

COMMENTARY

Statue of Columbus can teach a lot about us

Your Turn

Roseanne Camacho
Guest columnist

The Italian American community has been proud of the statue of Christopher Columbus in Providence's Elmwood neighborhood for decades. And now it has it, to be put into a park in Johnston, thanks to former Providence Mayor Joseph Paolino's money.

The statue was removed from Elmwood in 2020 after it had been defaced in 2015 and 2017 in protest of Columbus Day. Protesters in Providence doused the statue with red paint, a sign of the deadly consequences to Indigenous peoples of Columbus' "discovery" of a world unknown to Europeans. Instead of representing a grand beginning, Columbus, it was argued, introduced subjugation and colonialism to people already living in the "New World." Monuments erected in one historical moment, as it turns out, are not immune to evolving interpretations of their meanings, a hard lesson learned recently by supporters of Confederate statuary.

The statue, however, was erected in 1893 near the Gorham Manufacturing Company in Providence,

where it was twice cast. To late 19th-century Americans, Columbus' discovery was being celebrated to mark 400 years of history and to anticipate industrialized greatness ahead. The nation celebrated these sentiments in Chicago, where the Columbian Exhibition was held and where Gorham's statue stood, cast in sterling silver. The casting celebrated Gorham's technological skill and Providence's industrial prowess. In the spirit of the Columbian Exhibition, the residents of Elmwood paid to have Gorham recast the statue in bronze. They gave it to the city, where it was dedicated in Elmwood's Columbus Park in 1893.

The statue is beautiful and valuable, worth, one might suspect, more than the \$50,000 Paolino paid. It was designed by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, the French artist who designed the Statue of Liberty. It has its own aesthetic merit along with layers of historical significance. From the history of Columbus himself to the 1893 Exposition in his honor, from Columbus Park in Elmwood adjacent to Gorham to the proposed new site in Johnston, the statue participates in histories attached to the moments of their construction.

The controversy behind defacing Columbus' statue stresses that his legacy is no longer seen in simplistic

terms as the origin of American greatness but more generally the beginning of colonialism. The Columbian Exhibition 400 years later is its own controversy to current historians, one of whom, Gail Bederman of Notre Dame University, has characterized the White City of the Chicago Exhibition, a reference to its classical architecture, as a "vision of future perfection and of the advanced racial power of manly commerce and technology ... an ideal of white male power." Installing the statue in Johnston lends no understanding to this statue's history.

Mr. Paolino's proposal for the statue, quoted in April in *The Rhode Island Wave*, made short shrift of the statue's history or the content of its controversies. His proposal made clear at length, however, that the statue now is one of the "symbols that foster Italian American pride." The sense of the statue's histories should be elucidated, not minimized. The statue does not belong in anyone's park. It belongs in a museum, where no one history of Columbus "wins," but where all of Providence can appreciate this statue's beauty in its full and accurate contexts.

Roseanne Camacho, of Providence, is a retired educator.



STREET LEVEL VIEW - PROPOSED

A rendering of the Taunton Avenue Collaborative shows the outside of the proposed affordable housing development in East Providence. PROVIDED BY ONE NEIGHBORHOOD BUILDERS

State support will accelerate needed housing development

Your Turn

Jennifer Hawkins
Guest columnist

While it's not revelatory, the Rhode Island Foundation's recent independent report on housing is incredibly valuable. The report offers 182 pages of vital validation of the arguments my colleagues in housing and community development and I have been making for years. Its thesis is simple: Rhode Island is deep into a housing crisis that we can't simply build our way out of. Secondly and more importantly, it lays out specific policy recommendations distilled from research inside and outside Rhode Island.

In my view, the structural challenges fall into three categories: a balkanized system that separates housing developers and owners from homeless outreach and emergency shelter providers; lack of predictable and sufficient state resources to produce housing at the scale that is needed; and restrictive land use policy.

As a state, we need to act with urgency to address the structural issues which have allowed this housing crisis to take hold and persist. Fortunately, we are seeing a new understanding of these issues and actions to address them. For the first time in my memory, the governor, the legislature and municipal leaders across Rhode Island are singing the same song as philanthropic leaders, business leaders and advocates, even if it's still not quite in tune.

The Taunton Avenue Collaborative – the proposed apartment community that will transform a blighted and vacant stretch of property – hits all three key challenges. And it's exactly the kind of project that puts in practice specific recommendations from the Rhode Island Foundation's report.

