



## **Columbus Circle Action Committee**

A Mayoral Appointed Committee

July – October 2020

**A Final Report and Recommendations for  
Mayor Ben Walsh**

**City of Syracuse**

October 7, 2020

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## Context

The legacy of Christopher Columbus has connections to the histories of many different peoples in Central New York. The monument at Columbus Circle has become a lightning rod for present-day movements for justice and an end to oppression for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, while also serving as a point of pride for many Italian-Americans whose families first settled here in the late 1800s. The Syracuse Columbus monument was installed in 1934 as a gift from the Italian-American community to celebrate the ethnic pride of this group, and to embed Italian-Americans in civic life. The important history of how the monument was conceived, paid for, shipped, and installed has been told by local historians.<sup>1</sup> In 1992, the monument was cleaned and restored by grants to the City of Syracuse. The removal of the monument has been a matter of debate since the late 1980s leading up to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' first voyage and reached a new peak of demand during the recent Black Lives Matter movement.

This report documents the process and outcomes of a 2-month exploration by a diverse group of community members assembled at the behest of Syracuse's mayor, Ben Walsh, in a Columbus Circle Action Committee (CCAC) representing multiple opinions about the Columbus Circle.

The Columbus Circle Action Committee objectives were to:

- Recommend to Mayor Walsh common ground solutions to the Columbus issue that should be implemented in the City of Syracuse beginning in 2020,
- Work toward a comprehensive plan that recommends specific action steps, timelines and responsible individuals and organizations that lead to the creation of a heritage site,
- Identify other actions, such as comprehensive community education through schools, museums, and non-profits that the group identifies as necessary to bring healing and understanding to the process.

The process was facilitated by InterFaith Works, and the list of the committee members is attached. The CCAC was convened in August 2020 and met weekly for 8 weeks to present the mayor with a set of recommendations about the future of Columbus Circle.<sup>2</sup>

## Summary of Common Ground Recommendations

*Common ground is defined as the place where the committee members' goals, values, and interests overlap and intersect.*

1. In accord with the Committee's objectives, the Committee recommends the establishment of a Heritage and Education site at the current location of Columbus Circle and Powelson Park in downtown Syracuse.
2. The intention and hope of the Committee's recommendations is that any action in the development of such a site is inclusive of the heritages past and present in Syracuse, NY, and that any action taken continues to honor Italian-American contributions to the city.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://syracusesthenandnow.org/Dwntwn/Columbus/ColumbusStatue/ColumbusStatue.htm>

<sup>2</sup> These sessions occurred during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some sessions were held via Zoom, some in person, and some were held using a hybrid model with some people in person and some on Zoom.

3. Regarding the Columbus monument, the Committee finds common ground agreement in the recommendation to remove the heads of Indigenous people of the Plains and the two bas relief plaques “Columbus bringing Christianity to the New World” and “Columbus returning to Queen Isabella’s Court.”
4. There is a desire among the CCAC members to continue to promote productive civic and civil conversations that will move our community towards deeper understanding of our own and each other’s histories, and towards open-minded and critical thinking about a perspective that is different from one’s own. The Heritage and Education site and other efforts and events related to community education healing, and deeper understanding should serve as a platform to promote such education and dialogue.
5. The overall vision for the Heritage and Education site is that it embraces what contributes to the edification of our community: learning from the past, healing wounds left by our histories, and exhibiting contributions of many different people and cultures that helped build this community.

## CCAC Point of Tension: Columbus’ Intent vs. Columbus’ Impact

What is often at play during divisive conversations about Columbus are intense disagreements over facts. Historians interpret and hold differing opinions about the impact of Columbus’ arrival in the new world on enslaved Africans and on Indigenous people encountered by Columbus and by subsequent voyagers from Europe. People on all sides of the issues either shared documents describing Columbus’ personal atrocities towards the people who were here, as well as the treatment of Indigenous people by his crews, or documents describing reasons for acclamations of Columbus for his brilliant navigational skills and that showed support of his intent to bring people to Christianity. These different understandings and viewpoints of history made it very difficult for civil and forward-moving conversations to occur within the CCAC meetings.

