

Charlottesville City Council Worksession
Native American Panel Discussion Regarding the Disposition of the Lewis, Clark and
Sacajawea Statue
November 15, 2019, 8:30 a.m.
Carver Recreation Center, 233 4th Street, Charlottesville, VA

At its June 17, 2019 meeting, Charlottesville City Council directed staff to convene a meeting of Native American representatives to discuss the disposition of the statue on West Main Street. The approved schematic design for the West Main Street Streetscape Plan calls for the statue to be moved about 20 feet to the southwest from its current location. The work session will inform Charlottesville City Council's decision whether to move the statue as proposed, re-contextualize it, or to remove it from the street entirely.

A Shoshone-Bannock tribe-led smudging ceremony was conducted outside of the meeting venue before attendees moved inside for the discussion. Members of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe are familial descendants of Sacajawea.

Mayor Nikuyah Walker called the meeting to order and welcomed attendees at 9:10 a.m. with the following Councilors present: Mayor Nikuyah Walker, Vice Mayor Heather Hill, Ms. Kathy Galvin and Mr. Mike Signer. Absent: Dr. Wes Bellamy.

Local members of the Monacan Indian Nation, which gained Federal recognition in 2018 and is headquartered in Amherst County served as panelists representing Eastern Native Americans: Chief Kenneth Branham, elder Bertie Branham and member Teresa Pollak. Ms. Walker asked that Mr. Anthony Guy Lopez, who has been involved with local native education and initiatives, introduce himself and sit on the panel with the Eastern tribal representatives. Mr. Lopez introduced himself and Ms. Grace "Softdeer" Hays (of Chickasaw descent) introduced herself and sat with the panel.

Sacajawea familial descendants Rose Ann Abrahamson, Dustina Abrahamson, Willow Abrahamson and Emma George traveled from Idaho to participate in the discussion and share information about the representation of their ancestor.

Chief Branham welcomed the Shoshone-Bannock tribe on behalf of the Monacan Indian Nation.

A brief presentation on the history of the statue was made by City staff Jeff Werner, Historic Preservation and Design Planner, and Jeanette Janiczek, Urban Construction Initiative Program Manager.

Ms. Rose Ann Abrahamson shared that her ancestor Sacajawea has statues all over the country dedicated to her, but the statue in Charlottesville is the worst that the family has seen and she was shocked when she saw it. She reviewed the history of the times when the statue was erected, and advised that it is an image of the past when women did not have rights and indigenous people among others were not viewed as human beings, and is not reflective of today's society. She advised that images should reflect integrity, equity and tolerance in public forums, bringing people together.

Ms. Galvin commented about the idea of a new image to be made, using the same historical figures to replace the current statue. The Shoshone Bannock panelists were in agreement that this is the request.

Ms. Dustina Abrahamson shared various perspectives of Sacajawea: as a teenager, taken away from her home and to an unfamiliar man, and bartered off to an older man. Her contribution to the nation was inspiring, sharing the values of helping, being compassionate and welcoming. She advised that as a first time seeing the statue, it brought shame and made her “feel sadness and worthlessness”, which was not how she was brought up. She advised that it is not a proper depiction. She advised that this country was built upon the contributions of all types of people and a monument should be representative of unity.

Ms. Willow Abrahamson spoke about seeing the statue for the first time. She also felt that it minimized Sacajawea’s contribution to the pioneering of the United States, putting her in a “monkeyed position”. She noted that women were revered. She emphasized the importance of truth-telling, humility, kindness, integrity and love. She advised that Sacajawea was a leader and communicator, and that the statue depicts her ancestor in a diminished role. As a mother, she advised that she would not want her children to see this statue. She asked that there be a major consideration that the depiction not be displayed in such a public manner. She advised that the statue depicts a lie.

Ms. Emma George asked for clarity for things to be right. She advised that Sacajawea had knowledge that was re-written by Lewis and Clark regarding geography and botany. She shared that Sacajawea came from a democratic society where all had a voice and worked together. Elders were held in esteem for their wisdom and each life is treated as precious. Sacajawea represented peace and unity and was recognized as a sergeant in the Army. Ms. George advised that when she viewed the statue, she felt humiliated. She asked that the statue be removed because it does not depict the truth. She spoke about changing the image of Charlottesville and that making a change would benefit future generations.

After further comments, Ms. Walker opened up discussion for comments from local indigenous people.

