

Statement: Charlottesville Protests

[What follows is the statement written for the Durham County Commissioners in the aftermath of the Charlottesville protests and was issued in response to the tearing-down of a Confederate statue, after which protestors were taken into custody. Here is a link to coverage of the resulting Commissioners meeting: <https://indyweek.com/news/durham/much-confederate-monument-worth>]

A little more than two weeks ago, District Attorney Roger Echols asked the board of commissioners to assess and declare the value of the Confederate statue that was removed from the courthouse grounds back in August. As we understand it, this valuation will be seriously considered by Mr. Echols, as he continues to investigate the events of last month. For this reason, we have taken these two weeks to carefully analyze the worth of the former statue as well as reflect on its historical value to our community.

If the Confederate statue had been private property, Mr. Echols' request would be simple enough: we would merely need to determine the statue's financial worth. But the statue was not owned by a private citizen—it was instead owned by the community, which made the statue a public good. It was owned, if you will, by the people of Durham. Now, the difficulty in assessing the value of a public good is that its value cannot be explicitly linked to its cost. The cost of our police force, for example, is the salary that we pay our officers, but their value is tied to the safety that they provide for our community. The cost of our bridges and roads is what we pay in maintenance, but their value is found in the access that they provide to our citizens and their ability to bring our community together. These are both good examples of why we tend to describe such public goods as 'invaluable'.

A public statue is a more difficult case. In many instances, we could calculate the cost of a monument as the fee charged for installation or the market price for its materials. However, because of its status as a public good, the value of the former statue is reflected in the story that it told about our community; we have been tasked with determining the value of a monument that represented a complicated and divisive history. For some, it was a monument to ancestry and political strife. To many, it represented oppression, persecution and overt racial discrimination. The history of this statue must play a large role in our valuation; so, too, must the character of our city.

Durham is a community that has always acknowledged its past, but we are also a community that has embraced diversity, opportunity and equality. Durham is a community that values the lineage of the progress we've achieved, not the era we chose to leave behind. We are a community that values our history of opposition to oppression, not the history of our opposition to freedom. This fundamental attitude is intrinsic to our city, and it is what makes our citizens proud to live here.

In asking us to assign value to the statue, Mr. Echols is asking us to complete the impossible task of quantifying our community's values. What we have found is that we cannot quantify the emotional toll our neighbors felt when faced with our history of oppression, nor can we quantify the importance of inclusivity and freedom. The valuation of a public good is qualitative in nature—it cannot be determined through a quantitative assessment.

Instead, all we can provide Mr. Echols is whatever collective wisdom we've acquired over the 15 terms our respective commissioners have been chosen to serve by our community. Our determination has been informed both by Durham's attitude toward the statue itself as well as its status as a public good. We

ultimately believe that the Confederate statue did not reflect the character of our city. Its value was little when compared to the legacy of compassion and progress that our city is hoping to achieve.

Sincerely,

The Durham County Commissioners