

Discussion Regarding Marker Updating Policy

Virginia established its historical highway marker program 93 years ago; if the program is to remain relevant, it must be able to evolve as new voices and fresh research continuously expand and enrich the narrative of Virginia's history. Aluminum roadside signs are inevitably one of the most static media for conveying historical information. This lack of flexibility presents challenges in an era when the very nature of public history and public memory are being thoroughly reevaluated.

The marker program has recently received several requests to remove markers, which we will not discuss today. The program has also received inquiries about whether existing markers might be updated and replaced, and this is the issue we would like to address at today's meeting. These queries have brought to our attention a gap in our marker retirement policy: there is currently no provision for removing a marker and replacing it with an updated version *if the original marker is in good physical condition*. We expect to receive a handful of these inquiries each year and would like to have a policy in place to address them.

The question for the board today is whether, if an organization volunteers to sponsor a replacement for a marker that does not currently meet our retirement policy, we may update and replace the marker in question.

First, a review of DHR's current marker retirement policy:

Markers may be retired if they

- 1.) Contain errors of fact that can be documented with reliable sources
- 2.) Are so damaged, deteriorated, illegible, unstable, or unsafe that the cost of repair would approach the cost of a new marker
- 3.) Require refurbishment, *and* have very brief texts, *and* lack historical context, such that their educational value is severely limited. Such markers, generally erected from the 1920s through the 1950s, do not meet the modern standards of the program.

DHR will make an effort to locate and notify the original sponsor of any marker that is retired.

"Retiring" a marker does not mean that the *topic* covered by the marker is no longer eligible for inclusion in the marker program; it just means that the existing sign may be removed from the roadside.

When a marker is retired under this policy, DHR seeks funding from VDOT or from private sponsors to pay for a replacement. Any time a marker is replaced, DHR's marker program staff conduct a full review of the text and determine whether it needs to be updated. In the vast majority of cases, we do update the text, and I then present that text to the Board of Historic Resources for approval.

We have no policy, however, to address situations in which a marker is in acceptable physical condition and is factually accurate, but still would benefit from an improved text. Such situations arise when, for example,

- new research reveals information that was not known when the marker was erected (even if the marker has only been in place for 5, 10, or 20 years)

--an older marker has been well-maintained over the decades, so it is in decent physical condition, but its text focuses only on the facets of the topic that were considered important in, say, the 1930s or 1940s, excluding others

--a marker is factually accurate as far as it goes, but it omits important information that would enhance the significance and educational value of the marker

One example is the First Confederate Officer Killed marker, which Fairfax County is considering removing (though they do not have the authority to do so). The existing marker does not meet our current retirement policy in that it does not contain an error of fact, is not deteriorated or damaged, and does not need refurbishment. Yet the existing marker is Confederate-centric and does not mention that the officer described in the text, John Q. Marr, was reportedly the first officer of *either side* to die “in the first land conflict of organized military units in the Civil War.” A local group has offered to sponsor a replacement that would still mention Marr, but would reshape the text so that the marker would be less easily interpreted as Confederate nostalgia. The Board of Historic Resources would, as always, vote on the new text.

A second example is the Roanoke College marker in Salem, which was erected in 1942 and has been cleaned and repainted regularly over the years. The marker omits important information, such as who founded the college, and its narrative ends in 1865, leaving out more than a century of history. The college would like to sponsor an updated marker to provide a more comprehensive and educationally valuable account of the institution’s development. Our current policy does not specifically allow for this.

Therefore, I would propose that we add the following point to our retirement policy.

“DHR reserves the right to update and replace markers regardless of their physical condition in cases where, after a detailed evaluation based on primary and reliable secondary sources, marker program staff and the Board of Historic Resources determine that the existing text is inadequate and merits rewriting. Such action is dependent on the availability of funding for a replacement marker.”

This policy in no way commits DHR to do a proactive review of all of the markers in our system to see whether they could be improved, but it does give us the ability to react when a deficient marker text is brought to our attention, and when a sponsor is willing to pay for a replacement marker.

The full retirement policy would then look like this:

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DHR will make an effort to locate and notify the original sponsor of any marker that is retired or replaced.