Chief Branham advised that Sacajawea should be in front with Lewis and Clark behind in the statue. He advised that the statue does not depict true history. Speaking for the Monacan Indian Nation, he advised that he would want to see a depiction that he would be proud to show his grandchildren. He asked that this effort get more than lip service.

Ms. Teresa Pollak spoke of paper genocide of the Monacan People. She advised that the truth be told about local natives, who have been around since before Sacajawea. She advised that the Shoshone members’ wishes to have the statue removed should be granted.

Chief Branham gave additional background of the Monacan Indian Nation, and opportunities that were historically denied. He recommended addressing the current statue issue, then moving forward with other decisions.

Ms. Walker advised that it would be a challenge for her to agree to put up a new statue of Lewis and Clark, but she understands that others may feel differently.

Mr. Signer asked for clarification of a previous email sent by Rose Ann.

Willow followed up on comments about contributions from African-Americans and advised that they should also be honored, and the hope is to not overshadow that. She advised that the discussion is about truth-telling and one group should not be depicted more than another.

Rose Ann stated, “We’re here to address humanity.” She spoke about the Confederate statues and the perception of Charlottesville from people on the outside looking in, wondering if it is a safe place because of the events of August 2017.

Ms. Charletta Anderson spoke about an additional individual named York, of African ancestry, who traveled on the Lewis, Clark and Sacajawea expedition, and suggested including him in a future memorial with Lewis, Clark and Sacajawea.

Dustina agreed and added background about learning about York as a child, advising that it was inspiring to see another person of color, representing different ethnic backgrounds.

Ms. Galvin asked about the moving of the statue, and asked the Historic Preservation Planner to explain logistical aspects.

Mr. Signer asked about the statue being moved to the Lewis and Clark monumental area, and how to do that respectfully. Rose Ann advised that there could be a correlating exhibit to show that the statue represented a perspective, but to add context showing the truth of Sacajawea’s contributions, and the current plaque should be included in the exhibit. Willow shared that the new location should also share the story of why the statue was moved, why it was placed in the Center, that the statue represents supremacy, explaining the disparities between different ethnic groups at the time.

Mr. Signer asked about the “tracking” explanation of Sacajawea’s stance on the statue. Rose Ann advised that ten years ago when the plaque was added to contextualize the statue, there was an unwillingness to move the statue. At that time the decision was to add a plaque. Mr. Guy Lopez added that there was no consideration given ten years ago to moving the statue. He advised that at that time there was hope for more relationship building and education opportunities involving indigenous peoples. He spoke about discussions about a UVA Center for Indigenous Studies.

Ms. Grace Hays added comments from Rosina Abrahamson which indicated that perhaps adding the plaque did more harm than good by making others think that Sacajawea’s familial descendants liked the statue.

Mr. Jeff Werner shared input that he has heard from local constituents. He reviewed the various types of historical designations. The statue is not defined as a contributing structure to

that historic district; therefore, it would not be subject to review from the Board of Architectural Review.

Discussion ensued about the treatment of the statue removal.

City Attorney John Blair advised that it would take a Resolution to remove the statue and an appropriation for the funds to remove as “personal property disposition” by City Council.

Councilors asked about logistical elements of moving the statue during other construction in the area or as a separate project. Mr. Signer mentioned addressing recent events in the community with the West Main park location, as well as honoring history. Ms. Walker cautioned against enveloping the story of a group of people in a story about the whole people. She advised that honoring a particular group of people does not mean the exclusion of others.

The meeting recessed at 11:10 a.m.

The meeting reconvened 11:40 a.m.

Rose Ann asked Council to confirm whether the agreement is to move the statue.

Mr. Signer advised that it should be moved to the Lewis and Clark park. He suggested that it may be a decision for the next Council.

Ms. Walker advised that it should be a decision of the current Council, with staff informing Council of costs by the second meeting in December.

Ms. Galvin asked that staff write a resolution to move the statue, and confirm that the Lewis and Clark center would accept the statue. She advised that the move should coincide with Phase 1 of the West Main Streetscape Project.

Mr. Branham asked for a date when action may be taken.

Mr. John Blair advised that this meeting was appropriately noticed, and that the Council could pass a resolution, which requires only one reading, at the current meeting. Rose Ann recalled that the public was given time to consider since the Council meeting in June.

Emma advised that she would like for the statue to be moved as soon as possible. She advised that the community was invited to attend this meeting to give input. She asked that a resolution be proposed today to move the statue.

Mr. Paul Oberdorfer gave input about the West Main Streetscape Project timeline.

