

DAILY COMMERCIAL

Statue protesters file Sunshine suit against Lake commission

By Payne Ray

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The lawsuit alleges that county commissioners violated Sunshine laws by holding private meetings or discussions about bringing a statue of Confederate Gen. Edmund Kirby-Smith ahead of a July meeting in which they voted on the issue.

TAVARES — The Lake County Board of County Commissioners is being sued for a Sunshine Law violation by residents organized against bringing a confederate statue to Lake County.

The Lake County Voices of Reason, formed in direct opposition to a local effort to bring the statue of Confederate Gen. Edmund Kirby-Smith to the Lake County Historical Museum, filed the lawsuit last week alleging that commissioners discussed the matter outside of meetings.

Such a discussion would have violated the government transparency law requiring public officials not to speak privately about issues which the board may address.

“The County Commission used a flawed process to approve the installation of the General Kirby-Smith statue,” Voices of Reason President Cassandra Brown said in a release sent to media. “We now know that it was perpetrated through a violation of the Sunshine Law and a misrepresentation of facts to the Florida Department of State.”

According to the complaint, the alleged violation happened on or before July 30, 2019, when commissioners voted 3-2 in favor of endorsing a statement from the museum board of directors which favored bringing the statue to Lake.

“The plaintiff alleges the defendants discussed the confederate statue outside public meetings before voting on July 30, 2019, thereby violating the purpose of the Sunshine Law,” the statement from the Voices of Reason said.

Only Commissioners Sean Parks and Wendy Breeden opposed the statue, citing issues with the process of bringing the statue to Lake and with the costs of doing so.



The statue was also roundly opposed by city governments that decided to weigh in.

It has been a point of controversy since it was announced that it would come to Lake in 2018. The statue would be delivered after it was replaced in the National Statuary Hall by a sculpture of black educator Mary McLeod Bethune.

Lake County Historical Museum Curator Bob Grenier has defended the statue as an artifact of history relevant to Lake, and worth preserving, though protesters have pointed out that the statue of the general, born in St. Augustine and a resident of Florida only until age 12, was only built in 1922.

Grenier argued that Kirby-Smith was born in St. Johns County, which at the time contained a portion of what would become Lake.

The Voices of Reason has published a website at www.lakecountyhistoricalmuseum.com chronicling media reports, public records and their own protest against the statue which also details their lawsuit.

The organization is asking a judge to void the commission's vote on the statue and provide "injunctive relief prohibiting the installation of the statue of a man who has no ties to Lake County, who left Florida at age 12, who was the last Confederate General to leave the field, and who after the Civil War fled the country for Mexico."