

Community, university, business groups reinforce commitment to diversity, inclusion

Denounce vandalism to Dr. MLK Jr. Plaza

April 19, 2021 – The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau, Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County, Downtown State College Improvement District, State College Borough and Pennsylvania State University today, April 19, denounced the recent vandalism at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza, and reinforced their commitment to a community that is welcoming to all who live, work, conduct business, study in and visit Centre County.

“As leaders of our respective organizations and as individuals, we are dedicated to building a better quality of life and ensuring positive experiences for everyone who lives here and visits here,” said Fritz Smith, President and CEO of the Happy Valley Adventure Bureau. “Embracing diversity and inclusion is central to our corporate missions and to our own daily lives. It is disgusting that some feel the need to vandalize public property, particularly a public space built to remember Dr. King’s message of unity and non-violence, with symbols of hate. These actions do not reflect the community values I believe the vast majority of Centre County residents share.”

The Centre County Board of Commissioners also condemned the defacing of the plaza and emphasized that “hate has no place in Centre County.”

“These cowardly acts go against what this community celebrates: diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice,” the statement read. “We encourage all residents to reflect upon the words Dr. King spoke 56 years ago during his visit to Penn State’s campus — the reason behind the Plaza’s creation — to appreciate the progress we have made but, more importantly, the distance we still have to travel.”

State College Council President Jesse Barlow agreed.

“The Borough of State College has repeatedly worked to make our community welcoming to everyone, and the recent hate-based vandalism shows that there’s still a lot of work that needs to be done,” Barlow said. “We are all disgusted to see a treasured local landmark, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza, being defaced. This monument is meant to be a symbol of Dr. King’s legacy and how it should live on in our community. This mural has served as a gathering space to speak against social injustices and celebrated our community’s diversity. We must all join together in speaking out against hate groups like the one that defaced our mural.”

Penn State President Eric J. Barron joined with other community leaders to denounce the vandalism and to offer a message of support.

“We are appalled by this act of hate in our community,” Barron said. “This vandalism has occurred during a time of ongoing discord and violence in our country, and as university and local community members we must continue to do all we can to speak out against such hate and to stand up against inequality and injustice.”

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Barron added that there are a variety of resources available and that Penn State students and employees who are impacted and need additional support can reach out to the Office of Educational Equity, Counseling and Psychological Services, Penn State Hotline, and Employee Assistance Program, among others.

Vern Squier, President and CEO of the Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County, echoed that hate has no place in Centre County.

“As we begin to recover as a community, this is the time to move forward together, resolving to not let abhorrent actions like this divide us or poison our collective future,” he said.

State College DID Executive Director Lee Anne Jeffries called the racist defacing of the beloved memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in downtown State College “reprehensible.”

“We do not and will not tolerate hate of any kind in our town,” she said. “We are proud of our nation’s diversity and are committed to respect for our community and guests, no matter their race, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation.”

Smith said Centre County’s business and community organizations will continue to do their part to embrace and advance diversity and the myriad ways it contributes to the fabric of the Happy Valley community, and will take a stand against any actions that promote hate and division.

State College Mayor Ronald Filippelli said the Borough of State College appreciates the support it has received from its partners and friends.

“It shows how our residents, local businesses, and colleagues are united in the fight against hate,” he said. “Hate-based crimes, like the recent vandalism, is an epidemic, and we must work together to make sure State College is a welcoming community for all.”

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This crime is being investigated as a hate crime in which, under Pennsylvania law, is called Ethnic Intimidation. The police department is offering a reward of up to \$1,000 for information that leads to an arrest and conviction of the persons responsible for defacing the mural.