

February 27, 2024

To: Mayor and Councilors of Washington Grove

Comments of David Cosson on recommendation to rename McCathran Hall

I have read the RASEC Recommendation that the Town rename McCathran Hall as Town Hall. RASEC asserts that this action would be an appropriate application of the provision in Resolution 2023-01 that calls on the Mayor and Council to “...take steps that undo the effects of systemic racism, bias, discrimination and inequities which impact the quality of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for Town residents and our neighbors;”

As a Town Councilor I voted in favor of Resolution 2023-01 and continue to believe it was properly and necessarily adopted. I do not believe, however, for the reasons stated below, that the Council should adopt this recommendation. The admonition of the Resolution to “take steps” must be understood to mean reasonable and justifiable steps that do not do more harm than good.

Renaming of buildings and removal of statutes in public places has been a matter of intense public discussion in many areas of the Country over the last ten years or so. Many of these changes were well justified, despite protests alleging “destroying history.” For example, statutes honoring men who took oaths as U.S. Army officers to defend the Constitution and then fought for the Confederacy. Others were not justified such as San Francisco’s January 2021 decision (quickly rescinded) to remove the names of Geroge Washington and Abraham Lincoln, among others, from public schools.

The renaming movement has been particularly active at Colleges and Universities where buildings are often named after founders, large donors, or distinguished alumni. Many of these schools, recognizing the need for thorough and balanced analysis of competing values, first adopted principles to apply in deciding whether to rename buildings. I have read several of these and found most of the [principles adopted by Yale in 2016](#) to be suitable for use in analysis of the RASEC recommendation. I have listed the relevant principles and explanations followed by my comments [The principles are stated in bold, Yale’s discussion is in italic.]

A. Presumptions: Renaming on account of values should be an exceptional event. *There is a strong presumption against renaming a building on the basis of the values associated with its namesake. Such a renaming should be considered only in exceptional circumstances.*

Comment: At worst, the allegations against Roy McCathran are that he acted in some instances in ways that although common among his peers at the time are now recognized as harmful to minorities. Whatever we think of these acts now, they were not *exceptional*.

B. Principles to be considered: Sometimes renaming on the basis of values is warranted. *Is a principal legacy of the namesake fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University?*

Comment: Note the emphasis on *principal legacy*. The point here is that the entire legacy of the namesake should be considered and renaming should occur where the principal legacy is one that is fundamentally at odds with the institution. The actions complained of were not the

principal legacy of a man who successfully guided this community through the transition from Camp Meeting to Incorporated Municipality and continued to lead the Town through its formative years to the great benefit of its residents. (See, Comments of Phil Edwards for details.)

C. Was the relevant principal legacy significantly contested in the time and place in which the namesake lived? *An important reason to attend to the standards of a namesake's time and place is that doing so recognizes the moral fallibility of those who aim to evaluate the past.*

Comment: While, as explained above, the actions complained of were not Roy McCathran's "principal legacy", I have not seen any indication that the actions found today to be offensive were "significantly contested" at the time, if at all.

D. Did the University, at the time of a naming, honor a namesake for reasons that are fundamentally at odds with the mission of the University? *[UNC Chapel Hill] trustees nonetheless changed the name of the building when they discovered that university leaders had believed Saunders was a Klan leader and viewed this belief as reason to name the building in his honor.*

Comment: I am not aware of any information or indication that those making the decision to honor Roy McCathran by naming the hall after him did so because they wanted to celebrate blackface minstrel shows or anyone involved with creating the original property deeds.

E. The University ought to adopt a formal process for considering whether to alter a building name on account of the values associated with its namesake; such a process should incorporate community input and scholarly expertise.

Comment: The Town, of course, is not a university, or even a small college, but it is a community and its actions should be structured to ensure they reflect the values of the entire community. The implications of renaming any town location, e.g. buildings, roads and parks, should be examined and explained in a way that allows full participation of all residents, preferably at a Town Meeting.

Conclusion: When the recommendation is evaluated utilizing the foregoing five principles, I conclude that the actions described do not warrant the "exceptional event" of removing Roy McCathran's name from the Town hall. The actions are not his "principal legacy;" they were not unusual or contested at the time; the decision to name the hall after him was not motivated by a desire to honor him for those actions; and the Town has not adopted principles for evaluating such requests.