Many of the Committee’s discussions over these 7 weeks have centered on Impact vs. Intent, and we frequently struggled with finding common understanding of the contentious components of the history: What were his motivations – selfish or altruistic? Did he want fame and fortune or was he religiously inspired (saving souls and finding riches to fund the retaking of Jerusalem?) Should his religious motivations be acclaimed or repudiated? What was Columbus’ direct role in the atrocities? Regardless of what he did or didn’t do, how responsible was he for what transpired? Should his writings be considered “true history” or polished legacy? How do we sift through the discrepancies about him from first-hand accounts – Do we believe de las Casas? Ferdinand Colombo? Bobadilla? – they all contradict each other. The CCAC heard presentations and viewed shared documents in an effort to answer these questions, questions which are at the root of why various Syracuse communities, as well as individuals from the Onondaga Nation, have called for the removal of the Columbus statue, while other groups are adamant it should remain. The discussions have all followed a similar path that, whether these actions were intended or not, Columbus’ arrival opened the door to European colonization which led to devastating impacts for Native, Black and Brown People, and all people of color across the Americas.

In the time that we were given to accomplish this task we, as a group, were not able to untangle the competing opinions and interpretations of facts. Interviews with content experts were conducted for the group’s review, and videos, links, and materials shared from participants helped to clarify some issues, but also revealed a deep division in the way people understand and interpret history. This was particularly true for learnings about the Doctrine of Discovery and perspectives on Western colonization. Discerning interpretations and opinions from fact regarding Columbus was an

unfinished piece of business; discerning impact by looking at losses and resulting systems was very much a part of this discussion.

## Impact of Historical Oppression and CCAC Representation

All the groups represented by people involved in CCAC experience current and/or past oppression, and the effects of oppression continue to factor into the decisions about the Columbus monument.

The Committee spent considerable time hearing first-person accounts of the pain associated with Columbus from Committee members through formal panels, and in general conversation during the meetings. For many panelists, Columbus is the symbol of domination of one group over another group. The system of dominance has led to their histories being untold and/or erased. People with this perspective and experience are continuing to fight for their dignity and rights to this day, and Columbus represents the pain and trauma that they and their ancestors experienced as a result of colonialization, slavery, genocide, the extraction of land, resources, and rights. One of the forms of oppression to which we returned again and again was the unceded lands of the Onondaga People, upon which the City of Syracuse now resides, and where the Columbus monument stands.

The Committee has also learned of the history of the Italian-American people who immigrated here at the turn of the century, and the pride many have in the Columbus monument. Columbus has been celebrated as an American hero; Italians chose Columbus as a hero figure in the late 1800's to connect themselves with the foundation of the U.S. This helped to bring an end to their own oppression in the U.S. Regarding the monument, the Committee learned that the Italian community felt that symbols on the monument were intended to show the story of Columbus and a positive relationship with Native people. Because of the oppression Italians in America faced at that time in history, there was an urgency and importance to celebrate their heritage and contribute something of this size and magnitude to the city of Syracuse. It was often recounted that many people in the Italian community contributed their "pennies and nickels" to its creation. Many people were involved in the development, creation and placement of the statue (although it was noted that the Black community was not involved, and that there are differing interpretations of the Onondaga involvement). Committee members understand that the monument is still a physical representation of ethnic pride for many, but not all, Italian-Americans in Central New York and continues to be celebrated annually on Columbus Day.

Central to the discussions was the suffering which both the Italian immigrants and Indigenous Nations as well as other immigrants and people of color have experienced and continue to experience. The CCAC had representatives from the following groups, listed in order of their presence and/or arrival in this part of the world. Additional information is included here to give background to the type of oppression these groups have and still experience.

**Native Americans**, including people from Onondaga, Taino, Creek, and Akwesasne Mohawk nations were represented in the CCAC. Indigenous people faced early and continuing traumas as a result of European colonization and of the subsequent actions resulting from the Doctrine of Discovery including slaughter, near genocide, removal from their ancestral lands, placement in Indian boarding schools, and theft of land through broken treaties. Most historians accept the estimate of 15 million deaths resulting from European colonization in the Americas, a near annihilation leaving only 250,000 indigenous people at the turn of the 20th century. To this day Native people experience the highest levels of poverty of any people living within the U.S. borders, significant public health issues such as alcoholism and suicide, and growing numbers of the disappearance and the killing of Native women.

