

DAILY COMMERCIAL

Opinion

Jimmy Conner: Campione kept statue relocation secret

By Jimmy Conner / Special to the Daily Commercial

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I read with interest Mae Hazelton's submission to the Daily Commercial accusing County Commissioner Leslie Campione of lying in a letter she wrote claiming the law required the Confederate statue to be relocated inside a museum.

I researched the issue and the chairman of the State Relocation Committee did not say the statue must be placed in a museum as Campione claimed. A review of the process the commission undertook to relocate the statue to Lake County reveals a disturbing pattern of dishonesty, deception and unfairness to our citizens.

Most disturbing is Campione's stunning admission in her correspondence the county and museum curator Bob Grenier agreed to keep the relocation meeting held in Tallahassee secret or, in her words, "low key." That means the relocation process was done behind the public's back, without the public's knowledge.

As a result, opponents of the statue, including the African-American community, were denied any opportunity to voice opposition before the Relocation Committee because the date and location of the meeting was purposefully concealed. This is unethical and should be illegal. Decisions like these must be made in the sunshine, not in secret. Regardless of one's position on the statue, certainly we all can agree the "low key" approach by the county treated opponents of the statue like second-class citizens.

As a native of Lake County, in my youth, I saw first hand the rampant racism during the '60s and beyond. The Ku Klux Klan had a strong presence here and even marched in parades. I remember being frightened by the white hoods and my dad telling me “anyone who spreads hate is up to no good.”

I also remember two water fountains in the historic Courthouse. One said “white” the other said “colored.” This is the same building black men were beaten and even killed for no reason other than being black. Lake County was widely known for its racism particularly in law enforcement.

Thankfully, over the past 60 years, our county has made monumental progress in race relations. We are blessed having wonderful relationships with our African-American community throughout all of Lake County. We have made a successful transition from our sordid racist past to one of living together in harmony with love and respect for our fellow brothers and sisters regardless of color.

Sadly, here we are 60 years — over half a century later — and three county commissioners — Campione, Tim Sullivan and Josh Blake — have singlehandedly destroyed decades of racial healing by engaging in a secret, underhanded process that treated opponents of the statue like second-class citizens. By bringing this racist Confederate statue of a general who had no ties to Lake County, Campione, Sullivan and Blake have done irreparable harm to the people of Lake County.

Those of us who oppose this racist statue are not going to allow three commissioners to silence our voices. We are not going away. We urge Campione, Sullivan and Blake to acknowledge the process was flawed and to send this issue back to the Relocation Committee for a fair public rehearing so all citizens can be heard this time.

Jimmy Conner served as county commissioner from 2008-2016.