

By Sarah Cavacini scavacini@palatkadailynews.com August 1, 2020 Publication: Palatka Daily News (FL) Page: A1 Word Count: 740

Organizers of a peaceful protest planned for Aug. 8 in Palatka said Friday they expected more than 200 counterprotesters to attend

Organizers Dar'Nesha Leonard and Tevel Adams said the expected numbers are not counting Putnam County residents, only counterprotesters from surrounding cities such as St. Augustine.

"It was expected for counterprotesters to come and we welcome it," Adams said.

Leonard and Adams hosted the PEACE in the STREETS protest June 4 to rally for the removal of the Confederate monument at the Putnam County Courthouse.

More than two months later they will host a second protest 4 p.m. Aug. 8 at the Putnam County Courthouse because no decision has been made about the statue.

As the second protest nears, Putnam County Sherriff's Office Col. Joe Wells said he is concerned about people from other areas disrupting what is planned to be a peaceful event. Wells has been meeting with the protest organizers since their plans began but said he has only heard from one counterprotester who was at a St. Augustine protest.

He said he has not been contacted by anyone from Putnam County planning a counterprotest.

"There's going to be no attempt to limit the event, to limit the size of the event or interfere with anybody's rights as long as the event stays peaceful," he said. "By peaceful, I mean no other injuries to attendees and do damage to property."

The hosts said they want a peaceful protest where a conversation about both sides of the argument could be heard. They said they are not worried about rioting or violence. Leonard and Adams request protesters wear masks because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Wells said the sherriff's office is working with St. Augustine and St. Johns County law enforcement to gain insight on protesters who may be planning to attend. He wants the protest to be as peaceful as the last one and said law enforcement will be prepared for any foreseeable possibility.

"I don't want to come across as an alarmist," Wells said. "We very well may have a larger peaceful event, but we have to operate based on what we learn from what goes on in other jurisdictions and other jurisdictions have just not had entirely peaceful events."

Leonard and Adams, both college students who grew up in Palatka, said while their first protest also focused on removing the Maltby Oak at the courthouse, this one would focus only on moving the Confederate monument.

At the previous peaceful protest, the organizers said the tree represented a history of lynching, although no hangings were historically recorded to have happened on the Maltby Oak.

Residents voiced opinions during a June 9 Board of County Commissioners meeting and a July 14 county workshop, but no decisions were made by the board on the statue's fate.

The decision lies with the county commissioners because the monument is on county property. The five commissioners agreed Wednesday the decision should come from residents and most said they needed more time to hear different sides.

Commissioner Buddy Goddard expressed concern Wednesday the protest duo was being manipulated, but Adams and Leonard said that is not the case.

"I know I'm not being manipulated," Adams said. "It is an insult to my intelligence because (Goddard) believes I'm not capable of doing the things that I'm doing on my own."

Adams is a rising sophomore at Livingstone College in North Carolina studying political science. He said he finished his first year of political science classes with a 3.9 GPA. Leonard is a student at Florida State University graduating one year early with a criminal justice degree.

"I feel very offended," Leonard said. "If any of (the county commissioners) were really, truly open to getting to know me and Tevel, they would reach out to us more than what they have."

The organizers said they have not received questions from any commissioner outside of a county meeting regarding the Confederate statue issue and their call to remove it.

"We stand firm and strong with what we believe in," Adams said.

The protest is expected to last three hours with speeches from invited guests, but the schedule has not yet been completely set. Wells said he will continue to work throughout the week with law enforcement to prepare for the protest, but officers will definitely be present.

"We always pray for the best," Wells said. "And prepare for the worst."

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