**African Americans** on the CCAC point out that Columbus' voyages opened the passage of the Mid-Atlantic slave trade, bringing enslaved Africans in large numbers into bondage in the New World. The economic expansion of the Americas through the labors of enslaved people is a legacy of pain and oppression that continues into today's inequitable systems and structures. African Americans first arrived in Central New York in the decades leading up to the Civil War, some passing through on the Underground Railroad to Canada, and others staying to promote freedom, like Harriet Tubman and Rev. Jermain Loguen. Black members of the CCAC identified continuing mistreatment of Black Americans, noting that the recent killings of Black people by police in cities across the U.S. has given rise to a global Black Lives Matter movement, and the call for societal change.

**LatinX** people in the CCAC came from the Island nations now known as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Columbus first landed on these islands. The committee members recounted the histories of their ancestors going back to the early disruption of an ancient way of life which began with Columbus' arrival. LatinX people in the US continue to experience high levels of unemployment, lower test scores and drop-out rates in high schools, lack of health care coverage, and a recent Pew study showed that 55% worry about immigration practices and deportation for themselves or for friends and family, even if they are here legally.

**Italian Americans** were represented by people who want the monument to remain, and those who wanted it removed. The Italians' ancestors faced trauma before arriving in the U.S. due to failed land reforms in southern Italy. Upon arriving in the United States in the 1890s-1930s in large numbers, Italians, like other early immigrant groups, were persecuted and were treated with suspicion and derision due to their darker skin color, accents, and form of worship. In 1891, a mass lynching of 11 Italians accused of killing New Orleans' mayor occurred, seven of whom had already been acquitted. The current New Orleans mayor issued an apology in 2019 for this anti-immigrant crime. Italians in Syracuse have been successful in politics, business, and community service positions across the whole community since the 1940s.

**Jews** were represented on the CCAC by a local rabbi. Jews have been the target of oppression from the beginnings of their history, as evidenced in their early enslavement, the Russian pogroms, and the Holocaust of World War II, which attempted full-scale genocide across Europe by the Nazi government. Jews are targeted because of their ancestry and their form of worship. Anti-Semitism continues and is on the rise today, with 50% of hate crimes on the U.S. registry directed at Jews, plaguing and causing fear among Jews everywhere, as evidenced in the 2018 and 2019 attacks on temples and on Jewish families.

**Muslims** have been present in the United States since its inception. Immigrants who worship Allah through their Islamic faith have arrived in the U.S. in large numbers over the last 30 years some as refugees, and some as immigrants. In the last 20 years, the rights of Muslims have been challenged, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11/01 and the war on terror began. Muslims have been denied access to enter the U.S., have been rounded up without due process even here in Syracuse, and have been targeted by U.S. militia groups. As many are immigrants, they struggle to find acceptance in an America that has branded them as terrorists.

**Refugees** come to Syracuse from many different lands and each nation from which they come presents different forms of oppression that force people to flee. For example, African refugees from Somalia, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo who have come in the hundreds to Syracuse in the last decade have experienced ethnic cleansing, torture and mutilation, loss of land and possessions, government suppression, and civil war in their homelands or camps. For refugees, even if they make it out of their country, life in a refugee camp is often long and arduous before their passage to the U.S. is secured. Upon arrival in the U.S., they are treated with distrust and struggle to find full acceptance as Americans.

These histories of oppression are recounted here because they have such strong interplay with the Committee's discussion about the Columbus monument. From this common experience of exclusion can come the gifts of compassion and resiliency which we wish to pass on to each other and future generations. As the U.S. struggles with its own history of oppression, our community finds itself in the center of that struggle which many groups see as represented by Columbus, the man who first traversed the Atlantic, and by Columbus, the symbol of European colonization. The recommendations of CCAC are rooted in a vision and a desire to cause no pain, but rather to reduce pain and to bring healing to the pain of oppression for all groups. It is not the desire of the Committee to erase the history of anyone. The Committee recognizes the need to share our histories.

## Heritage and Education Site Recommendations

The Columbus Circle Action Committee recommends the creation of a Heritage and Education Site at the current location of Columbus Circle and Powelson Park. Committee discussions and considerations centered around the question of how to make this space in Syracuse inclusive of the rich and diverse heritages present in Syracuse and Onondaga today.

The Committee's recommendations reflect the desire to recognize and honor the history and importance of the Columbus monument to the Italian-American community, while at the same time to reckon with a long history of injustice and oppression inflicted upon specific groups of people. In this spirit, and to address the pain that exists in connection with Columbus, multiple working groups suggested renaming the site. Ideas include: Heritage Circle, Cultural Plaza, Cultural Circle, Circle of Wisdom, Circle of Peace.

