

College not asking right questions before paving over history

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Great cities are shaped not only by the strength of their institutions, but by the courage of the people who protect them from forces seeking to redefine who they are.

Higher education is evolving in ways that demand institutions recognize that broader community interests and moral responsibilities extend beyond the priorities of the ivory tower. Universities do not exist apart from their communities. They are accountable to them.

That is why so many Charlestonians remain deeply concerned by a proposal to build a college residence hall atop the centuries-old burial ground at 106 Coming St.

College of Charleston President Andrew Hsu wrote in a May 23 commentary about ensuring that “Charleston stays Charleston.” Yet the college seeks to permanently alter the landscape of one of

the city’s most historically sensitive sites. To offer language of preservation while advancing development on sacred ground is a contradiction the public should not ignore.

The Community Engagement Council, established to navigate tensions surrounding 106 Coming St., was not created solely by the college and the city as a mechanism to critique the project’s overall value, practicality or necessity. Federal, state and local laws and regulations already require meaningful engagement with affected communities in determining whether, why and how any burial ground disturbance should occur.

Had it not been for the persistent advocacy of invested individuals and organizations, the Community Engagement

Council likely would not exist.

These voices came together to send a clear message: Previous disruption, neglect and indifference toward the spiritual, cultural and historical legacy of this site do not justify continuing those harms today.

President Hsu quotes a native Charlestonian who speaks of “leaving places better than you found them.” That sentiment raises an unavoidable question: How can the desecration of a burial ground possibly leave it better than it was found?

Equally troubling is the one-sided portrayal of the Community Engagement Council process itself.

Council members have spent months patiently listening, reviewing technical data and learning about the

extensive layers of regulations, archaeological standards and procedural requirements connected to the project. Yet many members have come to realize that pertinent questions are effectively off-limits and have been told that the engagement council has no decision-making authority.

The college’s framing of its own process promises community input on *how* the project proceeds, not *whether* it should proceed. Meanwhile, the college’s Board of Trustees has already resolved to demolish the historic YWCA building and disturb the possible resting place of as many as 12,000 human beings.

The public should understand that the S.C. Department of Environmental Services permit, as proposed, does not authorize the unrestricted removal of human remains from this site. If remains are encountered, additional obligations for consultation and engagement remain in place. The Community Engagement Council does not replace those

obligations, nor does it satisfy the college’s broader moral responsibilities.

President Hsu’s attempt to frame disturbance of this burial ground as “respectful commemoration” for those who “didn’t die a good death” deeply troubles many in the community. Across this nation, sacred sites connected to tragedy and suffering from Gettysburg to Pearl Harbor to the Trail of Tears are honored in place, not excavated and redeveloped for institutional convenience.

The frustration surrounding the Community Engagement Council process has become increasingly visible. Some members have resigned. Others have openly expressed concerns that opposition voices are being heard but not meaningfully considered.

The college understandably seeks solutions to student housing needs. But what it has yet to fully recognize is the moral obligation it owes to both those buried at 106 Coming St. and also to the larger

Charleston community that refuses to allow a small and powerful institutional interest to determine the fate of sacred ground without genuine public accountability.

We urge all who care about the city’s history to engage in this process now. Let the decision-makers know your concerns and attend the public meetings regarding the proposed project.

Charleston cannot claim to honor its history while repeating the very patterns of erasure that buried this history in the first place.

A burial ground is not a development opportunity; it deserves protection, dignity and respect.

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