

By Sarah Cavacini scavacini@palatkadailynews.com June 20, 2020 Publication: Palatka Daily News (FL) Page: A1 Word Count: 539

The Palatka City Commission declared Juneteenth a city holiday Friday during a special meeting on the steps of City Hall.

The holiday celebrates the official end of slavery. Although, President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery Jan. 1, 1863, the news did not reach Texas until June 19, 1865.

“We stand here today on this momentous occasion as an opportunity for this city to celebrate true freedom of America,” Mayor Terrill Hill said during the meeting.

Hill wants the holiday to be a teaching moment for people who may not know about Juneteenth.

The decision to make Juneteenth a holiday was unanimously passed by the commission. The holiday allowed city employees a half-day off Friday to celebrate the freedom the holiday commemorates.

Hill said making it a holiday is a fresh start for Palatka and with the hate in the world he hopes the city will be a haven for unity.

Commissioner Justin Campbell said acknowledging the holiday is one step closer to creating inclusion.

“This is not the beginning, but it’s a continuation to make sure that every heritage within our community is recognized,” Campbell said.

The proclamation comes one day after Hill asked for removal of the Confederate statue outside the Putnam County Courthouse. He said the county statue represents America’s dark past of slavery and said the monument “dishonors” fallen World War I soldiers.

A protest at the courthouse June 4 called for removal of the statue and the Maltby Oak Tree. The tree, protesters said, is a symbol of lynchings. No hangings have ever taken place on the Maltby Oak specifically, but protesters said the idea of the tree still invokes fear in the African-American community.

Protest organizers also said the monument should be moved to a museum or place where people can learn from the statue’s history. They said it should not be in front of the courthouse where legal matters occur because it is intimidating to people looking for justice.

The statue and tree are on county property and the decision to remove them must go through county officials. Residents against the removals spoke out at the Putnam County Board of Commissioners meeting June 9. Many said they did not want to see history removed and became emotional as the meeting continued.

Although no decision has been made by county commissioners, the issue will be discussed at a county workshop in July.

Commissioner Rufus Borom said he was happy to see Palatka as an “early adopter” of Juneteenth.

“I thank the city of Palatka for embracing this day and, again, we would love for everybody to embrace it and support us in this cause,” he said.

Commissioner Mary Lawson Brown said people need to be thinking about peace when it comes to celebrating Juneteenth.

“I have gone through integration, segregation and seen a lot of things that have gone on. Some changed for good. Some didn’t,” Brown said. “But if we keep an open mind and communicate and work together, this city can be the best city it can be.”

Palatka Daily News (FL)

Date: June 20, 2020

Page: A1

Copyright © 2020 Palatka Daily News, Community Newspapers, Inc. All Rights Reserved.