Nungesser on statues: ‘Where do we stop’

Lt. governor denied monuments, invited to join bidding process

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Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser asked Mayor Mitch Landrieu on Monday to turn over Confederate monuments taken down in New Orleans over the past few weeks to his office.

But city officials said Nungesser or other state officials would have to submit their proposals for review along with anyone else interested in taking possession of the displaced monuments.

Nungesser had opposed the monuments’ removal.

The city is expected to release a request for proposals this week to determine the fate of statues of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis and a monument to a white-supremacist uprising known as the Battle of Liberty Place.

The statue of Confederate Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard is not part of that process because the city and City Park are still discussing its ownership. It stood at the main entrance to the park until it was removed last month.

The city will be evaluating whatever proposals are submitted based on both “qualitative” elements, such as the context in which they would be displayed, and “quantitative” ones, such as how much the proposals offer in

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financial or other compensation to the city, Deputy Mayor Ryan Berni said Monday afternoon.

“We invite the state to join the process,” Berni said.

Nungesser said he had hoped to avoid a bidding war over the statues after reaching out to Landrieu’s office last week to express interest in putting them at a state park or historic site.

As lieutenant governor, Nungesser oversees the state’s Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, which includes the Office of State Parks as well as other agencies including the Louisiana State Museum.

The city’s selection process, which could be completed by the fall, will require whoever gets the statues to provide some public explanation of why they were first put up in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and what led to the decision to take them down, a process that began in 2015.

The city officials tasked with evaluating the proposals are expected to view them through the same lens Landrieu has used when discussing the monuments that they originally amounted to propaganda erected after the Civil War aimed at rehabilitating the image of the Confederacy and re-establishing white dominance in the South.

The Mayor’s Office has said it will not consider proposals that would see the statues erected once more outdoors in Orleans Parish.

It’s not clear how much of a role compensation will play in the final bidding, but Berni said the “city can’t just give away property it owns.” That squares with previous stances Landrieu’s administration has taken over the donation of public property, which in any case is prohibited by the state constitution.

During the meeting with Landrieu, Nungesser suggested the state could cover the costs the city incurred for removing the statues, Berni said. The city has not said how much it spent but that most of it was covered by donations to a private foundation.

The state’s proposal, Nungesser said, likely will include use of private funds to relocate the monuments to sites within the state.

He also said he will ask the Legislature to pass a resolution supporting the idea of turning over the monuments to the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism and allowing state parks and historic sites to be considered as potential relocation spots.

Nungesser said a worst-case scenario would involve a private group taking the monuments and not putting them back up.

"Where do we stop taking down monuments?" Nungesser asked. "Even though some of the history is bad — we can't continue to destroy history.

"You don't destroy history because you don't like it," Nungesser said.

The director of the Beauvoir estate in Biloxi, Mississippi, where Jefferson Davis lived after the Civil War, has said it would be interested in displaying at least the Davis statue.

Officials at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, where Robert E. Lee was president for five years after the war, have said they would not be interested in taking the Lee statue.

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