

Members of Pittsburgh City Council
City of Pittsburgh

October 9,2023

Dear Councilpersons:

I write on behalf of the officers and members of the Italian Sons and Daughters of America, one of the largest Italian American fraternal organizations in our country. The ISDA was founded and has been headquartered in the City of Pittsburgh since 1930.

Our organization just became aware of the fact that legislation will be voted upon tomorrow to change the second Monday in October from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day.

Columbus Day was first celebrated in 1892 to make atonement for the largest mass lynching in American history, and as a way to help Americans learn to be more accepting of immigrants.

In 1891, the largest mass lynching in our country's history occurred in the city of New Orleans when a mob of over 5,000 people beat, mutilated and hung eleven Italian immigrants, for allegedly shooting the city's police chief. Nine of these immigrants had been tried, and none had been found guilty. Despite the court finding, all were returned to jail where they were held until a lynch mob was assembled to storm the jail.

The deep-seated bigotry Americans harbored toward Italian immigrants was clearly manifested by the New York Times, and many other newspapers, that actually applauded the lynchings on their editorial pages. Even future president Teddy Roosevelt stated that the lynchings "were a rather good thing." Tragically, the New Orleans lynching were not an isolated incident, as over 40 more Italian immigrants were lynched by angry mobs throughout our country.

In an effort to encourage more tolerance and acceptance of Italian immigrants, President Benjamin Harrison declared a national celebration of Columbus Day in 1892.

From that day to this, Columbus, who was regarded as a national hero of Italian heritage, was embraced by Italian immigrants as a symbol that they would someday be accepted in America.

But injustice befell our community time and time again. Important examples included the anti-Italian bias exhibited in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and executions of 1920 and 1926, and the enemy alien designations of 600,000 Italians in our

country during WWII. These Italians were subjected to confiscation of property, loss of jobs, evictions from their homes, and in many cases placement in internment camps. The tragic irony of this situation is that while they were being treated as criminals, one million of their sons were fighting and dying to keep our country safe and free.

Through decade after decade of hardship, hostility, persecution and prejudice, the statues, parades and days created to honor Columbus were the outlets through which Italians in America expressed their pride in their heritage and their gratitude to their new homeland. This unique and inseparable bond helped our community overcome the bias and violence we encountered in our long journey to assimilation.

Your council's efforts to recognize the injustices perpetrated on the Indigenous Peoples are most appropriate, and have long been publicly supported by the Italian American community. But to rob the Italian American community of its special day in order to attempt to provide a day of recognition for another group is completely contrary to the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. Clearly, there are many other days that may be designated as Indigenous Peoples Day without having to pit one group against another group.

The Italian American community has a long and impressive history in the city of Pittsburgh. They have contributed greatly to the city's growth and success. The Pittsburgh metro area has the fifth largest enclave of Italian Americans in our country with the number of Italian American residents totaling approximately 316,000.

To denigrate the history of the Italian American community by attempting to vilify Columbus because of contrived allegations that are not supported by primary source historical documents, is something that should not be advocated by your council.

Many books have been published in recent years that debunk the lies and misinformation concerning the allegation that Columbus was not respectful of the Indigenous Peoples he came into contact with. In fact, Columbus protected the Taino tribe from the hostile Carib tribe that sought to kill and enslave them. Columbus had a close friendship with the Taino chief, and he even adopted a Taino boy.

There is much we can all learn from constructive dialogue that will ultimately nurture a feeling of mutual respect concerning all parties positions with respect to this issue.

Passing this legislation to make a name change for the holiday, without holding a thorough public hearing that affords the Italian American community the opportunity to appear before council to express its concerns, is insulting to all parties involved, including city council.

Our community respectfully requests council hold public hearings on this legislation before making a final decision and taking any action.

Ironically, the ISDA's lawsuit against the city to preserve the statue of Columbus in Schenley Park will be argued before the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania this Wednesday morning. That ruling will be forthcoming very soon, and it may help shed some light on an appropriate course of action in this matter.

Sincerely,

Basil M. Russo, President
Italian Sons and Daughters of America