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February 26, 2024

**Public Comments of the Olmsted Network**

Via email, [comments@cityofnewburgh-ny.gov](mailto:comments@cityofnewburgh-ny.gov)

Good evening, everyone.

I am Dede Petri, President and CEO of the Olmsted Network. We are based in Washington, DC and have been around since 1980. Our purpose is simple: to speak for Olmsted parks. There are hundreds of Olmsted parks around the country and you know many of them – Central Park and Prospect Park being two of the most famous. We want to preserve these beautiful and restorative spaces whose value was never more evident than during the Pandemic. We speak for the parks because once these green spaces are filled with buildings and statues and hardscape, you can't get them back again.

I am commenting tonight to emphasize what a great gem you have. Downing Park is not just a local park. It is a park of national significance. It is the last great park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the famed designers of Central Park. Olmsted was an abolitionist and a social reformer. For him, parks were not just pretty places; they advanced equity and social justice. They were places where city dwellers from all backgrounds could come together to connect with nature. Rich people could go to the Adirondacks, said Olmsted. Olmsted parks were for the rest of us.

Tonight, I am making a simple request, hold public meetings on the African American memorial plans. **Honoring the dead and honoring the Park are not mutually exclusive goals. But the broader community and those who speak for the park – some of whom are attending tonight – have had no input. It's time for public information and feedback before any further action is taken regarding this public space.**

If current plans proceed, the memorial will eat up a vast amount of park space with bollards, ramps, cobblestone swells, paved parking spaces, knee walls and granite terracing. It will diminish valuable open space which has already suffered from the addition of structures and a major roadway. The plans will necessitate significant new maintenance and security expenses, noted by the Council members. Newburgh has no Parks Department and its DPW is already stretched thin. How will the City address these needs?

Taxpayers paid for a detailed park master plan in 1989. It should be revisited. Many of you raised concerns about the unsightly pergola ridden with graffiti in the viewshed of

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the memorial. Rather than addressing the memorial and pergola as separate projects, the park's future should be examined holistically.

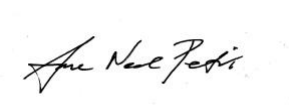
One final important question. This memorial involves human remains. To date there has been no DNA testing to identify possible descendants. Surely the families of the deceased, if they can be identified, deserve to be part of this process as well.

All of these issues need to be reviewed in the public eye. **And once they are, we believe there will be substantial reason to reconsider the siting and design of the memorial.** Downing Park is itself a memorial to famed Newburgh resident Andrew Jackson Downing. Any other important memorial deserves its own location.

If the park serves as the site, using the existing footprint of the Pergola would be far less costly and less intrusive. It would let us respect the dead and the Park.

The Olmsted Network looks forward to bringing people from across the nation to Newburgh in September to see Downing Park because of its national importance. If the Park is treated with respect, we could be just the first wave of visitors. I ask that this statement and [my letter to the Council of February 21](#) be entered into the formal public record. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,



Anne Neal Petri  
President & CEO

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*The Olmsted Network, based in Washington, DC, is proud to partner with hundreds of conservancies, friends groups, scholars, professionals and interested individuals throughout the country – and across the globe. We offer advocacy, education and stewardship support and are the leading champion for Olmsted's parks, places and principles. Learn more at [Olmsted.org](http://Olmsted.org).*

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