

Durham's battle with Confederate statues

By Ramishah Maruf
Durham Voice Arts Editor

Durham is forming a committee to find out what to do with Confederate symbols in the city, and anyone from the county can apply to join.

After protesters toppled a Confederate statue in August, the city began the process of forming a commission to find out exactly what to do with both the base of the statue and the remaining Confederate symbols.

The committee, led by Wendy Jacobs, Durham County Board of Commissioners chair, and Mayor Steve Schewel, has two main goals. The first is to gain input for the disposition of the toppled statue, as well as its base that still sits outside the Durham County building at 200 E. Main Street. The second is to assess what other Confederate public symbols may be on display throughout the city.

"We want to have conversations about history and talk about difficult topics," Jacobs said. "We want to ensure people share their ideas and give their input on white supremacy and the legacy of slavery in our country, and then talk about how we move forward as a community."

There will be designated spots for people with expertise on the history of topics such as slavery, the Civil Rights Movement and the Jim Crow era. Anyone from Durham County can apply, and Jacobs hopes for a diverse and representative group.

"It's really important for us to change the narrative and confront the history of slavery, racism and white supremacy because it impacts everyone," Jacobs said. "It holds our country back in so many ways."

Jacobs said the City Council and County Board of Commissioners are "moving forward with the application process and formation." The application will be open for a 30-day period; five people will be appointed by the City Council and five people will be appointed by the County Commissioners. Schewel and Jacobs will recommend two co-chairs.

Jacobs hopes the committee will begin work in May and present recommendations for the monument in November



Durham Chair of County Commissioners Wendy Jacobs (right) and Mayor Steve Schewel (middle) are spearheading the new committee on Confederate monuments in Durham. Anyone from the county can apply to join. Photo courtesy of Wendy Jacobs

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The protesters who toppled the monument in August put Durham in the national news regarding Confederate statues. They felt that it represented white supremacy. This past week, the Durham defense attorney dropped all of the charges.

Jolil Smoke, a 2017 graduate of Hillside High School, was present at a Durham rally a week after the statue was pulled down to counter-protest the Ku Klux Klan. Smoke said she believes the committee will make the right decision in what to do with the remaining

Confederate symbols.

"Durham is a very cultured city, and throughout history they have been an exception to the intense racism of North Carolina," Smoke said. "The people are participating and they're doing what they can."

Jacobs said she believes the events of Charlottesville, Virginia, where a far-right group protested the removal of a Confederate statue leading to a death, impacted many people in Durham and across North Carolina.

"Confederates were essentially people

that protected the institution of slavery, and that's what the livelihood of the South was," UNC-Chapel Hill junior Angum Check said. "(People argue that) the Civil War was fought over states' rights. Yes, it was fought for states' rights to keep slaves."

Jacobs said she has seen more people in Durham become aware of Confederate symbols in the city and what they stand for.

"Before Charlottesville, people may not even have been aware of the existence of the Confederate statue in their city," Jacobs said.

Smoke said she saw the anger and passion of the people of Durham when she protested over the summer, and had suggestions for the upcoming committee. "We shouldn't forget what happened, but we should look at it in a different light," Smoke said. "There should be some type of plaque explaining how the outlook has evolved, and that it's unacceptable now. Just being there in its natural state gives the wrong message. We should make the message clear about what it stands for."

"We need to fulfill the promise of who we are in this country, to confront our past and figure out how we're going to address this history."

— Wendy Jacobs

APPLY TO THE COMMITTEE

Go to durhamnc.gov and click on Boards, Committees and Commissions under the Government section.