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Messy fight over Columbus statue blurs political lines as Syracuse barrels toward mayoral race

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The Columbus Monument, in Columbus Circle was designed by the Syracuse-born architect, Dwight James Baum in 1934. This circle is one of the most popular places in Syracuse for gathering and sitting. It is surrounded by the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, the County Court House and the County's John H. Mulroy Civic

By **Chris Baker | cbaker@syracuse.com**

Syracuse, N.Y. — For almost a year, supporters of Syracuse’s Columbus statue have waged a war on Ben Walsh -- one that’s become increasingly political as a mayoral election nears.

The Columbus Monument Corporation has put a target on the mayor for his decision last October to remove and replace the tribute to the Italian-born explorer.

They plastered neighborhoods with lawn signs and billboards bearing Walsh’s name. They’ve contacted political parties to register their displeasure with Walsh. They’ve produced and promoted video ads calling Walsh unqualified and uninformed. And they’ve sued the mayor in state Supreme Court, asking a judge to block the statue’s removal and accusing Walsh of criminal activity.

Despite Walsh’s decree, the statue still stands. It’s almost certain to remain standing throughout Walsh’s bid for a second term as the legal case makes its way through the courts.

The prolonged fight has blurred lines between politics and policy as Walsh fights for four more years and the Columbus group fights to preserve its monument.

The Monument Corporation’s leaders say their battle is not a political one, and that the election is irrelevant to their efforts. But critics say that group’s behavior is brazenly political, and their actions violate laws barring non-profits from political activity.

Joseph Heath, general counsel for the Onondaga Nation, said the group has made a concerted effort to crush Walsh politically, and that they’re dragging out the fight in an election year.

“For them to say they’re not political is just a lie,” Heath said. “That’s what they’re about right now -- defeating [Walsh] in November.”

‘Highly motivated’

The Columbus Monument Corporation has raised around \$30,000 since last year in its fight to save the statue. About half of that has been spent on lawn signs, billboards, a legal battle and an active website, according to board member Nick Pirro.

Pirro said all of those efforts drive toward a singular goal: preserving the monument. Walsh, then, is their target only because he's the one who decided it should come down.

"Our entire focus is to preserve the statue," said Pirro, a Republican who is a former Onondaga County Executive. "It just happens to be an election year. Whether it was last year or next year it would be the same situation. We're doing everything we can not to get involved."

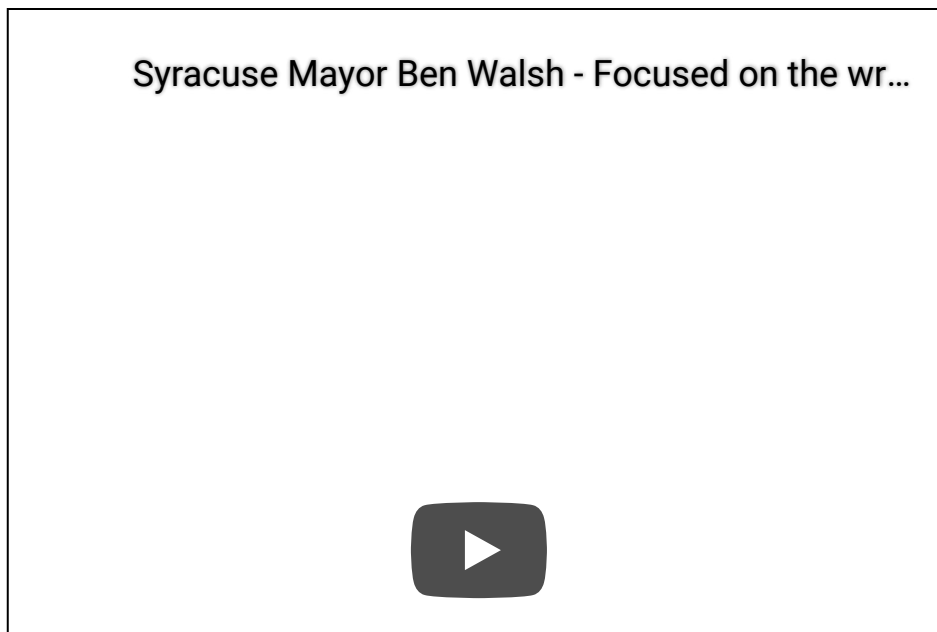
The website, however, has frequently lambasted Walsh on issues beyond the statue, from crime to police spending to slumlords.

"Italian lives matter," reads a post from April 14. "Let's make our city safer before we worry about scenic statues downtown. Syracuse had 105 rapes last year. Murders – 20. None of those victims care about the Columbus statue. Most city residents don't either. It is one of the 4 nice areas downtown."

Another post, from April 23, criticizes Walsh's experience.

"The mayor is too young and uninformed to understand the history of the city he 'runs'. It's very sad," the post says.

The group produced and publicized a series of video ads attacking Walsh in April, including one titled "Ben Walsh: Focused on the wrong things." The ad portrays the city as a dystopian hellscape plagued by crime, chaos, broken pipes and potholes.