The Heritage and Education site should be welcoming, peaceful, contemplative, and informative as well as ADA accessible, aesthetically beautiful, honoring the natural world. The Committee wishes for it to be a usable town square which incorporates the circle and the park. Therefore, multiple working groups recommended connecting the circle with the park, either with a pedestrian bridge or by closing the dividing E. Onondaga St and creating a new traffic pattern for a cohesive and pedestrian friendly site.

The Committee recommends using natural elements to create a peaceful environment. Robust, colorful landscaping and substantive greenery should be implemented using a self-sustaining and environmentally friendly design. The water element of the current monument could be featured and expanded upon, as water is common source of life for all humans, animals, and plants.

As someone spends time in or walks through the Heritage and Education site, they might see plaques or signs which tell the first-hand histories, flags of represented cultures, plants honoring native species, and artwork commissioned by artist(s) of each group to provide unique forms of artistry (or a collaborative work of art). They could participate in a self-guided walking tour, which would bring them around the site to learn of their significant local histories. There might be opportunities for videos of first-person stories, or ways to engage with the educational components using technology. The committee was made aware of two projects that may help to meet these needs, one at SUNY-Clarkson and the other at OHA.

The Heritage and Education site should include elements that lift up the many different groups that make up our city. The Committee learned much about the histories of the Onondaga Nation, the African-American and immigrant experiences in Syracuse and would encourage accurate portrayals of all groups. It is Important to note here that the

Skä-noñh Great Law of Peace Center on the shores of Onondaga Lake in Liverpool, NY is a wonderful and unique resource that tells the history of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and explains the negative impact that the Doctrine of Discovery has had on indigenous people. Committee members do not wish to replicate the museum at the Heritage and Education site. Rather, the Committee sees the Heritage and Education site as a way to tell the story of the contributions of many groups - including the Onondaga - to this community, and the Haudenosaunee influence on the U.S. construction of democracy.

We also recognize that Syracuse is a major refugee resettlement city and the many different nations and tribes from which refugees come should be uplifted and celebrated at this site. Earlier immigrants from Europe and the stories that forced them to leave their homelands need a space in this site, including the experience of the Italian immigrants. Later immigrants, including religious diversity like the strong Jewish and growing Muslim communities should be included.

In review, the Committee recommends inclusion of the following histories in the creation of a Heritage and Education site: the Onondaga and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, turn-of-the-century immigrant groups (Italian, Irish, German, Polish, Chinese, etc.), Black, New American nationality groups (Somali, Sudanese, Vietnamese, Bhutanese, Burmese, Turkish, Congolese, Iraqi, Mexican, Cuban, and others who have come in the past 30 years).

The Committee recommends that the city should work directly with members of each group to establish the content of the history and to assure that the story of this group is told from the perspective of those who lived it. Additionally, the city should work with organizations representing the immigrant and refugee population, and those which keep their histories, in order to determine the groups to represent.

In the telling of this community's collective story, a focus should be placed on local heroes and trailblazers from within these cultures with the dual purpose of instilling local pride and preserving the history of this community.

The Committee recommends that the Heritage and Education site is used to educate the public of our many heritages, acknowledging that through education we can begin to heal historical wounds. Educational components that lead to healing at the site could include:

- A brief historical representation of the identified groups where the development of the content of the histories is a collaborative effort with individuals from the specific groups and told from the group's perspective.
- Information about struggles of each group in Syracuse
- Information about each group's contribution to the Syracuse and surrounding region
- Culturally significant items

Certain educational components focusing specifically on the history of the Onondaga were recommended as a pathway to healing. These include:

- A tree of peace, and a way to learn the story behind the tree.
- An eternal flame, which honors the Onondaga in their role as the Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The flame has also been identified as a common cultural experience. Many cultures tell stories around a fire.
- A component which tells the history of the Haudenosaunee's role in the democratic foundations of the United States of America. One working group has done detailed work outlining what should be included in this educational component. Recommendations include:



- Highlighting the key principals (representative form of government and separation of powers), and the key treaties (the treaty of Lancaster Conference of 1744 and the treaty of Canandaigua of 1794).
- Including Benjamin Franklin’s famed but jarring statement, *“It would be a very strange Thing, if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interests.”*
- Including a quote by Canassatego from his remarks at the Treaty of Lancaster Conference of 1744, which reads, *“We heartily recommend Union and a good Agreement between you our Brethren...Never disagree, but preserve a strict Friendship for one another, and thereby you, as well as we, will become the stronger. Our wise Forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations; this has made us formidable; this has given us great Weight and Authority with our neighboring Nations. We are a powerful Confederacy; and, by your observing the same Methods our wise Forefathers have taken, you will acquire fresh Strength and Power; therefore whatever befalls you, never fall out one with another.”*

Overall, the experience of the Heritage and Education Site would be one of a town square which is inclusive of its residents and its rich history, and allows for rest, play, education, and enjoyment.

