

Baltimore County renaming Robert E. Lee Park as Lake Roland

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Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz, center, and Shannon Davis, head ranger of Robert E. Lee Park, are among the county officials and state delegates breaking ground Monday for a new nature center. Kamenetz announced that the county, which operates the park, is renaming it as Lake Roland. Baltimore City, which owns the park, must make it official in a City Council vote. (Staff photo by Larry Perl)

Robert E. Lee Park has a new name — Lake Roland — and next year will have a new nature center, too.

Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz announced the new name of the park during a groundbreaking ceremony Monday for the \$1.2 million Lake

Roland Nature and Environmental Education Center, which is expected to open in April 2016.

Kamenetz said all references to Robert E. Lee Park have been removed and Lake Roland substituted as the park name on the county website. The Robert E. Lee Park Nature Council also has changed its name to the Lake Roland Nature Council and its new website address is www.lakeroland.org.

However, a county spokesman said that since Baltimore City still owns the park and the county has run it since 2009, the city must still decide on an official name.

"The city is continuing to work through its process regarding the legal name of the park as required in the deed, and they will continue to do that," county spokeswoman Ellen Kobler said. "In the meantime, the county has moved forward to identify the entire area as Lake Roland, which anchors the entire amenity."

"Our understanding is that to formally change the name of Robert E. Lee Park, the City Council is required to pass legislation to make such a name change," said Howard Libit, a spokesman for Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who supports the name change.

The park takes its new name from Lake Roland as the body of water that Kamenetz called "the centerpiece" of the 450-acre park near the light rail station at Falls Road and Lake Avenue.

Kamenetz said the lake dates to 1850 "and it is what this area is known as. We think it's a fitting name."

In July, City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young introduced legislation to rename the park, which is named for Lee, a Confederate general. The council has not voted on the bill yet, but, "I think it's just a matter of scheduling," said Lester Davis, a spokesman for Young.

Young's bill followed the massacre of nine black church members in Charleston, S.C., by an alleged white supremacist. The killings sparked debate over whether

Confederate icons are racially divisive and should be removed from public spaces.

The park was named for Lee after Elizabeth Garrett White, a wealthy Baltimorean, required when she died in 1917 that the proceeds from the sale of her Mount Vernon Place estate be used to erect a monument for Lee, a Confederate general who spent time in the city during White's lifetime.

Kamenetz at the time called on the city to change the park's name to Lake Roland, which he said was more reflective of its diverse usage. The county has made \$6 million in upgrades to the park since taking over operations.

Rawlings-Blake's office said at the time that she supported changing the park's name to Lake Roland Park. She also convened a commission of historians, community organizations and art experts to evaluate the merits of removing Confederate monuments in Baltimore or allowing them to stay.

Gov. Larry Hogan initiated steps to get rid of license plates carrying an image of the Confederate battle flag that are registered to about 175 vehicles and motorcycles in the state — and he asked the state attorney general to take action to dissolve a 1997 injunction that required the state to issue the plates.

The park got its name in 1945 when Robert Garrett — a great-nephew of White, the heiress, and executor of her will — successfully petitioned the Circuit Court to have the money from his aunt's bequest used for city recreation at Lake Roland. Garrett was chairman of the city's recreation commission at the time. (The Garrett family were then part owners of The Baltimore Sun.)

White's will had instructed that the proceeds from the sale of her property go to the erection of a statue of Lee in Druid Hill Park.

Lee moved to Baltimore in 1848 when the War Department assigned him to oversee the construction of the still-unfinished Fort Carroll. He was a distinguished veteran of the Mexican-American War, and went on to become popular in Baltimore society.

He left the city about four years later to become superintendent of West Point, but he visited many times after the Civil War. He died in 1870, five years after the Civil War ended.

"He just exemplified a true gentleman in all ways," said Carolyn Billups, Maryland Division president for the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Stressing that she was speaking only for herself and not the organization, Billups, of St. Mary's County, said, "I most definitely want (the park) to remain Robert E. Lee."

She said she is worried not only about the name change for the park, but the fate of other monuments that the city is reviewing.

"The bottom line is, when one monument falls, it sets a precedent," she said.

Baltimore City Solicitor George Nilson said in July that the City Council has the legal standing to change the park's name, despite White's wishes in her will.

Kamenetz in his remarks before the groundbreaking did not address the controversy over Robert E. Lee, but he said afterward that he prefers Lake Roland because, "it's a more welcoming name."

"It's the obvious name," said Larry Zeafla, president of the Lake Roland Nature Council. "It's the name that's been commonly used by people in the community."

Zeafla said that despite any remaining legal hoops, he is glad that the county and the nature council are moving forward with a new name.

Jeffrey Budnitz, the Lake Roland Nature Council treasurer agreed stating the issue has become a needless and polarizing distraction relative to the true value and intent of the park, a place for everyone to enjoy.

Baltimore Sun reporter Yvonne Wenger and Sun research librarian Paul McCardell contributed to this article.