

THE ROANOKE TIMES



MOSTLY SUNNY 80 • 55 FORECAST, A10 | FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2021 | Roanoke, Virginia | roanoke.com



HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Roanoke City Arts and Culture Coordinator, Douglas Jackson finishes hanging artwork for a new art exhibition called "Welcome to Roanoke: Images of a compassionate diverse and welcoming community." Jackson puts tags on work by Bryce Cobbs, one of the fifteen local artists with work in the show. The exhibit is launched with Welcoming Week in Roanoke which runs Friday to Sept. 19. The art show can be seen on the fourth floor of the municipal building just outside the city council chambers.

A more welcoming hall

City hall tribute to past Roanoke mayors, almost all white men, replaced by art gallery

JEFF STURGEON
jeff.sturgeon@roanoke.com
540-981-3251

Roanoke has removed a city hall tribute to decades of mayoral leadership, almost all of it by white men.

Roanoke City Manager Bob

Cowell arranged to take down an entire hallway of mayoral portraits at the Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building last month.

"It is my feeling," Cowell wrote to the city council, "that the current image (a corridor lined nearly exclusively with white

males) does not align with our efforts at being welcoming or supporting diversity and inclusion."

An art gallery intended to highlight population diversity will open in the hallway Friday during the kickoff for Welcoming

Week, a celebration to connect people of all backgrounds.

Cowell said he discussed the possibility of making changes in the hallway for about a year and a half with other people,

Please see **CITY HALL**, Page A5

City hall

From A1

including elected leaders and staff, before he took action. City officials declared the concept of “interwoven equity,” which means embracing, welcoming and meeting the needs of diverse people, a pillar of municipal government last year. An advisory panel on equity and empowerment has been meeting all year and, since then, the values diversity, inclusion and equity have appeared to increasingly influence decision-making in local government.

Countless other parts of the nation have taken steps in recent years to affirm and embrace diversity and inclusion, including by removing longstanding public displays of Confederate imagery and other symbols of white supremacy. Virginia this week removed its statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, defeating opponents’ last-minute court motions to save it while delighting a crowd of onlookers.

Roanoke had no Confederate statues, but decided last year not to reset its 60-year-old Lee monument after it was deliberately pulled down by a man who said he wanted to prevent civil strife in Roanoke. He is charged with destroying a monument.

In its place will go a marker to recognize Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman who contributed cancer cells to important medical research and who once lived in Roanoke.

Another Confederate emblem was stripped away when the city school system renamed Stonewall Jackson Middle School as John P. Fishwick Middle School in 2018.

The portrait collection removed from the municipal building consists of individual drawings, prints and photos of 39 former mayors of

Roanoke’s Welcoming Week

Roanoke’s Welcoming Week celebration will feature activities spread over 13 days, including a run, scavenger hunt, soccer competition, spelling bee, speakers, cooking demonstrations and eating. A complete list can be found at www.roanokeva.gov/2434/Welcoming-Roanoke.

Highlights include:

Friday, 11:30 a.m.: Kick-off ceremony, fourth floor, Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building.

6:15 p.m.: Roanoke Runs for Refugees, Wasena Park.

Saturday, 10 a.m.: Scavenger hunt and fair, Main Library and other downtown locations.

Sunday, 3 p.m.: International Soccer Cup, Rivers Edge.

Wednesday, 10:30 a.m.: Bilingual story time, Main Library.

Sept. 17, 6:30 p.m.: Salsa lessons with Salsa Noke, Century Plaza.

Sept. 18, 1 to 4 p.m.: International Taste of Roanoke Tour, info at city libraries.

Sept. 22, 6 p.m.: Adult multilingual spelling bee, Williamson Road Branch Library.

the town of Big Lick, town of Roanoke and Roanoke city from 1876 through 2016, according to the Roanoke Public Library, which has the pieces at its headquarters. The public will have access to digital copies of the works, which also will undergo evaluation by an archivist, a library spokeswoman said.

The city municipal building will continue to display the portraits of a few former mayors who achieved milestones and the incumbent mayor. They’re on the wall inside the city council’s meeting room.

“That was a way to continue to honor the intent of what I think those photos represented,” Cowell said, referring to the removed hallway display.

In place of the wall of mayors, which had been just outside the council chamber, Cowell promised “a very good representation of our diversity and our welcoming nature.”

“I mean,” Cowell added, “this is where the people of this community come to do the people’s business. And being able to represent that ...

in the most diverse manner as practical is really important.”

After the mayoral portraits were removed, Roanoke officials entrusted the bare-walled corridor to the Roanoke Arts Commission, which organized an exhibit titled, “Welcome to Roanoke: Images of a Compassionate, Diverse and Welcoming community.”

It features colorful works by 15 artists, the youngest of whom is 15 years old, selected from a call for submissions that went out in early August. The city spent about \$1,000 on a display system for the new exhibit, which will be used for years to come.

The commission, which relies heavily on volunteers, oversees the municipal art collection and strives to present art in ways that help the community see and think about itself, said Doug Jackson, arts and culture coordinator. To beautify the city is another goal, he said.

Cowell said he believed the city first displayed mayoral portraits along the municipal building’s top floor hall about 10 years ago, before



JEFF STURGEON, THE ROANOKE TIMES

A collection of portraits of former Roanoke mayors lined the corridor of the fourth floor of the Noel C. Taylor Municipal Building on Aug. 12. The portraits have been removed and are not part of the collection of the Roanoke Public Library. They are being replaced by a display of art celebrating the city's diversity.

he was hired, but he added that he did not know for sure.

White men occupied the mayor's office exclusively until 1975 when Noel Taylor became the city's first Black mayor by appointment. He was elected the next year and ended up serving until 1992. The next 24 years, the city was led again by white mayors. In 2016, Sherman Lea was elected and he remains in office as part of a Black majority on the city council, the first in Roanoke's history.

The city has employed a female city manager once — Darlene Burcham, who served from 2000 to 2010 — but has never had a female mayor.

Trish White-Boyd, the city's vice mayor, who is African American, won't miss the mayoral lineup.

"Nobody knows who they are, they don't relate anymore. We just need something more current," she said.

The former mayors whose pictures remain up are Taylor; John Trout, mayor of the town of Big Lick from February 1874 to June 1876; and Lucian Cocke, mayor of the town of Roanoke from July 1882 to December 1883 and mayor of the city of Roanoke from January 1884 to June 1884. Near them is a permanent spot for a picture of the incumbent mayor.

Soon after the new art exhibit was hung Wednesday, City Clerk Susie McCoy exited her fourth floor office and saw it for the first time.

"Oh! Oh!," she said.

"Exciting, nice," said Maryna Mabes, an accountant, who passed by a few moments later.

"Are these for sale?" asked Evan Maxey of the finance and payroll department.

The commission expects to issue a call for new works for the space in time to set up a new exhibit in about 10 months.

Video and images online at:

https://roanoke.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/dozens-of-portraits-of-former-roanoke-mayors-removed-at-city-hall/article_13446ef0-10ff-11ec-abb2-2f3d526b19f9.html