## Specific Recommendations Related to the Columbus Monument

Many of the Committee members view the monument as reminiscent of European piazza-style art and fountain creations, and that the water element is lovely. Critical understanding was reached about the offensive parts of the monument and all agreed to some modifications. These modifications include the removal of the heads of Indigenous People of the Plains atop the granite spire, and the removal of the bas relief plaques “Columbus bringing Christianity to the New World” and “Columbus returning to Queen Isabella’s Court.” No matter what else happens to the monument, the Committee agrees that action on these modifications would be a symbol of good faith towards the healing of historical wounds.

The removal of the Columbus statue atop the monument is seen by many of the Committee members as a necessary step for our community in terms of recognition of the tragic outcomes of the Columbus voyages for indigenous peoples, and for the opening of the slave trade as the economic basis for the U.S. success as a world power. This portion of the Committee is adamant that positive regard for the Italian American community and to their contributions to the life, culture, and building of the city of Syracuse should not be confused with the removal of the statue. There is no intent on the part of those asking for the removal of Columbus to have this action be seen as an affront to the Italian American community of Syracuse.

It is important to note here that some Committee members do not attribute the atrocities against Indigenous people and the subsequent outcomes to Columbus himself. For them, the removal of the Columbus statue is a step too far. They would like to see the monument remain, with modifications as identified above, with the proposed Heritage and Education site around it, suggesting that education is furthered if they exist concurrently. An example of this sentiment is that if the statue of Columbus remains atop the monument, with the modifications mentioned, then other statues representing other groups be erected in the park, alongside the creation of the Heritage and Education site.

As the Mayor works to reduce community tension, build civic unity, and grow compassion for each of the journeys of the many peoples residing here, he will need to address the reason behind modifications and/or removal of the statue as well as the impact on the many different constituencies that make up our community. It was often mentioned by various CCAC members that the very presence of the statue has forced the community to have difficult conversations. The Committee feels that dialogue across our diverse community about these critical equity issues is needed, no matter what happens with the monument.

## Scenario Building

The continuing differences of opinion among the CCAC about what should happen to the monument were apparent, which resulted in different scenarios that were named and discussed. Here is a synopsis of each of these scenarios along with the pros and cons named throughout CCAC discussions:

### **Scenario A: Modifications of the Monument with the Heritage and Education Site in Powelson Park**

In this scenario, the monument would remain mostly intact, but physical changes would be made. The heads of Indigenous People of the Plains and the two bas relief plaques aforementioned in the report are removed. Two new plaques are commissioned to replace them, which would describe Columbus as a navigator, scientist and explorer.

In this scenario, proposed with the approval of the Columbus Monument Corporation (CMC), the CMC commits to giving public recognition by honoring a non-Italian minority or refugee member of the community at their annual luncheon , giving \$1000 per year to the Onondaga Historical Association to support field trips to the Skä•noñh Great Law of Peace Center and raising from its supporters \$25,000 toward the development of a Heritage and Education site in Powelson Park, or to be used immediately to make park improvements.

**Pros:** This scenario allows the Syracuse Italian community to retain the visible symbol of its pride in its culture and the locus of its annual celebration space. The proposal acknowledges that the statue is offensive to many in the community. Supporters of this scenario suggest that by pairing the existing Columbus Monument with an ongoing series of artworks dealing with the themes of oppression and exclusion, Syracuse would be confronting history rather than removing a historically important piece of art from public space. Education is an important piece of this proposal.

**Cons:** This proposal would not be acceptable to the Syracuse community seeking social justice if Columbus's statue remained. His presence at the top of the monument is at the core of resistance that resulted from oppression attributed to the European voyages. To them, the Columbus Monument is not merely an egregious statue, but a looming reminder of colonialism's ongoing attempts to eradicate Indigenous Peoples as well as to enslave and criminalize Black and African peoples. Changes to the statue on top of the pedestal are seen to be a critical part of a path to healing from those who are part of, or allies of, oppressed groups. The statue, like other U.S. statues, could be vandalized or unlawfully removed, causing expense, outrage, arrests, and continued controversy.

