the right thing to do. This statue as it is now is not a solemn memorial to people who gave their lives for a war. You don't put memorials up on a pedestal. You put memorials in a somber place of reflection. Monuments mean something entirely different, especially ones that went up during the Jim Crow era. Monuments are made to glorify something and they are placed on pedestals in places of prominence. This is not an appropriate way to remember war. Please realize you're on the losing side of history defending this statue or even just being silent about it. These Jim Crow era statues are being exposed for the symbols of hate that they are and they won't last forever. These statues are not an accurate history lesson you want to be teaching your kids. Moving them to a proper place is far from destroying that history. In fact, it is a far more accurate telling of history to NOT have this statue where it is. There were 261 slaves in this county on the 1860 census. That's more people than died fighting for the confederacy from this county.

You, as community leaders, are in charge of looking out for the most vulnerable members of your community even if they are in the minority. To defend a symbol of such hate in front of your community is wrong. I know not everybody sees it as hateful. Those people are white. Those people have family who might have fought for the confederacy. And sure, they get to see that statue as heritage if they so choose. But why should they ever get to have that statue looming over our town? And no, a plaque isn't going to fix the problem. The only context that matters is where that statue is located. Any words you place next to it are just going to be overshadowed by the statue's prominent location. Crowding the space up there with other statues to counter this one would look ridiculous and would end up prolonging this debate, making us rehash it in our minds every time we look up at the library. Putting a Cherokee statue up there would also be controversial as cultural appropriation is also not okay, especially in a county named after a person responsible for Native American genocide. I think something natural/non-human related needs to go up there. Please take a stand and relocate this statue so this community CAN move on to lifting people up. As long as that statue is there it will be continue to be controversial and divisive, which is precisely what it was intended to do when it was made.

Thank you for your time,

**Gayle Woody - Commissioner** <gaylewoody@jacksonnc.org>  
To: David Nestler <dnestler@townofsylva.org>

Dear David,

I appreciate that you took the time to email your disapproval. You expressed your points very well. The issue of the monument is on the agenda for our next meeting, Tuesday.

I have received letters expressing concern like yours and as you can imagine, other letters from some folks who want the monument to stay. I recently spoke with a black woman whose family has lived in Jackson County since slavery. In fact, her great grandparents were slaves. We walked together at the protest for Black Lives Matter and she said if it was up to her - to leave it because it has been there her whole life. She said "thinking folks know better." So ALL people of color do not see it the same way. Yet, other black citizens want it taken down right now as you do. You make a very good point about the shame of having the monument where it is.

How do we resolve the issue in a way that respects divergent viewpoints?

You and many others may feel different viewpoints aren't worthy of respect. I suggested a task force as a vehicle to allow various sides to express their viewpoints. It is important people are heard. As an elected official I feel a responsibility to represent ALL our citizens, even those I don't agree with.

I did not suggest the task force to "kick it down the road" or avoid controversy. It does need to be addressed NOW, and we will have to take a stand by voting on the task force suggestions, whatever they are. Yet it won't be just my opinion, it will be recommendations of diverse citizens.

I think most citizens can find common ground in the fact that they value freedom and the rights of individuals.

How do we take that common value and create an opportunity to resolve this issue of the monument? I would like to see it moved, but where would that be that would not offend those like your friend of color who feels shame that the statue is in Sylva. No resident should feel shame here. Do you have suggestions for a new location?

My hope is that a task force would develop a plan to resolve this crisis in a respectful way. It could be a starting point for addressing the other real changes needed in our community so that all citizens feel respected and valued, all the time. I recently finished reading "Leadership" by Doris Kearns Godwin. In the part about Lincoln, she tells how he brought together his rivals and how they learned to work together for the nation. If we can work together as a community to solve this issue it could prevent polarization of future concerns.

We mentioned at the Board work session Tuesday about requesting the Sylva Board to choose someone to serve on the task force.

I respect you, David. You made very good points that I will take to heart. We have it on the agenda for Tuesday.

Thank you for your thoughtful words,  
Gayle

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Thu, Jun 18, 2020 at 6:12 AM

**David Nestler** <dnestler@townofsylva.org>

To: Gayle Woody - Commissioner <gaylewoody@jacksonnc.org>

Gayle,

Thanks for taking the time to respond! I respect your opinion very much on this matter and I'm glad that you all are addressing the issue. I know that you are a very open-minded, kind, and thoughtful person. Sylva would love to pick a representative for this task force if you all so choose to go that route and allow us to contribute. As for suggestions for a new location...I always thought that Bicentennial Park, on Keener Street, right below the library was a good spot. It's a somber place befitting of a memorial. However, lately I am not so sure that I want it there anymore because it is still within Sylva city limits. I do understand that there is a proper place for these memorials and that perhaps they do deserve a home somewhere but I just don't want to be one of the few towns left in the country that still have a Jim Crow era confederate statue. I've heard that there is a confederate cemetery somewhere in the county...in Whittier perhaps...don't know if this is true?? If so then I think that would be an excellent place.

I also just want to relay one more story to you. I don't know if you remember or not but last year Airbnb magazine did a story on the Smoky Mountains and the writer of the article came and stayed with Suzanne and I in our Airbnb. She toured all the towns in the area and she fell in love with Sylva over all the others...she is even thinking of moving here! Shortly after she left Sylva the magazine sent a photographer from NYC to come photograph all the places she visited to put in the magazine. I met up with him one night and he told me that the magazine wanted to use a photo from on top of our courthouse steps as the cover photo for the magazine. This magazine has worldwide circulation and Sylva was going to be on the front cover. However, as soon as they found out that the statue in the photo was a confederate monument they immediately decided otherwise. Him and I were talking about it and he explained that they could never mail this magazine to a family of color if that was on the cover. I agreed completely with his decision and it made me ask myself that if they know better than to even send a photo of this statue to people of color then what are we doing making people live beneath it? Anyway, just another example of how this statue hurts even the economy of Sylva.

Thanks for listening Gayle.

David

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**From:** Gayle Woody - Commissioner <gaylewoody@jacksonnc.org>

**Sent:** Wednesday, June 17, 2020 11:44 PM

**To:** David Nestler <dnestler@townofsylva.org>

**Subject:** Re: Statue

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Thu, Jun 18, 2020 at 7:46 AM

**Gayle Woody - Commissioner** <gaylewoody@jacksonnc.org>

To: David Nestler <dnestler@townofsylva.org>

David,

Oh, my. What a powerful story about the impact of the statue. Even more than the economic impact, the message those people took from the fact we have a confederate statue sent a message I don't want folks who live here or who visit take away with them.

We must find the solution now.

Please stay in touch. Your insight is helpful.

Gayle

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