N.O. monument backers seize on attorney's letter

Ownership of City Park land questioned

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New Orleans officials insisted Monday that they will move ahead with the planned removal of the city's monument to P.G.T. Beauregard, despite a newly disclosed letter from the City Attorney's Office acknowledging open questions about the ownership of the land the statue sits on.

Richard Marksbury, who sued unsuccessfully earlier this month to block the statue's removal, circulated the letter among members of the media Monday, arguing that it backed up his legal claim that the statue and the land it sits on belong to City Park, not the city.

But city spokesman Tyrone Walker said that the City Park Improvement Association, which manages the park, does not dispute the city's right to move the Beauregard statue, which stands in a traffic circle at the main entrance to the park.

In the letter, City Attorney Rebecca Dietz writes that it has come to the city's attention that the park's board has "asserted certain legal rights in the property upon which the monument is situated." It suggests the park's board and the city discuss the issue over the next 30 days.

However, she goes on to say that City Park "recognizes that the city will be moving forward with the removal and storage of the monument."

As "the letter confirms, the City Park Improvement Association acknowledges that the city can and will move forward with removal of the monument," Walker said in a separate email Monday. "The city will move forward with its authority to do so."

City Park officials did not respond to requests for comment on the letter Monday.

The Beauregard statue is widely expected to be the next monument the city intends to dismantle, following the removal in recent weeks of a monument to the Battle of Liberty Place and a statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

But the city's letter also was signed by City Park Improvement Association President Steven Pettus, suggesting the park's leadership is not pushing back against removal of the monument to the state's best-known Confederate military leader.

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The city has not said when that will occur, nor has it discussed plans for removal of the fourth monument, the statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee atop a column in Lee Circle.

The City Council authorized Landrieu to remove all four monuments in December 2016.

Marksbury's request for a court order blocking the removal of the Beauregard statue on the grounds that the city does not own it was tossed out by Civil District Judge Kern Reese last week.

Marksbury said Monday he'll ask the state 4th Circuit Court of Appeal to delay any action by the city. The letter, he argued, shows there's still uncertainty over who actually owns the property where the equestrian statue stands, and that the question should be sorted out before the city moves forward.

"Why would you take a chance if we can get this resolved in 30 days one way or the other?" Marksbury asked.

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