

Group Wants To Move Madonna Statue to Farm Women's Cooperative Property

Organizers say that Bethesda icon is largely “unnoticed” in current location

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The Madonna of the Trail statue is located on Wisconsin Avenue in downtown Bethesda.

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A local group Thursday announced an effort to move a Bethesda icon, the Madonna of the Trail statue, from its location next to the Hyatt hotel parking garage to the Bethesda Farm Women's Cooperative Market, a few blocks down Wisconsin Avenue.

The 18-foot statue and pedestal currently sit "usually unnoticed among the high-rise and hubbub of downtown Bethesda," according to the organizers of a petition drive to move the historic landmark.

The sculpture is one of 12 identical statues marking the National Old Trails system. The trail began in Bethesda in 1755 during the French and Indian War and stretches to the Pacific Ocean.

The statue is dedicated to the courage of "Pioneer Mothers in the Covered Wagon Days," and shows a strong woman in boots and sunbonnet holding a baby and a rifle. Her long skirt is being clutched by a young child. Its image is often used to illustrate Bethesda-themed items, such as business directories and posters.

"She deserves a better home," said David Moulton, of Bethesda, a retired Congressional aide, who founded The Campaign for Bethesda's Madonna of the Trail. "She's been moved twice and she's now over a Metro station that causes vibration and damage."

The statues were commissioned by the Daughters of the American Revolution to celebrate America's pioneer women and the country's westward path.

When the first statue was unveiled in Bethesda on April 19, 1929, then judge Harry S Truman led the speakers who addressed a crowd of 5,000

people. It originally was at the corner of Montgomery Lane and Wisconsin Avenue, across from the then-County Building.

The Madonna was moved between the former post office on Wisconsin Avenue and the Hyatt hotel in March, 1982 during construction of the Bethesda Metro station. A water main break caused its foundation to tilt and it was put in storage by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission in Dec. 2004. It was re-installed in the same location after the ground was stabilized.

Moulton noted the Bethesda statue is the only one facing east. “The purpose of the statues was to celebrate the pioneer women as they headed west,” he said. “Moving her will give us the chance to have her facing in the right direction.”

Dr. Patricia Maclay, a Gaithersburg physician who is a steering committee member of the campaign to move the statue, said the Madonna “appears to be the only historic monument in Bethesda. It’s a great link to past and present Bethesda.”

Maclay, a commissioner on the Montgomery County Commission for Women, said the Madonna also is important “for young girls to see that the settling of the west wasn’t just men with rifles. It was many brave women.”

The Maryland Daughters of the American Revolution, which owns the Bethesda statue, is supporting the move, Moulton said.

The Co-op is under discussion with developers to build housing and offices adjacent to the historically-protected market. Moulton said he has talked with the two developers interested in the renovations of the adjacent Co-op property.

The petition will be submitted to the County Council. The petitioners also are collecting funds through their website (www.madonnatrailbethesda.org) as the statue needs some \$35,000 in structural renovations, plus the cost of removal and re-installation.