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Happy medium

## **Confederate monument committee votes to keep statue with additional plaque, informational videos**

By Julian Gill Staff Writer Feb 2, 2018

The Confederate monument will stay put, but many questions linger about the proposed additions around the 100-year-old statue.

The monument advisory committee voted 12-3 Tuesday to keep the Confederate monument on the south side of the Courthouse on the Square lawn with an additional plaque and videos about the history of slavery in Denton. The plaque is supposed to include language denouncing slavery and segregation in Denton County.

The committee's decision was a culmination of two and a half months of discussion and research into the meaning behind the statue, which some feel symbolizes racism and pro-slavery ideals. Other county residents feel removing the statue would be an attempt to erase or revise history.

Denton residents Paul Meltzer, Willie Hudspeth and Alfred Sanchez cast the dissenting votes, though they all said they generally supported the proposed additions to the monument. Hudspeth and Sanchez told reporters after the vote they misunderstood what they were voting on. Meltzer said he would have voted for the proposal with more extensive discussions about the plaque's language.

"It would not have taken very much to get to a 15-0 vote," said Meltzer, who is running for Place 6 on the Denton City Council.

The meeting, which started at 9 a.m. in the Commissioners Courtroom, lasted roughly two and a half hours.

Committee chairman John Baines asked all available committee members to attend Commissioners Court on Tuesday to present the plan.

Baines initially supported moving the monument and replacing it with a memorial for all Denton County veterans.

But with 10 of the 15 committee members opposed to moving the statue, he presented the plan as a middle ground.

"I felt like we needed something that was more inclusive rather than exclusive," Baines said.

He said County Commissioner Andy Eads initially gave him the idea of a new plaque and video monitors on both sides of the monument.

He said they discussed the concept on Monday when he approached Eads with his idea of the memorial for all Denton County veterans.

Baines, who was appointed to the committee by Eads, said the new plaque would sit under the monument's arch and denounce slavery.

It's supposed to be large enough to read the words from a short distance, so that "any time you take a picture of that monument, you take a picture of that alternate language," Baines said.

The plaque's size also would block access to the walkway that leads to the courthouse steps, he said.

The committee agreed that the two "kiosks," which will include audio and video monitors, would be positioned on either side of the monument. They would show interviews about local veterans and the history of slavery in Denton County, Baines said.

Denton County resident and former University of North Texas student Thomas Johns said he's been torn on the monument issue.

He was satisfied with the recommendation overall, but the kiosks may take away from the artistic elements of the statue, he said.

"I'm almost afraid the kiosks will make it less of an art piece," he said. "So how to do that artistically in a way that it still feels monumental is going to be the challenge now."

The committee did not determine the language on the plaque, aside from a general denouncement of slavery.

They also didn't determine the specific content of the interviews, though Baines expects them to include candid conversations about slavery and segregation.

Some committee members were skeptical about how the recommendation will play out in Commissioners Court next week.

"We don't know what they're going to do with it," Hudspeth said after the meeting.

County Commissioner Hugh Coleman, who was the only commissioner to vote against the advisory committee's creation, observed most of the meeting from the third-floor balcony overlooking the Commissioners Courtroom. After the vote, he was concerned about the feasibility of video monitors.

"I think having electronics out in the weather may have operational problems," Coleman said. "If we do this, we want to do it right. I don't want it constantly breaking down because it's subject to wind, rain and weather."

Coleman said he's in favor of the large plaque denouncing slavery, but he wants more details before he decides on his vote.

"I don't know if I'm going to vote for the video monitors," he said. "I'd like to hear what [Denton County Public Facilities] has to say about putting video monitors outside."

County Judge Mary Horn also said she needs more information before she discusses her vote.

For her, removing the monument was off the table from the beginning, as she firmly believes the monument is "for the soldiers," she said.

"My thought process hasn't changed on it," she said, adding that she hasn't been shy about her position from the start.

Horn sent an email to another Denton County resident at 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, assuring the man that she would vote against any recommendation to remove the statue.

Baines couldn't say whether Horn's preconceived judgment affected the committee's months-long discussion on the monument.

He said he made his recommendations independently, but he couldn't speak for the other members.

"I think that opens a whole bunch of questions to a lot of things," Baines said. "We just did the job we were initially asked to do."

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