



CITY OF PITTSBURGH
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
MAYOR WILLIAM PEDUTO

October 9, 2020

Chairperson Kilolo Luckett & Commission Members
Art Commission of the City of Pittsburgh
Department of City Planning
John P. Robin Civic Building
200 Ross Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

RE: Schenley Park's Christopher Columbus Statue

Dear Chairperson Luckett & Members of the Art Commission,

Thank you for your study and your recommendation regarding the Christopher Columbus statue in Schenley Park. I have reviewed the matter carefully and agree with your conclusions, with the provisos noted below.

It is important to recognize the context in which Columbus Day was adopted as a holiday and the 50 subsequent years of work by Italian-Americans in Pittsburgh to build the Columbus statue. Like many immigrants to the United States in the 19th Century — and for that matter, today — Italian-Americans were commonly subjected to discrimination and violence, perhaps most infamously in 1891 when 11 Italian-American immigrants were viciously murdered by a New Orleans mob. President Benjamin Harrison recognized a national holiday the following year (on the 400th year of Columbus's arrival in the Americas), and when Pittsburgh began celebrating the holiday in 1909 planning began for a statue in honor of him.

It took nearly 50 frustrating years of grassroots planning and fundraising — through generations of Italian-Americans raising nickels and dimes, passing plates after Mass and community picnics — but in 1958 the City formally dedicated the statue by renowned sculptor and Italian immigrant to Pittsburgh Frank Vittor, in conjunction with the Sons of Columbus of America. The statue was renovated in 1992, again with private funding from a new generation of proud, Western Pennsylvania Italian-American contributors.

As the years have passed there has been a reckoning with the historical record of Columbus. Even by the standards of the time, Columbus was contemporaneously known for using torture and slavery to keep order, and was ultimately ordered arrested and returned to Spain for trial.

Many people have long questioned why this man is being celebrated, and those voices have grown even louder after the deaths this year of African-Americans at the hands of police, and the subsequent calls nationwide for police reform. In their view Columbus is a symbol of oppression, and public statues celebrating him (like the statues of Confederate generals who supported slavery) should not be placed in public spaces.

I was raised by my grandfather, a proud Italian immigrant, and to him Columbus was a great hero who symbolized that he and other Italian-Americans had a right to be here. Those same feelings are

embedded in Italian-Americans all across Western Pennsylvania today; while I share those feelings, others were raised with very different perspectives, which I can also understand.

All of us have a cultural identity that binds us to the people we love and care for, and helps us carve out our own spaces within American culture. The challenge is preserving and honoring that ethnic identity and history while having the empathy and humility to recognize that others have backgrounds and experiences that are just as valid as one's own.

It is just as Fred Rogers wrote: "We want to raise our children so that they can take a sense of pleasure in both their own heritage and the diversity of others."

I view the drives to adopt Columbus Day as a holiday more than 100 years ago and the calls now to remove his statue similarly. Italian-Americans viewed him with pride as they were being vilified and murdered; today, those experiencing oppression in our country see him as a symbol of what divides us and a progenitor of slavery and racism.

All four of my grandparents were Italian and personally experienced discrimination, yet learned to love their new country. I am tremendously proud to be part of the Italian-American community in Pittsburgh, just as I am proud to be Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh and to represent all people of our city.

After much thought and prayer I believe it is now time for us to return the Columbus statue to the Italian-American community that brought it into existence. They can preserve it in a manner than celebrates Italian-American culture, while acknowledging the wreckage that slavery and racism has done to America.

At the same time, through the leadership of the Heinz History Center, we need to work to establish ties between our local Italian-American and Native American communities to discuss the pain that both have been through over hundreds of years, and to promote and celebrate each other's culture.

Efforts are already underway to find a new and private home for Vittor's work, which is more than just a statue, but a beautiful and important piece of art. In the meantime I agree that the statue should be removed from Schenley Park and temporarily stored elsewhere until a new private home for the artwork is designated.

I request that upon receipt of this communication the Commission schedule a hearing to officially vote on the statue's removal and decommissioning.

Sincerely,

William Peduto
Mayor of Pittsburgh

CC: Daniel I. Gilman, Chief of Staff
Andrew Dash, Director of City Planning