This project is the result of an unprecedented partnership between four of the state's most respected and impactful nonprofits – ONE Neighborhood Builders, Crossroads RI, Foster Forward, and Family Service of RI. Working together, we'll create 160 new affordable apartments for individuals and families, including 65 that will be set aside as permanent supportive housing with on-site wraparound services. The remaining apartments will be affordable for low- to moderate-income households, individuals earning between \$40,000 and \$80,000.

There are meaningful efforts already underway and proposals under consideration. House Speaker K. Jo-

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seph Shekarchi's recent package of housing proposals clears red tape and creates the kind of market conditions that incentivize the swift development of housing that is affordable for Rhode Islanders at all income levels. And Gov. Dan McKee has wisely proposed funding to adequately staff and resource the state's Housing Department.

To be fully effective, though, those policy reforms need to be complemented with meaningful public investment in projects with clear and present public value.

With direct support from the state this budget year, we can accelerate development and welcome new residents as soon as 2025.

As we push towards development, the Taunton Avenue Collaborative will make full use of federal financing vehicles that will unlock over \$20 million in private investment.

But we can only leverage this private investment once the public financing has been committed.

I am hopeful the legislature accurately weighs the public value of a project like the Taunton Avenue Collaborative. Our development promises to deliver a return on investment to taxpayers, not shareholders, in the form of reduced spending on social services, health care, and other interventions that are required when people lack safe, affordable, permanent housing.

Elected leaders' focus on housing over the last several years has been so encouraging. Our leaders – from town and city halls to every floor of the State House – have put words into action. Now is not the time to slow down. The housing crisis is as urgent as ever and we need to show that we have the courage to invest in solutions and projects that will move the needle swiftly and create housing stability for the long term.

Jennifer Hawkins is president and executive director of ONE Neighborhood Builders. More information at www.oneneighborhoodbuilders.org.

An investment that's a game changer for Rhode Island's students

Your Turn

Larry Warner and Maryclaire Knight
Guest columnists

As representatives for more than 400 community-based organizations that serve thousands of Rhode Island kids, the gravity of this legislative session is not lost on us. We have been working toward increased access to afterschool and summer learning programs for decades, bringing learning to life as a partner and complement to the education system.

Tens of thousands of local children – many of whom are now adults – have benefited from our network. But we have the ability to close the gap in access and improve outcomes for almost 60,000 youth by acting now.

Looking at the data, it seems an easy decision for lawmakers to pass the Building Opportunities in Out-of-School Time (BOOST) bill introduced by Rep. Julie Casimiro and Sen. Sandra Cano, which calls for a budget allocation of \$4 million for afterschool programs statewide.

Eighty percent of students' learning occurs outside the classroom. Children who participate in afterschool programs during their elementary years attend school more often and achieve higher grades in high school. They increase their adult earning potential and are less likely to engage in crime and juvenile delinquency. More than 90% of Rhode Island parents with a child in an afterschool program are pleased with the support their child receives, while 86% agree the programs help working parents remain employed. We could go on.

And yet, for every Rhode Island child participating in an afterschool program, three more would be enrolled if a program were available to them. That's more than 59,000 local students who are missing out. Why? Because Rhode Island is one of just two New England states that lack dedicated funding for afterschool programs.

At its core, out-of-school are locally driven programs that help children grow, allow families to better balance work and home, and support employers' ability to hire and retain the workforce they need. While in no way a substitute for K-12, out-of-school time is vital to the social-emotional development of our students.

Afterschool is where children go after a long, productive day in the classroom. It is where they explore and begin to see their path for the future. Where they find new opportunities, collaborate with peers, engage with mentors and develop important life skills. And because out-of-school programs are steeped in workforce development, they also help prepare young people for the jobs of tomorrow.

To understand the power of project-based learning, we need to look no further than Cranston, where students last summer gained an understanding of the role of a watershed. Through a curriculum based on Next Generation Science standards, they explored the health of Stillhouse Cove and how pollution impacts water quality. Working as a team, youth then identified ways to reduce pollution in the cove to protect the oysters growing there, sharing what they found with their community in the name of facilitating change. And they did all this before entering fifth grade!

Providing students the opportunity to use their voice and what they learn with purpose is incredibly powerful. Passing the proposed BOOST legislation is a critical step in that direction and to ensuring all kids have access to programs that help to build 21st-century skills. The investment, less than one-third of one percent of the proposed state budget, can be a game changer for our state.

It is time for Rhode Island to take advantage of the robust afterschool network that has been built in every community in the Ocean State. All of us at the Rhode Island Afterschool Network stand ready as a partner as our school districts continue to open their doors to share their space and their students. Let's ensure we make the investment in our students that they deserve.

Larry Warner is chief impact and equity officer for United Way of Rhode Island. Maryclaire Knight is chair of the Rhode Island Afterschool Network.