

Ok, what do you think will happen with the Columbus monument removal request?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 21, 2020 4 Minutes

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

Let's recapitulate.

A group of at least a 120+ residents signed **a letter** addressed to the Mayor and City Council requesting the removal of the Christopher Columbus monument in the Rose Garden.

The monument was presented to the City in 1992 on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's successful trans-Atlantic voyage by the local chapter of UNICO, an Italian American service organization.

The Mayor appointed a committee (membership unknown to Gadfly) to consider the request. It is not clear that Council is formally involved. It is also not clear to Gadfly whether the committee is "advisory" or whether it has been entrusted with the decision about how to respond to the request.

Rationale for the removal of the Columbus statue includes:

- Columbus did not discover the Americas: he accidentally happened upon them while searching for a westward route to Asia.
- Columbus illegally claimed possession; the Americas were already inhabited by Indigenous populations with rich and ancient cultures.
- The monument, therefore, literally espouses misinformation to the public; it does not tell the truth, the whole truth.
- Though some Italian Americans revere Columbus, signers of Italian descent call on these members of the Italian American community to



reconsider Columbus's status as a "hero" and join in honoring Indigenous lives.

- Columbus is no hero; his legacy has been shaped by a self-serving Eurocentric education system that has promoted false information, the erasure of Indigenous stories, and the devaluing of Indigenous life.
- Primary sources document Columbus's horrific crimes against the Indigenous peoples: he is responsible for the rape of countless women and children, the torture of entire communities, forcing human beings into slavery, killing countless others, wiping out whole cultures.
- Columbus precipitated a genocide against the Indigenous population of the Americas.
- Columbus literally has nothing to do with the United States; a better founding moment would be Jamestown 1607.
- Bethlehem prides itself on going through a cultural renaissance, but we cannot make genuine progress in this area if we insist upon honoring as a hero a man who committed heinous acts of violence against Indigenous people.
- Bethlehem celebrates diversity, and a monument to Columbus does not belong in such a community.
- Columbus does not represent the values people in our community strive to live by.
- Bethlehem needs to lead Pennsylvania and its sister cities in correcting an unjust spotlight.

The counter-argument: rationale for the original placement of the Columbus monument as well as not making a change now includes:

- If it weren't for Columbus, "we" wouldn't exist.
- Columbus and the people who followed him deserve thanks for giving us the opportunity to voice our opinions.
- To remove the monument would be to give in to the excesses of the present-day "cancel culture."
- We're all human, no one is perfect, everybody has faults.

- Jefferson had slaves, Washington too — where would we stop canceling?
- What if we learn something bad about **Pulaski**?
- Modern critics of Columbus dwell too much on the negative.
- History is written by the winners.
- Columbus was a man of his time; it is unfair to judge him by our moral standards.
- We can't change the past.
- Darwin's survival of the fittest applies to cultures too; the Arawak/Tainos were not fit cultures to survive.
- Columbus shouldn't be blamed for what others did after him.
- Most city residents informally polled both then and now have no problem with the monument.
- The monument has existed without incident for almost 30 years; it has "tenure."
- Even granting the monument has the power to create problems, it is located in a spot where it is unlikely to do so.
- The monument is little known, has virtually no visibility, the petitioners make a problem where there is none.
- The monument is limited in scope, focusing just on Columbus as navigator, as sea man, qualities for which he can be justly praised.
- Columbus is emblematic of the millions of immigrants, and their pursuit of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and hope for a better life.
- Columbus has become symbolic of the Italian American experience, heritage, and contributions to the United States.
- The desire for Italian Americans to honor their culture is part of our history too and shouldn't be erased.
- To remove or revise the monument now would be to offend Italian Americans.

Possible committee conclusions, the range of options:

- 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 reminds you that what makes this Columbus monument issue significant is the connection it has to our desire to eliminate systemic racism in our country triggered by the murder of George Floyd.

The requestors are asking for the removal of a monument to a racist.

You know Gadfly loves to lay out a situation for you from multilevel perspectives and then ask you to role play the decision-maker.

He has now laid out a dozen posts encouraging you to think about the decision before the Mayor.

Gadfly understands that the Mayor’s committee meets for the second time today. We might learn their decision. but then again Gadfly would not be surprised if the committee does not finish its work today. This is a tricky issue.

What do you see as the outcome of the resident request for removal of the Columbus statue?

Is this Columbus monument a stain on our city?