

July 29, 2020

A Special Meeting of the Board of Park Commissioners was held on Tuesday, July 29, 2020, at 5:00 p.m. This meeting was conducted by Zoom/Teleconference. The public had access to this meeting by calling the following conference line and then entering the conference code:

**Dial to Join by Phone:**

1 (929) 436-2866

1 (877) 853-5257 Toll-free

Meeting ID: 931 3551 3166

Mr. Labrador stated that this meeting is being conducted with the authority issued by the Governor of the State of Connecticut and read the following:

Tonight's meeting of the Board of Park Commissioner is a Special Meeting for July 29, 2020 and is being conducted by electronic means as authorized by Governor Ned Lamont executive order 7B which was issued on March 14, 2020, and which the Public has electronic access to witness this meeting.

The recording and transcription of this meeting will be posted on the City Clerk's website within 7 days.

Mr. Labrador asked that everyone abide by the Governor's request and directives contained in his various executive orders: 7 through 7J, with additional orders to be forthcoming.

**OPENING CEREMONY**

**ROLL CALL**

Present: President Labrador, Vice President Brideau, Commissioners: Wade, Cotto and Hosier, Clerk Ellen M. Gerrity. Also, in attendance were, Craig A. Nadrizny, Acting Public Facilities Director, Luann Conine, Recreation Superintendent Stephen Hladun, Special Projects Coordinator, Luis Burgos, Manager of Roadway and Parks Services, with Angel DePara, Database Administrator, presiding as host of the meeting.

After determining there was a quorum, Mr. Labrador called the meeting to order.

**PUBLIC SPEAKING FORUM:**

\*\*\*Due to the public health emergency, public speaking will be by written testimony only\*\*\*

All written testimony should have been submitted to [Ellen.Gerrity@bridgeportct.gov](mailto:Ellen.Gerrity@bridgeportct.gov) by 4:30p.m.on Tuesday, July 28th.\*\*\*

July 29, 2020

## PUBLIC SPEAKING FORUM

Letters were submitted from the following three people and were received and read by the Board of Park Commissioners.

1. Councilwoman Maria H. Pereira, 138<sup>th</sup> City Council District
2. Councilman Mike DeFilippo, 133<sup>rd</sup> City Council District
3. Christopher L. Caruso and Leonard S. Paoletta, The Council of Italian-American Societies of Greater Bridgeport Inc.

"1. Discussion of, and possible action concerning, Christopher Columbus Statue at Seaside Park."

Mr. Labrador asked the Commissioners if they received and read the letters that were submitted to the Board.

All Commissioners stated that they have received and read the submitted letters.

Mr. Labrador said that they are at the Special Meeting tonight to try to understand what happened to the Christopher Columbus Statue, how it happened and why it happened.

He said they would like to come to a happy medium that will fulfill some of the needs of all the parties that are involved.

He said that he prides himself in saying that over all the years he has been on the Parks Board that they have been transparent and dedicated to the Board of Park Commissioners, parks and to the community and residents of the City of Bridgeport and that they have made decisions based on what they think is the best choice for our communities throughout Bridgeport.

Mr. Labrador said that we also serve residents from the surrounding towns that come to use our facilities because our parks are so beautiful.

Mr. Labrador said that he has been on the Board of Park Commissioners since 2007; he loves his parks and cannot say more about Acting Public Facilities Director Craig Nadrizny, the park staff; Luis Burgos, Robert Valeri and Fernando Dias, and how well the parks have been kept.

He wanted to say thank you from his heart and he and the other commissioners appreciate the work they are getting done with the amount of staff they have available to work with.

Mr. Labrador told the Park Commissioners that they are aware of the steps that were taken and what has transpired in our City and Parks Department with the removal of the Christopher Columbus Statue.

He said he is looking forward to hearing what the Park Commissioners have to say about the situation so the Public who are listening can also hear what the Commissioners are thinking and how they feel.

July 29, 2020

He asked the Commissioners to comment on the Christopher Columbus Statue situation.

Commissioner Brideau – Stated that he has read all the letters submitted and agrees with the consensus of them especially the letter submitted by Councilwoman Maria Pereira, and is in favor of putting the statue back and then to come up with a solution that will appease everyone.

