

Coming Together While Staying (6') Apart

Emily Kilroy, Albemarle County, Director of Communications & Public Engagement

COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on how local governments provide services to our communities, most visibly among our public safety and human services functions. As Governor Northam began to announce gathering restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, local governments found themselves quickly planning for how to address another pressing need - how do you design a civic engagement process – how we come together as a community, safely, to tackle a pressing issue – when we have to remain apart?

Localities across the nation have been grappling, with a renewed focus in recent weeks, on whether and how to confront the harmful legacies of monuments, memorials, and markers that tell incomplete or racist stories about our history. In Virginia, 2020 General Assembly legislative session included the passage of Senate Bill 183 and House Bill 1537, which will be in effect by the time you read this article, to give localities the ability to remove, relocate, contextualize, or cover the monuments or war memorials in their communities.

Albemarle County's historic Courthouse Square sits on a parcel of land in the center of the City of Charlottesville, which was never annexed due to its historical location as the County Seat. Over the past several decades, Court Square - Circuit Courthouse Grounds, has become host to memorials and historic objects in Albemarle's history. In 1909, a statue of a generic, armed Confederate soldier named, "At Ready" was ordered from a catalog and installed at Court Square, flanked by two Napoleon-style canons.

This past winter, in anticipation of this authority, Albemarle County launched the Court Square Community Conversations, a series of engagement opportunities to build a shared understanding of our full history and to have a conversation as a community about what we would like our historic courthouse grounds to reflect about our community's values today and project into the future. The original project included a monthly lunch-hour speaker series, guided tours of the site, and a series of listening sessions. All of which were designed to foster dialogue amongst a range of viewpoints – and none of which were permitted to proceed as scheduled under Governor Northam's "Safe At Home" policy.

Once the organization stabilized operations under the new operating restrictions, we brought our team back together to explore how we could still bring the community together to have this discussion in a meaningful and inclusive way. We identified a platform that streamlines content and facilitates comments, and then took each project component and drafted a plan for how to bring it online. Our guided tour has become a video with some guided questions. Our speaker series has become a webinar series. Our listening sessions have become video-chats. All of our events have a call-in option so that members of the community without internet access can still participate.

When we first began exploring creating a public forum online, a lot of questions were raised – will participants commit to respectful and inclusive discourse, will it be over-run by participants from outside of our community, will anyone bother to participate? While we have not yet held any of our "live" virtual events, over 150 people have joined the discussion – the vast majority through local IP addresses and authentically interested in sharing their experience and their feedback on this important community question.

Emily Kilroy
Director, Communications & Public Engagement
Albemarle County, VA

434-296-5841
ekilroy@albemarle.org
www.albemarle.org