

Gadfly lands on his Columbus decision

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument October 5, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument* 

*“The (his)stories we tell shape the lives that we lead”
Gadfly*

Whew! Gadfly has lost a week in his plan to wrap up his Columbus thread.

Maybe no wonder. A bleepshow of a presidential debate. Then the president Covid'd and hospitalized. Double whammy.

It's no wonder that Gadfly lost his focus.

It has been a week since he wrote you on this topic.

Remember that 120+ residents (the number is no doubt higher now) **petitioned the Mayor** to remove the Columbus monument in the Rose Garden. The Mayor appointed a “Task Force” (number and membership unknown) to consider the matter. We don't know what the Mayor's “charge” was. The status of the Task Force deliberations is unknown.



Though the movement to de-heroicize Columbus long predates this petition, it comes during the post-GeorgeFloyd national reckoning with race that Gadfly has been writing about, and he sees the petition in that context.

Gadfly has been slow-walking, trying to model a process of thinking, inviting you to think along with him. And to disagree if you want. Even coming to a different conclusion. But show your reasons. Gadfly's mind is not closed.

Gadfly **outlined** the arguments for and the arguments against removing the monument, listed 8 possible options for Task Force recommendation or Mayoral action, and has begun thinking through that list — role

playing. At the present moment, as you can see below, Gadfly has whittled the options down to 4.

- ~~deny the request, allow the monument to stand.~~
- issue a formal statement agreeing with the negative view of Columbus, disavowing his actions relative the Native Americans, but letting the monument stand as is.
- add additional “educational” information about Columbus and his legacy at the monument site.
- add a monument celebrating Indigenous people to the monument site as balance of perspective on 1492.
- replace the monument with a new one representing the complex nature of Columbus’s legacy.
- ~~replace the monument with a monument to an Italian of less ambiguous heroic stature.~~
- ~~move the monument to private property.~~
- ~~remove the monument.~~

Gadfly believes in the educational function of public art, believes that the whole story of Columbus’s impact on history needs to be told, and thus sees a positive aspect in each of the remaining 4 options on his list for they provide occasion for a teachable moment.

But we still must prioritize.

Let’s take the 4 options in Gadfly’s ascending order of favorability.

1) The Mayor (or Gadfly role playing the Mayor) could issue a formal statement agreeing with the negative view of Columbus, disavowing his actions relative to the Indigenous peoples, but letting the monument stand as is in respect to the modest good-faith motive of Bethlehem’s original Italian American sponsors and the original 1992 City Council deliberation and decision. Such a decision, such a statement gives something to both sides, and the statement might have educational impact at the moment, but, of course, it would soon become old news and then no news and would have no impact on future visitors to the monument. Gadfly sees this as the weakest option in this last tier of options.

2) The Mayor (or Gadfly role playing the Mayor) could work toward (ha! that means find the \$\$\$) replacing the monument with a single new one representing the complex nature of Columbus's achievement and legacy. This is a better option in the sense that it is an attempt to tell the whole story in an enduring way, it need not obliterate the Italian American viewpoint, and it would include the Indigenous viewpoint. The downside is cost. In his role-playing of the Mayor, the Gadfly is starting to feel the pinch of practicality. His idealism wavering as the rubber meets the road. Would there be grants? Would there be donors?

3) The Mayor (or Gadfly role playing the Mayor) could add additional contrasting educational information about Columbus and his legacy at the monument site by way of a marker/sign (modest \$\$\$). a move that seems the common way that cities are addressing this issue, for instance, regarding **Confederate**



monuments. The original monument retains its identity, yet the whole story is told for one willing to read about it. The downside is that by its very look as an add-on and by the very fact that the contrasting story has to be read in small print rather than sometimes grasped visually in an instant, the material on the marker/sign will always in reality seem secondary.

4) The Mayor (or Gadfly role playing the Mayor) could work toward (money, money, money) adding a monument to Indigenous people adjacent to the monument site (for discussion purposes, say 20-25 yards away) to balance the perspective on 1492. This is perhaps the best option in that it would have more power to teach than a marker/sign, in that it enables the work and the ideas of the original sponsor on the existing monument to stand in its own identity but establishes a significant dialog with it. Such a juxtaposition would have educational impact, would provide a teachable moment, especially if the new adjacent monument spoke to the significant (30%) Latino population in Bethlehem, people whose heritage is the very land Columbus "discovered" and he and his followers decimated. This would be a significant gesture of inclusion of

the Latino population and a dramatic anti-racist act. Big bucks, yes, but big impact, big pay-off. This would be a bold, courageous move. One worthy of an anti-racist city.

So here's where Gadfly ends up.

What might seem at first to some as a nuisance petition by petty activists with nothing better to do than make trouble where there was none could even be turned into an occasion for a recognition that Italian Americans and Latinos and, in fact, all People of Color are kin: they share a common heritage of oppression and discrimination in America (Italian Americans were **once considered Black**). And that Bethlehem values and honors that diversity.

Gadfly would love to be a gadfly on the wall at the Task Force meetings and hopes they are recording their meetings in a detailed way. He loves to observe how people argue and is looking forward to compare thought processes with them.

He looks forward to doing the same with you.

It might not seem like it, but the Columbus monument is a significant issue, a significant opportunity.

The Bethlehem Gadfly