

A Necessary Conversation

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TO: The Mayor of Elroy, Alabama

FROM: Jay Anand, City Council Member of Elroy, Alabama

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SUBJECT: Alfred Zane Park

After careful thought and deliberation on the issue of the Alfred Zane park, I believe the solution is clear. In order to maintain our city's history while addressing the issue of inclusion, it is imperative we not rename the park. Rather, we should create a museum at the center of the park that presents our city's history, racism's place in American history, and the impact of racism today.

In addressing the status of the Alfred Zane park, the city council must consider a few key concerns. First, what is the history and legacy of controversial sites and memorials? Second, what is the responsibility of our government towards our city's history and citizens? Third, what actions can we take that respond to the problem of a lack inclusivity in our city while also maintaining our city's history? And finally, what kind of ramifications would our actions have on our citizens and local businesses?

It is uncomfortable to associate our Elroy with the atrocities of lynching and segregation. It is uncomfortable to reconcile with the fact that our city's previous leaders participated in an ignoble history. However, it is morally reckless for our current leaders to ignore our past. As leaders, we have been given the privilege and responsibility of serving our constituents in their best interest. Simply put, renaming the park without grappling with the complexities of our predecessors' actions would not only be a disservice to our past citizens but the future of Elroy as well

What is the history and legacy of controversial sites and memorials?

Before undertaking any actions, it is crucial to understand the context of public sites dedicated to figures tied to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws. The earliest sites were attempts by women's associations to identify the remains of Confederate soldiers in cemeteries. This was done to provide solace for Southern families and commemorate their sacrifice. However, the narrative of these sites changed in the late 19th and 20th centuries when Southern writers, veterans, and political leaders sought to reinterpret the Confederate defeat as a spiritual victory. This reasoning, described as the "Lost Cause", established that secession was justified in pursuit of personal liberties. It stated that Southern men defended their homes against insurmountable odds. It insisted that slavery was not a cause of the Civil War.¹ Going hand-in-hand with the Lost Cause movement was the establishment of Jim Crow laws. The movement culminated in memorials dedicated to leaders of the Jim Crow era, men who had attempted to disenfranchise African Americans and establish white supremacy across the South. Ultimately, these sites had transitioned from simply remembering the fallen soldiers to glorifying the cause that resulted in their deaths.

Today, there has been a mixed reaction to the preservation of these controversial sites and memorials. Certain universities like the University of North Carolina have taken steps to remove any indications of a racist past by purging their campuses of Confederate statues.² Amherst College decided to remove its unofficial mascot of Lord Jeffery Amherst, the 18th-century

¹ "Confederate Monument Interpretation Template." *Atlanta History Center*. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <http://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/research/confederate-monuments/guide-for-placing-monuments-in-context>.

² Stancill, Jane. "UNC-Chapel Hill Trustees to Rename Saunders Hall 'Carolina Hall'" *The News & Observer*. 28 May 2015. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article22509843.html>.

colonial governor who led crucial victories in the British-French war and advocated for the rapid demise of Native Americans through smallpox.³

However, other universities and communities have decided to contextualize their memorials by understanding the history of the subjects. Brown University launched a study in 2003 regarding the use of slave labor to benefit the University when it was first established. After the concluding that slavery was instrumental in its creation, the university decided to establish a Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice to focus on how the legacy of slavery has shaped the contemporary world.⁴ While convened at the 2016 American History Association, historians advocated for addressing these public sites by educating students and citizens on the state of America during the lives of these controversial figures.⁵ The Atlanta History Center has reiterated the importance of contextualization because these sites can be used to combat against false narratives and misperceptions regarding America's history with racism.⁶

What is the responsibility of our government towards our city's history and citizens?

In order to properly serve both Elroy's history as well as its citizens, it is in our best interest to remain honest about our former leaders and promote unity. Honesty about our roots is

³ Bidgood, Jess. "Amherst College Drops 'Lord Jeff' as Mascot." *The New York Times*. 26 Jan. 2016. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/27/us/amherst-college-drops-lord-jeff-as-mascot.html>.

⁴ "History." *Center for Study of Slavery and Justice*. Brown University. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <https://www.brown.edu/initiatives/slavery-and-justice/about/history>.

⁵ Flaherty, Colleen. "Confronting the Past." *Inside Higher Ed*. 8 Jan. 2016. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/08/historians-debate-value-and-place-confederate-monuments-and-other-symbols>.

⁶ "Guide for Placing Monuments in Context." *Atlanta History Center*. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, <http://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/research/confederate-monuments/guide-for-placing-monuments-in-context>.

critical towards maintaining credibility with our citizens. Promoting unity would allow us to create a tolerant environment in Elroy as we move forward.