### **Scenario B: Remove all the Metal Pieces of the Monument, and Honor Italian Families on the Obelisk**

This proposal addressed the need to bring healing through the removal of the Columbus statue, while also keeping the legacy of the Italian-American community. In this scenario, the Columbus statue, the heads of Indigenous people of the

plains, and the bas relief plaques are removed. The obelisk and the water features remain. On the obelisk, the names of the families who donated to the Columbus statue in the late 1920s and 1930s are engraved, so that their legacy is preserved. The engraving stating that the monument was given as a gift to the city by Italians would remain. Additionally, context would be added near the monument to tell the story of how the Italian-American community came together during that time period to stand up against their own oppression, and to solidify their place in the community through the gifting of the monument to the City of Syracuse. Finally, a Heritage and Education site would be developed on the sites of the current Columbus Circle and Powelson Park, making it a seamless site for education and heritage history.

While this scenario holds that Columbus is removed, there was significant conversation in several meetings about a different Italian figure who could better represent the humanitarian and globally accepted hero status that all in the community could honor. People mentioned as important Italians during Committee meetings are, but not limited to, Amadeo Giannini, Lee Iacocca, Dr. Goffredo Gensini.

**Pros:** The monument would remember the legacy of the Italian-American community of Syracuse, but all the offending pieces including the Columbus statue would be removed in deference to the multi-cultural community's understanding of what Columbus and his voyages represent vis-a-vis oppression. The Italian-American community could still engage in its celebrations at the site and honor the Italian families who first came to Syracuse. The Committee wants to recognize and honor the history and importance of the Columbus monument to the Italian-American community while also addressing the impact of Columbus and his voyages on the people of this land. If the substitution of a different figure were chosen, the original monument as the pride of Syracuse's Italian community would remain largely intact without offense to anyone. Committee members urge that if the statue is removed, that it be done with solemnity, not celebration, in order to respect what the statue has meant to the families that helped to erect it. The Italian community could be fully engaged in determining a new path for its monument. Retaining the current modified monument would not preclude an Education and Heritage Site contiguous to it.

**Cons:** Many Italian-American people, especially those whose families are deeply attached to the statue of Columbus, would be very sad and angry if it were removed. It has also been noted that all of the names of the people and families who contributed to the monument are not individually recorded, so the engraving of some would leave others out.

### **Scenario C: Remove the Entire Monument and Build a Heritage and Education Site**

In an attempt to bring about healing to the community, and to instill local and communal pride, this scenario proposes to refocus the area to create a local and tourist attraction that would educate people on local history and celebrate the cultures that are present in this region. Here, the focus wouldn't be on national figures, such as Columbus, but on local figures who have made an impact in Central New York and beyond. Included in this scenario is a place to tell the story of Italian-Americans and the history of the Columbus statue, but it would be given the same amount of space as the other stories which make up Syracuse. This scenario would also make space to educate about the oppression of people throughout history on this land, and to lift up the stories and contributions of the Onondaga Nation. Art and culture would be represented throughout the entire site, and it would be an intentional place in the city of Syracuse to focus on cultural celebrations and events.

**Pros:** There is strong sentiment among the Committee that a new public space, forward-thinking and widely representative of many groups, is needed in our community to not only celebrate our diversity, but also to reckon

with a long history of injustice and oppression inflicted upon specific groups of people. The Committee is deeply aware of the presence of the Onondaga Nation and its people in the midst of this conversation, as well as how Syracuse historically has served as an important immigrant and refugee center that has allowed us to become culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse. Many new voices and artists could be brought forth in this process. An entirely new central city park would become a source of pride, tourist attraction, and education, not only for our own community, but for generations to come.

**Cons:** The removal of the entire monument would be a source of sorrow and anger for many in the Italian-American community. The expense of an entirely new configuration would be significant.

#### **Scenario D: Columbus Monument Stays and Tells the Story of Pain**

Throughout the committee's work a common theme has been that oppression is a thread that connects us all. This scenario proposes to keep the monument up (with the common ground modifications, see #3, page 2) and surround the statue with content that educates and creates further dialogue about Columbus, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the accurate and true history of Native peoples, African Americans, and the groups identified previously. This way we confront our history through education.

