

Syracuse's Columbus statue still standing

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Syracuse's Columbus statue still standing years after Mayor Walsh said he wanted it removed

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SHARE SYRACUSE, N.Y. — As America recognizes Columbus Day — it doesn't come without controversy. Communities across the country have changed the name of the day to National Indigenous Peoples Day, and some even removed statues of the man history tells us discovered America.

In Syracuse, Mayor Ben Walsh announced plans to have its Christopher Columbus statue relocated — a decision that was met with a lot of blowback.

What You Need To Know

- Syracuse's Christopher Columbus statue has stood in Syracuse's downtown for 91 years, a gift, we're told, from local Italian-Americans and other immigrants to honor not only the discovery of the country, but everyone across Onondaga County who worked hard to get it here and shape the county.

- However, due to concerns over the treatment of Indigenous People by Columbus, Syracuse Mayor Ben Walsh crafted a plan to remove the statue from its current location in Columbus Park to a new park that will be called Heritage Park. The park would be for all the area's history to be shared.
- That decision was met with blowback from people in the county, including a group called the Columbus Monument Corporation, which has already sued the city and says it will fight to keep the statue where it is

“The mayor made a poor decision to want to take it down. He's stuck by that. Why? I don't know,” Nicholas Pirro said.

Pirro is the former county executive in Onondaga County.

He's now vice president of the Columbus Monument Corp., focusing on the statue of Christopher Columbus that stands over Columbus Circle in downtown Syracuse.

“We've got a great legal team that won't allow this monument to come down,” Pirro added.

Taking down the statue has been a goal for Walsh for years.

“I've already come to the conclusion that the status quo in Columbus Circle today is not acceptable,” Syracuse Mayor Ben Walsh said in 2020.

Walsh has long said Heritage Park would serve as an educational area for all of the city's history.

“To tear down the statue is easy. Educating and healing a community, that's the hard work, and that's what we need to be focused on,” he said during that same 2020 event.

However, those efforts have been stalled, mainly by a lawsuit from the Columbus Monument Corp.

While that suit and an appeal have been dismissed, the city says legal action did delay fundraising goals to establish Heritage Park, efforts the city says are still ongoing. The statue will, however, still be standing when Walsh leaves office at the end of this year.

“Thank you for taking time out of your day to join us for this meaningful celebration,” a speaker said during a Columbus Day ceremony in Syracuse Monday when a wreath was placed at the statue.

The Columbus Monument Corp. said it's in honor of not only Columbus Day and the founding of the country, but also so many people in Onondaga County, including local Italian-Americans, who back then, did everything that they could to get this statue up.

“This really is symbolic to a lot of immigrant populations. It really does symbolize, to us, it's a pride in their native land, and you're loving your new country,” Columbus Monument Corp. Board Member Anthony Ilacqua said.

As for the controversy, the concerns around the treatment of Indigenous People, those at Monday's ceremony say they do not want that voice silenced either.

"Absolutely every aspect of our history needs to be preserved and remembered," Ilacqua said.

And, they add, displayed. Some even pointed out land right next to the Columbus statue that they believe could easily host a monument in honor of the county's Indigenous People and their history.

The statue's fate will likely be decided by the city's next mayor. Democratic Deputy Mayor Sharon Owens is battling Republican Thomas Babilon for the job, as well as independent candidates. Walsh cannot run again due to term limits.

Owens has said she wants to see how the Heritage Park situation plays out. Babilon says he wants the statue to stay right where it is.