Commissioner Hosier – Began by saying “Don’t be afraid of the unknown, because if you fear it you don’t believe in your convictions.” The authority of powers of the Park Commission is outlined in the City Charter, Chapter 12, Section 10, which clearly delineates all parks and structures are under the sole jurisdiction of the Board of Park Commissioners. That authority was disrespected and ignored on July 6, 2020. Yet, it was strenuously promoted at a Special Meeting of the Bridgeport City Council on July 28, 2020. The Park Commission has a sacred history of promoting the beauty of our parks, but most importantly it is inherently invested in protecting the diversity of our citizens. He believes in the stability of our citizens entrust in the fact that when we have differences that we believe in ourselves and will come to a reasonable and responsible conclusion. The Park Commission has before it a divisive matter and we have the responsibility to set a precedence. Discussions were taking place until they were abruptly ended with the actions of July 6, 2020.

Mr. Hosier read into the record the following agreement which underlies his belief:

In the current climate of the national unrest, members of the common council and leaders of the Greater Bridgeport Italian-American community are determined to peacefully work together on sensitive issues that have potential to fracture the Bridgeport community. After a meeting initiated by Councilman Jorge Cruz with Italian-American representatives and accompanied by colleagues Aidee Nieves, Alfredo Castillo, Maria Pereira, Denise Taylor-Moyer and Eneida Martinez, decided not to pursue the removal of the Christopher Columbus statue in Seaside Park. Everyone agreed that after years of not only peacefully co-existing but supporting each other through cultural celebration community events in natural tragedies and disasters it is important to continue a dialogue to find consensus on potentially divisive issues in order to continue to unite Bridgeport. Members of both groups agreed to meet again to discuss promising opportunities to work together on projects such as but not limited to honoring the legacies of other Bridgeport ethic and community leaders. Unfortunately, that discussion abruptly ended on July 6, 2020.

He said that furthermore he has prepared a resolution but right now his feeling is to allow dialogue to continue and if he has the opportunity, he would like to put forward a resolution.

Cruz M. Cotto – His feeling is that the Parks Department did not take the Christopher Columbus statue down so the party responsible should put it back up.

He said they did not come to the Parks Board to let us know until the statue was taken down.

He thinks there should be dialogue between the Italian-American community, Common Council members, and any other group that wants to meet with them to come to a conclusion.

July 29, 2020

He said that to a certain extent he is in agreement of putting the statue up, but he also believes that the party that took the statue down, should put it back up.

Lillian Wade – She believes that you cannot pacify everyone, if they want to put the statue back up, they will put it back up.

Ms. Wade does not believe Christopher Columbus was a hero.

She said she is willing to listen to what people have to say, but her mind is made up.

She said whatever the Board agrees to she is fine with it because she does not want to keep reiterating it over and over again.

Mr. Labrador said that he has researched the removals of Christopher Columbus statues around the United States and was caught by surprise when he found out that the Columbus statue at Seaside Park was removed and how it was done and the disrespect that was shown the Board.

He said that the Parks Board proudly served the City of Bridgeport with the best intentions and transparency and never did or agreed to anything that would hurt the people of Bridgeport.

Mr. Labrador said that when he says community, he means all communities not just the Puerto Ricans, Italians, African Americans or Portuguese, but a City that is so diverse in its community that people have moved from other towns to be a part of it.

He said that there is a lot of history in Bridgeport and there was a lot of middle class and poor people back then who put in their own hard earned money to purchase something they thought was important to them back then.

He said he cannot speak to the people back in the day because he was not there, and things were a lot different than they are today.

Mr. Labrador hoped that today's elders would have been able to reflect some of this growing up that we have gone through to our younger community, but he feels that in a small way we have failed them.

He said that he tries not to let his personal feelings get in the way of making decisions that will affect the community where he lives and volunteers along with his fellow commissioners who he totally respects and who diligently show up to Park Board meetings every 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of the month taking time away from their own families.

Mr. Labrador said that he came from Puerto Rico when he was five years old and was brought up by two good hard-working parents that came to the United States with his family.

He said that he remembers words that his father said "If you are going to be a poor person, be the best poor person you can be and if you are a poor person, be the cleanest poor person in your neighborhood." Lastly, he said that "If a man has no respect for his word than as a man, he is

July 29, 2020

truly not a man. If you can't live on your word to someone what else do you have, money cannot pay for that.”