Mr. Signer left the meeting at 11:58 a.m.

Ms. Walker recessed the meeting at 12:00 p.m. for participants to get lunch and return for continued discussion.

The meeting reconvened at 12:41 p.m. with the following Councilors in attendance: Walker, Hill, Bellamy, and Galvin.

Rose Ann emphasized the historic significance of this meeting.

Ms. George, on behalf of Sacajawea and all native people, read a statement about truth-telling for the benefit of the future.

Chief Branham spoke of the hope of change. He advised of the willingness to work together

After comments from Ms. Hays, Mr. Lopez, Dr. Bellamy and Ms. Walker, Ms. Walker read a resolution prepared by Mr. Blair.

Dr. Bellamy moved the resolution, seconded by Ms. Hill.

After further panel discussion, Ms. Galvin made a friendly amendment to resolution to include: “and other memorializations”, referring to a potential replacement for the Lewis, Clark and Sacajawea statue. The amendment was accepted by Dr. Bellamy and seconded by Ms. Hill.

Ms. Galvin expressed concern about the resolution not being considered at an upcoming City Council meeting because she felt that the public had not been notified that there would be a vote. Rose Ann advised that as a visitor to the City, she saw a tremendous amount of publicity for the event. Ms. Hays advised that this is the second public meeting that she has attended this year for this topic.

Councilors expressed agreement that the statue should be removed, but Ms. Galvin expressed concern with the process.

Ms. Walker advised that although the process for this decision is unconventional, it is within the letter of the law according to City Attorney John Blair.

Ms. Galvin made a Motion for suspension of the rules to allow for public comment. The motion was seconded by Dr. Bellamy and all councilors were in favor (Ayes: Bellamy, Galvin, Hill, Walker. Absent: Signer).

Ms. Virginia Hill spoke in favor of Council moving forward with a decision. She questioned why Council would hold this meeting if they were not prepared to make a decision.

Mr. Zach (?), citizen of the Cherokee Nation, from Virginia Beach, born in Oklahoma, shared information about policies of Andrew Jackson, influenced by the writings of Thomas Jefferson, that forced the removal of his people from their home in Oklahoma. He read statistics from the National Congress of American Indians. He shared that no natives should feel uncomfortable on native land. He also shared the meeting notice indicated an intent to make a decision for moving forward. He advised that the statue makes him feel unwelcome.

Another speaker was moved that Sacajawea's descendants traveled to Charlottesville and by Ms. Hays's story about differences. She acknowledged the difficult decision.

Ms. Susan Manasian, local pastor, advised that she understood this to be a public meeting. She recommended that there be no fear in making a decision.

Dr. Bellamy made a Motion to unsuspend the meeting rules and close public comment to return to the motion on the floor. The motion was seconded by Ms. Galvin, with all in favor (Ayes: Bellamy, Galvin, Hill, Walker. Absent: Signer).

Ms. Galvin made comments about procedures, content, and compelling public statement. She advised that the substance of the content outweighed the need to be rigid in process, and that she would vote for the resolution.

Ms. Walker called the question, with the addition of the friendly amendment. Council by the following vote APPROVED the following resolution 4-0 (Ayes: Bellamy, Galvin, Hill, Walker. Absent: Signer).

**“RESOLUTION DIRECTING STAFF TO PREPARE
REMOVAL OF THE STATUE LOCATED ON WEST MAIN STREET DEPICTING
SACAJAWEA, MERIWETHER LEWIS, AND WILLIAM CLARK**

WHEREAS, the Charlottesville City Council convened a work session on November 15, 2019 to discuss the statue depicting Sacajawea, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark located on West Main Street in the City of Charlottesville, Virginia; and

WHEREAS, the Charlottesville City Council received input on the statue from representatives of the Shoshone and Monacan tribes including lineal descendants of Sacajawea; and

WHEREAS, the lineal descendants of Sacajawea expressed their extreme displeasure with the depiction of Sacajawea in the statue located on West Main Street.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Charlottesville, Virginia that staff is directed to present the Council with a plan for the removal of the statue from West Main Street and such plan shall include a cost estimate for the removal of the statue as well as options for the disposal of the statue; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Charlottesville that staff is directed to present a plan to the Council of a new statue of Sacajawea and other memorializations of Virginia native people with primary consultation from indigenous people on the design of the statue and other memorializations of Virginia native people.”

The Native tribes made presentations of thanks at the end of the meeting.

Ms. Walker thanked all participants and adjourned the meeting at 2:11 p.m.