Those posts and others have drawn attention from critics.

At least two people filed complaints with the New York Attorney General's Charities Bureau, according to documents obtained by syracuse.com. Those complaints alleged the organization is improperly engaging in political activity, which would violate the rules that govern a non-for-profit.

"This group of retired politicians has launched a multiple front, carefully orchestrated political campaign to attempt to block the mayor's re-election," said a complaint filed by Ronald VanNorstrand, a retired Syracuse attorney.

VanNorstrand also noted that the CMC sent letters to every political party while those parties were choosing candidates earlier this year. The group told parties they were "well organized, well-funded, and highly motivated."

VanNorstrand also pointed to a tweet from the Corporation in April that said:

"Ben Walsh will be knocking on your door this weekend asking for a second term. After creating turmoil like this during a pandemic—for no reason—does he deserve a second term?"

Pirro said the AG's office sent his group a letter raising concerns about several posts on the website. Those posts have since been removed, he said.

"That's been reviewed," he said. "There was something put on the website that was marginal and that was taken down; there's been no follow-up from the AG's office."

Walsh declined an interview request for this story via a spokesman, who cited the ongoing litigation. In a statement, Chief Policy Officer Greg Loh said Walsh has repeatedly invited members of the Columbus Monument Corporation to participate in redesigning the circle to pay tribute to Italian-Americans.

Why the race matters

The mayoral race could have major implications on what happens to the monument.

The Columbus Monument Corporation filed a lawsuit in May asking a judge to block Walsh from removing the statue. That case won't go before a judge until late October. The city won't remove the statue while that case is pending.

If Walsh loses his reelection bid, a new mayor would take office Jan. 1, 2022. If the statue still stands by then, that new mayor could reverse Walsh's decision and halt the removal of the statue.

Right now, Walsh's announcement is the only thing dictating the removal of the statue. An advisory group is advancing plans to redesign the site as "Heritage Park." But there's no legal mechanism under which the statue will definitely be removed.

Walsh faces two opponents in November: Republican Janet Burman and Democrat Khalid Bey. Burman has said she believes the statue should remain. Bey has repeatedly declined to take a position, saying it shouldn't be up to the mayor to decide.

The statue's supporters are betting big that they'll have a better chance of saving the statue with anyone but Walsh, though.

Natalie LoRusso, a member of the Women of Italian and Syracuse Heritage, described the CMC's efforts as a "stall tactic." They hope to delay the statue's removal while they work to get Walsh out of office, she said.

WISH is advocating for the statue to come down soon. They've made lawn signs to counter the "save Columbus" signs and are working to get them in more yards across the city.

"We're letting them know that they don't speak for all Italians," she said.

Legal action ramps up

The Columbus group filed a lawsuit in state Supreme Court in May, arguing that Walsh doesn't have the legal authority to remove the statue. In a second filing, the group accused Walsh of committing two misdemeanors.

The group accuses Walsh of falsifying business records when he filed to terminate an agreement between the city and the state to preserve the monument. The lawsuit says that filing was an attempt to thwart any legal action that might stop the removal of the monument.

Heath, the attorney, said those accusations are a stretch.

"It's not common in a civil action that you see allegations of criminal conduct," said Heath, the Onondaga attorney. "It's unwarranted."

The second filing also asks a judge to stop the city from spending public money to defend against the lawsuit or to redesign the park.

The city hired an outside law firm, Hancock Estabrook, to defend against the lawsuit. It's not yet clear how much the city has been billed.

That case will go before state Supreme Court Judge Gerald Neri at the end of October. That means it likely won't be settled before Election Day on Nov. 4.

Pirro is confident the courts will side with the statue supporters. That, he said, is their primary avenue for keeping the statue in place.

A judge in Philadelphia recently stopped the mayor there from removing a statue of Columbus. Pirro points to that ruling as a promising precedent.

"It is baffling to this court as to how the City of Philadelphia wants to remove the Statue without any legal basis," Common Pleas Court Judge Paula Patrick said in her decision. "The city's entire argument and case is devoid of any legal foundation."

That decision overturned a ruling from the city's historical commission, which voted to remove the statue from a public plaza.

Both Heath and a spokesman for Walsh, however, said Buffalo is a better model for how Syracuse should move forward.

There, the Federation of Italian-American Societies elected to remove a Columbus statue from a downtown park.

"While the Columbus monument was erected by the Federation to recognize and honor the early struggles faced by Italian immigrants in the United States, it is the desire of the current Federation to dedicate a new monument that reflects the positive history of the Italian immigrant experience," the Federation said in a statement last year.

Heath said Buffalo was able to move past the issue, thanks to that support from the Italian community. He wished the same could happen here, but said the lawsuit and the fight are making it impossible.

"The impact is harmful to the community because we can't move forward in a healing fashion," Heath said.

Pirro, however, said it's Walsh's decision that's dividing the community.

"I don't think the mayor at the time was looking at the big picture," he said.

More on the Columbus Monument

- [Columbus monument group sues Walsh, says he doesn't have authority to remove statue](#)