**Pros:** While this proposal did not enjoy wide support in the committee, it is worth mentioning because doing this would retain a relic of our community's history, while re-establishing it in the context of our ability to understand racism and oppression in THIS time period. Some communities have done this with their Confederate statues.

**Cons:** Many on the committee feel that leaving it up, even in this contextual way, will continue to inflame historical trauma about oppression. Also, there is much disagreement in the perception of Columbus and the historical facts, so establishing the educational content would be of critical importance but might be contested by differing viewpoints and understandings in the same way that this committee struggled. Further, the statue and the monument are still offensive to many and are subject to vandalism.

#### **Scenario E: Remove the Pedestal and Lower the Columbus Statue, Placing it Alongside Other Statues of Similar Size and Scope**

This scenario addresses the identified issue that Columbus' position on the monument is viewed by many as a representation of power and dominance. This is the mindset that most in the group challenge and consider the root cause of oppression. Moving Columbus from atop the monument to a lower level where the statue would be on the same level as other figures removes Columbus as a source of celebration and removes the physical representation of dominance. Other statues of celebrated figures from other cultural groups in Syracuse could then be commissioned and displayed alongside Columbus, which would create a vision of equality among all groups.

**Pros:** To many, Columbus represented dominance, which has been enforced by violence and the establishment of oppressive laws, and with the support of the church. By removing him from the pedestal, and bringing Columbus down to the ground, the symbol of dominance is removed, and places equal value on our many stories and histories.

**Cons:** The symbolic nature of this proposal may be lost on many people, and therefore the Columbus statue will still be seen as a symbol of dominance. If the statue is brought down to a lower level, on par with other figures of celebration, this continues the pain caused by those who come across the statue in a public space, and therefore

continues the conflict. A concern for public damage to the statue would increase, as the statue would be more accessible on at ground level. Additionally, the size and scope of the statue is not conducive to eye-level viewing, and the creation of other statues at an 11-foot stature does not seem feasible.

## A Final Note

The committee recognizes that removing Columbus from the monument is contentious among the assembled Committee, strongly contested by a subset of the Committee, and would be a source of pain for many Italian Americans living locally today. The Committee members also recognize that keeping the statue is contentious among this assembled Committee, strongly contested, and would continue the conflict and the source of pain for many in the community. Some have recommended that the statue become a part of a museum so that the story of the Italian people can be told, including the story of the statue's creation. Others have suggested that the statue should be returned to the Italian-American community (specifically the Columbus Monument Corporation) so that they can decide what to do with it in the future, whether it is to store it or place it on private lands. Still others remain steadfast that the statue remain in its current location.

The Committee recommends that the Mayor's office immediately explicate the legal status of the monument, the stages of review, the commissions and committees that will be required to weigh in on changes to the monument, the information about the 1992 restoration, and the ownership of the monument to allay any questions or misunderstandings as the process of change proceeds.

Many on the Committee believes that done properly, this initiative in Syracuse could become an example for communities all over the country who are struggling with the same conundrum. Syracuse could model how to preserve history while at the same time addressing modern realities.

## Participants' Comments on the Process

"To be open minded is harder than I thought it would be!"

"We have things in common. The journey to find the and to peace is worth it."

"I have appreciated the openness, the sharing of our visions, and our trust in each other."

"This process is difficult, worthwhile, and needed."

"This is difficult because our stories have a personal dimension, and there is more than one side to the story. We have to acknowledge that."

"Consensus is a myth – but getting along is possible. To listen instead of to always speak has helped me to hear."

"I feel gratitude and have never been more proud to be an American, honoring and respecting one another. In these divided times, it has been refreshing and uplifting."

"I am trying to listen and be respectful."

"This is difficult but I am glad to be here."

"What we bring to the table is the affirmation of each other's humanity."

"What we do matters. We all have visions and aspirations, deep values that overlap, and concerns for our ancestors and our descendants."

"I have learned about Italian oppression which I did not know about before."

"This is a group of individuals at ease speaking their minds. We all have a lot to learn."

"A lot of information needed to be presented, and it's important to clarify details and facts to have a shared understanding."

"I am surprised and pleased to be asked to serve. Respect and honoring is important to everyone."

"I appreciate the open-mindedness and ready to go to the next level while also ready to give my input."

"I am more willing to stretched about my perceptions."

"I still have a lot more to learn."

## Columbus Circle Action Group Participants

Haji Adan  
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Rita Paniagua  
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### **Columbus Circle Action Committee Facilitators:**

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