PRESS RELEASE

What Use Is A County Mediation Office That Cannot Schedule Mediation? Bethesda African Burial Ground Mediation, Endorsed by Leggett and Berliner, Unilaterally Cancelled

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Bethesda, Maryland—“Our community is horrified that first generation free Africans, whose bodies were bought and sold at slave markets in Maryland should, after 140 years be bought again by a $14 billion corporation and sold again by Montgomery County.”

—Robert Dyer, testifying before the Montgomery County Council

The Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) plans to build a parking garage and housing over a known African-American burial ground (Moses Cemetery) on the Westwood Towers site in Bethesda. In response to this horror, Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett and Council President Roger Berliner urged stakeholders to engage in mediation, recommending the Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County (“Center”). The goal was to enable the descendant community, HOC, the County, Montgomery County Planning Board staff and the developer Regency to reach consensus on how to prevent further desecration of this sacred ground.

After two mediation sessions, late last week the Center unilaterally and unexpectedly terminated the mediation proceedings stating that it has “tried hard” to schedule a third session (by sending two Doodlepolls) but was unsuccessful in finding a date when every one of the nearly 2 dozen participants were available. Every single entity participating in the mediation had signed up for one or more offered dates, confirming that all stakeholders are willing to continue the mediation process.

“It is deeply troubling that the Center - endorsed by the County - would unilaterally end mediation when all parties are willing to return. How hard is it, really, to email a third Doodlepoll? Who authorized this decision, and why?” asked Ms. Coleman-Adebayo. “County officials?”

Macedonia Baptist Church, Montgomery County chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), Unitarian Universalists, the No FEAR Institute and other human rights organizations have all directly asked each of the county’s officials to intervene—to do SOMETHING definitive to protect this sacred ground. Were the County’s Executive Director of HOC, Stacy Spann, the County Executive and other County officials consulted about ending mediation? We certainly were not.
Ike Leggett and Roger Berliner originally offered mediation as a solution to resolve the core dispute - property controlled by HOC, which holds a lease to and an option to buy the land of Moses Cemetery and its plans to develop this sacred ground with a parking garage and housing. Macedonia has made repeated direct requests of HOC to 1) allow us to begin a study into the cemetery delineation and 2) acknowledge that the cemetery takes precedence over HOC’s plans to build on top of it.

The simple truth is that the mediation offered an opportunity for good faith dialogue between the parties. But when it became clear that HOC held all of the aces regarding access to and disposition of the cemetery HOC’s Board of Directors – at a recent open meeting-refused to declare its position on granting us permission to delineate our ancestors’ final resting place and refuses to acknowledge that that hallowed ground trumps HOC’s desire to build there.

We should not have to say that this is unacceptable, but given the County’s consistent display of hubris we must say: This is unacceptable.

The County, for its part, could have done the right thing a very long time ago when first, in the mid-1900s it facilitated the theft of the land that was once a thriving African community on River Road in Bethesda where a Whole Foods now stands. Unlike the community they purport to serve, however, current county officials have shown no revulsion at the idea of once again facilitating the sale of the bodies of our ancestors to the highest bidder.

Mr. Leggett, Mr. Berliner, Mr. Spann, Mr. Elrich, Mr. Leventhal, the entire County Council, Mr. Anderson, the entire Planning Board, Ms. Wright, the entire Department of Parks and Planning and Regency Centers: We give you notice:

Our ancestors should never have been sold. We will not have them be sold again.

Macedonia calls on all members of the community who are aghast at the continued, systematic desecration of the River Road African (Moses) Cemetery to join our efforts to MAKE the county do what is right—even if our elected officials can’t find the way to make themselves do it out of their own sense of conscience.

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