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Plaque would add context to Taney bust

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A proposal could turn the bust of Roger Brooke Taney in front of City Hall into an interpretive historical site following demands the sculpture be removed.

The likeness of the fifth Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and past Frederick resident drew fire this summer over his Dred Scott decision.

That judicial opinion in 1857 ruled that black people, whether free or enslaved, could never become U.S. citizens. The opinion also ruled that slaves were private property and could not be taken from their owners without due process.

Dred Scott, a slave who was taken to states where slavery was prohibited, sued for his freedom.

The proposed plaque would describe Taney's career as a judge and his decision on the landmark case.

"People will understand the full extent of the role he played in slavery," said Guy Djoken, president of the Frederick chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"People will come and see the bust and decide on it," he said.

Djoken said his organization had originally supported removing the bust but found a compromise with the proposed plaque.

Mayor Jeff Holtzinger on Tuesday met with the project's leader to discuss the wording of the monument.

Kevin Lollar, an attorney and director of development for the Housing Authority of the City of Frederick, will work with the city.

"I think we'll come up with resolution that will generally be accepted by everyone," Holtzinger said. "It sounds like it could be a reasonable approach."

The Board of Aldermen support a plaque or even more of an effort to give context to Taney's court decision.

"It is certainly not anybody's intent to use that statue to pour salt on the wounds," Alderman C. Paul Smith said.

But he added that anything approved should be as factual as possible.

"I would hate to paint him evil," Smith said.

Alderman Alan Imhoff said he was against any suggestion of removing the bust but wants an addition to the monument to educate.

"If they are going to do anything to commemorate the Dred Scott case, I want to see it as an educational piece not a simple plaque to be stuck in the ground," he said.

Aldermen as well as individuals and organizations will have a chance to give their input on the wording of the monument.

"I'm pleased they've given us the opportunity to comment on this," said Mark Hudson, executive director of the Historical Society of Frederick County.

He said he doesn't want the Dred Scott case to be oversimplified or present Taney with bias. But, he said he's been pleased with what he has seen so far.

"In general, what I've seen here is a pretty fair presentation of Taney's career and the Dred Scott case," he said.



Photo by Staff file photo by Skip Lawrence

The bust of Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney stands in front of Frederick City Hall. The city is considering adding a plaque to the bust detailing his Supreme Court decision on slavery.