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The buzz around the Maltby Oak tree and Confederate monument in Palatka continued Tuesday during the Putnam County Board of Commissioners meeting.

Several local residents spoke out in support of the tree and statue after hundreds of people attended a protest Thursday in support of removing the items from the courthouse lawn, which is county property.

“We need to keep our history,” Palatka resident Claudia Wilkinson said during the meeting.

The board did not make a decision regarding the tree or the statue because the item was not on the agenda. Commissioners agreed to bring the issue to a future county workshop.

The comments came less than a week after the PEACE in the STREETS rally that took place at the courthouse. Organizers Dar’Nesha Leonard and Tevel Adams argued at the demonstration for removing the Maltby Oak and the statue because they represented a darker time in history.

They want the statue moved to a museum or to a place where it could be appreciated for its history. Adams and Leonard said the tree costs too much to maintain and the oak can be removed and replaced with a new tree. They also said the tree is a reminder of lynchings committed against AfricanAmerican, although no lynchings took place specifically on the Maltby Oak, according to county historians.

“It’s intimidating as a member of the black community to go into a courthouse to find justice with a Confederate soldier statue standing in front of me,” Leonard said during Tuesday’s meeting.

The majority of residents at the meeting, however, argued in favor of keeping the statue and tree. Some people, such as East Palatka resident Mary Townsend, became emotional at the thought of removing the oak tree.

“Y’all need to look at the big picture,” Townsend said. “Black Lives Matter put their foot in there to try to take the statue down and the tree down as a symbol. After that, they’re going to try and defund the police, abolish the police.”

From there, the Black Lives Matter movement will come in and take away a white person’s right to vote, she said.

“It all starts from the tree and the statue and I don’t feel good about it,” she said while getting choked up.

Palatka resident Allegra Kitchens was also against removing the tree and statue. She said the people asking to remove both are “racially biased” because the tree was not involved with any lynchings.

“The tree genus Quercus, commonly known as the oak tree, is the national tree of the United States,” Kitchens said. “It’s the national tree of the United States. Removing that tree would be the same thing as killing a bald eagle, which is a symbol of its country. Perhaps that’s why they want the tree removed, because it’s a symbol of the country.”

Residents also said they did not want to become like Jacksonville.

The city removed a Confederate monument around 4 a.m. Tuesday without notifying Jacksonville residents.

East Palatka resident Judy Adams said trying to erase history is “futile.”

“If you’re offended by that something that you see as a part of our history, you need to use that as a teachable moment,” Judy Adams said. “There’s a cost factor involved in this and I’m a little resentful that we’re talking about the health of the tree all of a sudden here now. That’s not the case at all.

“This is a racist issue that’s been very clearly brought out (by) Black Lives Matter very closely associated with Antifa. ... I’m offended. ... This is just one more attempt to try to bulldoze a mindset that is going to disappear after a while. The tree should stay. My Lord, the tree should stay.”

Interlachen resident Judy Lucia said she didn’t know why anyone would want to kill a living oak tree.

“Somebody was over (at the courthouse) the other day destroying the monument, trying to burn the tree down, and now Black Lives Matter has a flag underneath the United States of America (flag),” Lucia said. “Is that right? No.”

The Palatka Daily News checked the courthouse grounds Tuesday after the meeting. The Confederate statue showed no signs of defacement, and no Black Lives Matter flag was flying at the courthouse. A black and white POW flag was flying below the U.S. flag.

Palatka resident Ed Killebrew suggested a compromise because he’s seen firsthand the effects of racism and hate. Killebrew suggested moving the Confederate statue and planting a new tree because “that thing’s ugly.”

He said the county put a considerable amount of money into keeping the tree when an issue for the county has always been how to save money.

“I was raised in (hate and bigotry). My grandfather, who was a Baptist minister ... was a treasurer of a (Ku Klux Klan chapter) here. It was nothing unusual as a child,” Killebrew said. “We still have a long way to go, but I’m going to leave you with that word ‘compromise.’ There has to be some compromise to get through this.”

Commissioner Jeff Rawls also spoke in favor of compromising. He said he grew up living in areas including Japan, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Libya and other parts of North Africa.

“I know what it’s like to be discriminated against,” Rawls said. “I really think we need to take a deep breath and follow Mr. Killebew and reach for compromise but not, by all means, not forget history.”

About two dozen people attended the meeting, with social distancing. It was the board’s first in-person meeting since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

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