A large segment of our citizens would like to simply remove the name of Alfred Zane from the park in order to solve the problem. It would be easy to simply erase one of our city's most significant leaders from public light and attempt to forget his horrendous actions. However, doing so would be a superficial attempt at addressing the issue of our city's past and would not be conducive to promoting inclusion. Doing so would be attempting to whitewash our history to our liking. Doing so would be dishonest about the reality of our roots. This cover up would prevent our current and future citizens from understanding our world today because they would lack the knowledge of how our country has progressed over time. They would not learn why it is so important to never revert to those previous prejudices.

The issue of inclusion in Elroy is not a subtle one and continues to prevent us from achieving the representation that is reflective of our community. Refusing to rename the park but recognizing it as an issue signals to our constituents that we are not shying away from the history of racism. Such an action would allow us to educate ourselves on the progression of our city. Such an action would show that we are willing to hold our heroes accountable for their sins and are unwilling to sweep them under the rug.

What actions can we take that respond to the problem of a lack of inclusion in our city while also maintaining our city's history?

Any action we take will need to address key considerations

- i) What will be the main focus of our message?
- ii) How will we prevent misinterpretation of our message?

iii) How will we encourage citizen participation in the solution?

In order to achieve our goals of remaining honest about the past and promoting unity while taking in these consideration, it would be wise for us to follow the advice of the experts. Our government should keep the name of the park as the same and create a museum at the center of the park that focuses on the history of Elroy, the history of racism in America, and the issue of racism today. The museum should detail the problematic histories of the city's founders and former leaders, such as Alfred Zane and Ulysses Elroy, and the eventual progress the city has made to become what it is today. Furthermore, the museum should look at American history through the lens of race from its birth to now. A primary message that would be communicated throughout the museum would be that we are a tolerant city that does not condone the actions of our predecessors. By looking at the issue of racism today and realizing what current obstacles we face in eradicating it, the museum would be reinforcing that message.

Active participation by Elroy citizens will be the only way the benefits of a museum are fully realized because the pursuit of acceptance is a partnership between a government and its citizens. Fortunately, there are multiple ways to achieve this. First, we can create a committee in the museum that helps design the content of the museum. This committee should be made up of citizens of Elroy from different backgrounds who can offer insight into what should be emphasized. A confluence of opinions will help construct a balanced approach to presenting the material. Second, we should initiate a guest speaker series that invites speakers from across the country to debate and present ideas on race in America today. This series would be incredibly valuable as it would help promote discussion as well as present opposing or unique viewpoints. Finally, the museum should partner with the local community college and the public school

system to educate students on racism and its legacy through field days, research projects, and internships for course credit. By educating the students of Elroy about its past, we would be making the responsible decision of ensuring our future generations are critical thinkers who are aware of past injustices and equipped with the intellect to prevent injustice from occurring.

What kind of ramifications would our actions have on our citizens and local businesses of Elroy?

The museum would serve to strengthen our community. This museum would be fundamental in promoting discussion in our citizens around the issue of race today and how each of us should approach it. Studies have found that engaging in educational dialogue surrounding race leads to increased levels of cultural awareness, commitments to promoting racial understanding, and higher levels of inclusivity and social activity among people of different races. The reason for this is because the subjects better understood the identity of people different from themselves.⁷ The museum would help our citizens empathize one another, leading to the ultimate goal of unity.

Examining our actions from an economic perspective is vital because looking at the tangible impacts our decision has on our citizens can help us analyze the costs and benefits. The museum would stimulate Elroy's economy in multiple ways. Primarily, by not renaming the park, businesses located on Zane Avenue East and Zane Avenue South would not be required to change their addresses and could avoid the crippling cost. Furthermore, the creation of a museum

⁷ Chang, Mitchell. *Quality Matters: Achieving Benefits Associated with Racial Diversity*. Columbus: The Kirwan Institute, 2011. Web. 03 Oct. 2016, http://www.kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/reports/2011/10_2011_AchievingBenefitsAssociatedwithDiversity.pdf

in town would create a variety of jobs for different skill levels, ranging from curators and historians to janitors and cashiers, and help employ our constituents. Moreover, the creation of the museum could help Elroy become a tourist center, as the unique nature of the museum would draw historians and students from across the country to Elroy, helping local hotels and restaurants gain business. Finally, creation of a museum would help address the issue of minority executive recruitment in Elroy. This is because we would be addressing a root cause in the issue of inclusion. By engaging in discourse around racism and coming together in order to stymie its presence in our city, we would be creating an accepting community.

George Orwell once wrote that “He who controls the past, controls the future. He who controls the present, controls the past.” We have come to a crossroads and as city officials, it is our responsibility to act in a way that maintains the integrity of Elroy’s past but also emphasizes inclusivity in Elroy for the future. By not changing the name and creating a museum, we would be holding our past leaders responsible for their actions. By not changing the name and creating a museum, we would be creating a tolerant environment and stimulating Elroy’s economy. By not changing the name and creating a museum, we would be engaging in a necessary conversation, one which would make me proud to live in Elroy.