

Statement By the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality on the Victory in the Shockoe Bottom Stadium Struggle

Bowing to years of growing local, national and international pressure, Richmond City Council voted Nov. 10 to keep baseball on the Boulevard, where it has been played for nearly 60 years. This effectively kills – for now – the reactionary, developer-driven proposal to build a baseball stadium in historic Shockoe Bottom, once the center of the massive U.S. domestic slave trade.

As we celebrate this important victory, we call on all defenders of Black History to rededicate ourselves to reclaiming and memorializing a section of Shockoe Bottom in order to pay homage to the hundreds of thousands of Black people who suffered and resisted on this sacred ground.

BACKGROUND

This latest proposal to build a stadium in the Bottom – the fourth such proposal that we are aware of – was first raised Aug 5, 2012, in a Richmond Times-Dispatch opinion piece co-signed by Jack Berry, Executive Director of Venture Richmond, and Kim Scheeler, President and CEO of the Greater Richmond Chamber (of Commerce). These two wealthy white men represent the ruling 1 percent of the Richmond region, including the developers who stood to profit handsomely from the proposal.

Not once in their opinion piece did they mention slavery or the slave trade in which Shockoe Bottom played the central role.

An opposing opinion published two weeks later in the Times-Dispatch threw down the gauntlet, declaring, “There will be no baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom.” That piece was co-signed by Defenders Ana Edwards and Phil Wilayto; Shawn Utsey, at the time the Chair of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University; and then-Virginia State Conference NAACP Executive Director King Salim Khalfani.

It was one year ago today, on Nov. 11, 2013, that Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones unveiled the Revitalize RVA economic development plan that included as its anchor a Shockoe Bottom stadium.

From the first anti-stadium salvo in 2012, the opposition movement has grown to include hundreds of people – Black organizations such as the African Ancestral Chamber, All as One, Urban Awareness, Inc.; Nation of Gods & Earths; and the Richmond Branch NAACP. Important support came from Latino immigration rights activists and from progressive organizations like the Wayside Center for Popular Education; Collective X; Flying Brick Library; 13ainbridge Collective; Shockoe Resistance; Food Not Bombs; and many more.

Hundreds of people attended City Council meetings. More than three dozen academics and museum directors signed a statement opposing a Shockoe Bottom stadium. Close to 5,000 people have signed an anti-stadium petition. Descendants of “Twelve Years a Slave” author Solomon Northup traveled to Richmond to speak out against the stadium. Through vigil after vigil, rally after rally, protest after protest, the word spread and more and more people became involved.

The struggle reached a critical mass, resulting in global news coverage, including in The New York Times and Washington Post, the AP and Reuters news services, National Public Radio, CBB and media outlets Canada, Europe and Africa.

Earlier this year major preservationist groups took up the cause, including Preservation Virginia and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, encouraging Academy Award-winning actress Lupita Nyong'o, who played Patsy in the movie version of “Twelve Years a Slave,” to write Mayor Jones asking him to back off from the stadium proposal and instead involve the community in a genuine discussion about how to properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom.

Throughout this struggle, Venture Richmond and the Greater Richmond Chamber spent at least \$50,000 in a

slick public relations campaign to try and convince Richmonders – especially the city's Black community – that a Shockoe Bottom stadium was in their interests. Mayor Jones spent more than a half-million in taxpayer dollars on “studies” for the same purpose – while the city's public schools continued to deteriorate to the point where a group of high school students marched on City Hall demanding “Money for Schools, Not for Stadiums!”

The fight came down to a long, drawn-out public relations battle for the hearts and minds of the public. It was truly David against Goliath – and David won.

The Defenders are proud of the role we have played in this fight. As an organization that for 12 years has been fighting for “Freedom, Justice & Equality,” we were in a unique position to explain the real issues from a position of credibility. Our newspaper, The Virginia Defender, and our weekly radio program Defenders LIVE, played central roles in educating, motivating and organizing the opposition. We hosted a series of activist meetings to make sure all voices were represented in devising strategy and tactics. We supported all opposition efforts – the Baseball on the Backs of Blacks initiative, the billboard campaign, protests at the Diamond stadium, the referendum effort and more.

But we always knew the fight would come down to one thing: was the community – especially the Black community – willing to come forward and fight to defend and preserve the sacred ground of Shockoe Bottom? The answer was a resounding YES!, and last night we all succeeded in stopping the stadium.

Victory is sweet, but now it's on to the second, even more important stage of this struggle: to reclaim and properly memorialize a section of Shockoe Bottom. Working with other community advocates and organizations and the National Trust, we are moving forward with this effort. A broad set of guiding principles is being developed that will be raised and discussed at a series of community meetings around Richmond. Many voices – but especially the voices of the descendant community – will have input. Should there be a museum? An interpretive center? A genealogy center? A performing arts space? A Sacred Ground Memorial Park? Statues? Signage? Tours? All this must be decided collectively, with the Black community having the primary voice – and the primary economic benefits of any development.

And then we will encourage the City do the right thing.

As we stated in the August edition of The Virginia Defender, we are giving the City of Richmond until April 3, 2015, to demonstrate that it is serious about creating a community-driven Shockoe Bottom memorial. That date will mark the 150th anniversary of the Liberation of Richmond and the ending of more than 100 years of slavery in the city. What a travesty – an international shame – it would be if by that date the now-majority-Black former Capitol of the Confederacy has still failed to rise to the challenge of facing the city's past and moving in a united way to a better, more honest future.

If there is no progress by April 3, the Defenders will announce plans to protest at the UCI Road World Championships, the international bicycle competition scheduled for September 2015 here in Richmond. Some 400,000 visitors are expected, along with reporters from more than 100 countries and millions of television viewers.

The Defenders have been very creative in the past in finding ways to focus media and public attention on local issues. Hopefully, April 3 will be a day of celebration – both of the end of slavery in Richmond and of a process for the city to finally come to terms with its terrible past, a past directly related to most of the social and economic challenges facing Richmond today.

We strongly encourage the City – its mayor, City Council and other officials– to do the right thing.

We know that we and our allies will do the same.

The statement is issued by the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, “an all-volunteer organization of Virginia residents working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice projects.”

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