Mr. Labrador said that there are two statues of Christopher Columbus in Puerto Rico with one also having the 3 ships, the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria, with a steering wheel in front.

He said that he has never heard anything derogatory said about those statues.

Mr. Labrador said that we are being asked to put the statue back when the Parks Board never removed it.

He also said that he went today for the first time to see the statue and where it is stored and said that he is not totally happy of the place they have chosen to put it in; he thinks that there could have been other places where it could have been stored, but presently it is secure and does not have easy access to the general public.

He said that he has taken pictures of the statue, so he knows what condition it is in when he visited it.

Mr. Labrador asked the Commissioners if they are ready to take a definite stand on whether we put the statue back up or leave it where it is.

He said are we ready to say we would like to listen a little more to the people that may be involved.

He asked if we are willing to take the responsibility to put the statue back up and then have it destroyed and the history for the Italian community be shattered.

Mr. Labrador asked the Board members to really consider all these things issues before deciding the fate of the statue.

He said the Commissioners will need to decide to either vote to put the statue back up, or if we need to have more dialogue from the people and decide within 30 to 60 days.

He said that if within the 30 to 60 days the people involved in this dialogue cannot come up with a decision, the Board will have to decide the fate of the statue and where we will find the funds to either put it back up, store it or return it to the Italian community.

Mr. Cotto said that he feels that the person who took down the statue should be the one to put it back up and pay for it.

He said that we do need to meet and have dialogue with Christopher Caruso, former Bridgeport Mayor Leonard Paoletta, Councilwoman Maria Pereira, Councilman Jorge Cruz and Councilman Michael DeFilippo and other council members that would like to meet with them for their input.

July 29, 2020

He thinks that if the Board decides not to put the statue up, that it should be returned to its rightful owners; the Italian community.

Mr. Hosier said that he is committed to putting the statue back up because if something is out of sight it is out of mind.

He said he is totally committed to discourse through the city and if they decide to hold off on putting up the statue, it needs to be completely and totally understood that this park board has the authority to put the Christopher Columbus statue back up and that the negotiation has to be real and sincere.

Ms. Wade said that she is in agreement with Mr. Cotto in that a dialogue must be had with the community.

She said that she did not know the statue was down until she saw it on the news.

She said that the Park Board was thrown into the ring which was not fair to them because they need to have dialogue with the person who took the statue down.

Mr. Brideau said that we do need to have a dialogue with the community, but he also thinks that if we put the statue back, we could still have a better dialogue with the community.

He also thinks that whoever took the statue down should put the statue back and pay for it.

Mr. Labrador said that he agrees with the Commissioners and that we must do the best for the Bridgeport community.

He thinks the different communities should be given an opportunity to express themselves.

He said that if we decide to put the statue up tomorrow, what kind of respect do we have for the statue and the people of Bridgeport if the statue is destroyed after being put up.

Mr. Labrador said that he is not happy that the statue is down, but he knows that right now no one can do any harm to the statue.

He said that making a reasonable decision without being angry is the best way to go and with that being said we as a Board need more community involvement and perhaps give them 30 to 60 days to decide, and if a reasonable decision is not made, that the Parks Board either decides to put it back where it came from with the City paying for putting it back up and have police coverage.

He said he does not want to spend money from the Parks or City budget on putting the statue up when we did not take it down.

He would like to see more dialogue between the next 30 and 60 days to decide and come to a happy medium on the fate of the Christopher Columbus statue.

July 29, 2020

He hopes that the communities understand that if the Parks Board must make a decision that it is based on transparency and the pride they take in their City, parks and statues.

Mr. Labrador asked that someone make a motion on whether they want to hold off for 30 or more days to get more dialogue before they decide what the fate of the statue will be.

Mr. Hosier said that the spirit of conciliation needs to start with the Board of Park Commissioners.

He also wants to express that this Board lets the community and those in negotiation know that the Board has the ultimate authority one way or another and they need to act in the spirit of conciliation and resolve this issue because it can be resolved.

A motion was made by Mr. Hosier and seconded by Ms. Wade to continue dialogue and expand it to include the community and that the dialogue decision by the appointed committee be presented at the September parks board meeting.

Mr. Brideau was opposed.

ADJOURNMENT

On a motion made by Mr. Cotto seconded by Ms. Wade it was unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting at 5:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellen M. Gerrity  
Clerk