

Sculptor Michael Jernigan and Florida PBA President John Rivera discuss the small scale "Officer Down" statue.



Florida PBA's Treasurer Ernie George and Executive Director David Murrell call attention to the sign that says "This 'Officer Down' sculpture is sponsored by the Florida Police Benevolent Association."

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Memorial will be thought-provoking addition to plaza

By Gerald Ensley • The View From Here • April 30, 2008

Do we want the body of a possibly dead police officer — even if it's just a statue — gracing the Old Capitol?

Maybe. Because maybe not everything around the Old Capitol has to be historic. And maybe art should make us think about serious topics.

So the "Fallen Officer" memorial should be an interesting addition to the Capitol plaza — even if it has evoked protest.

Local artist Ed Jonas was one of the first to respond to last week's news that the Florida Police Benevolent Association and local artist Michael Jernigan intended to place the memorial on the plaza between the Capitols. Police officers, their families and others also registered objections online and by phone.

The memorial will be a bronze statue of a downed police officer, attended by another officer. It will be installed next spring. The fallen officer is meant to be seen as injured, though not necessarily dead.

Far be it from Jonas, who has sculpted several prominent statues around town, to be against artistic expression. But he objects to placing the "Fallen Officer" memorial on the west side of the Old Capitol.

Jonas, who was the Department of State's staff artist when the Old Capitol was restored as a museum in 1982, remembers the directive to "protect the 1902 envelope" of the building. The clutter of 20 memorials added to the grounds in the 20th century was stripped away.

Only two monuments were left on the green east lawn of the Old Capitol: the 1861 Parkhill Monument in memory of a

Leon County soldier killed in the Seminole Wars and the 1887 Confederate Monument in memory of all Confederate soldiers.

Though neither monument is in its original place, both were part of the 1902 Old Capitol appearance. Jonas said that appearance should be preserved.

"I think (the new statue) is opening a floodgate and going down a road we tried to clean up when we restored the Old Capitol," Jonas said. "If we can say yes to this, how can we say no to anyone else?"

Yet that horse is already out of the barn. The Legislature — which stipulated the Old Capitol's 1902 "envelope" — has now allowed four monuments on the plaza, including:

- A monument to Martin Luther King Jr. (1984).
- A Florida Fraternal Order of Police monument and wall of names honoring law-enforcement officers killed in the line of duty (2000).
- And the Purple Heart Society monument (2004).

"Fallen Officer," approved in 2007, will be placed with the Fraternal Order of Police memorial.

Legislators approved those monuments, some suggest, because the plaza is not really part of the Old Capitol. It's a "transition zone" between the Capitols that's used for receptions, rallies and ceremonies.

"The plaza is not historic. It's a ceremonial place," said David Ferro, supervising architect for the Department of State. "To take the position that nothing should be there that wasn't there in 1902 is unrealistic."

Of course, much of the argument about "Fallen Officer" stems from its graphic nature. Critics say it's one thing to erect a wall of names of police officers killed in the line of duty — but another to display a statue of a possibly dead officer. Jernigan disagrees.

"What I think it does is capture the public's emotion from the standpoint that these officers put their lives on the line every day," he said. "Do they die in tragic ways? Yes. But is it something we should all (be aware of)? I think so."

Jonas suggested such a "dramatization" should be in a place of "serene reflection," such as the planned Cascades Park.

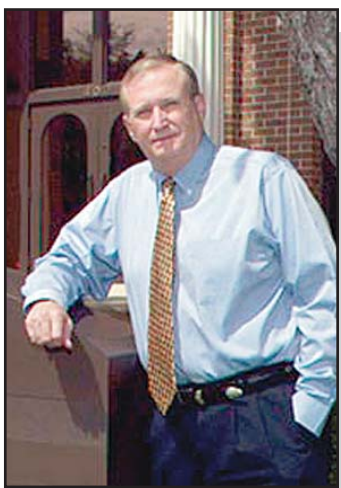
Jernigan counters that the plaza is visited only by those who intend to go there — such as legislators who make funding and regulatory decisions about police officers.

"You want a venue where those who deal with the issues will see it," he said. "For all (police) issues, this is where the action is."

David Murrell, Florida PBA executive director, agreed. He said the annual police recognition day is held every May in the plaza, so "what more fitting place could there be?"

"My prediction is this is going to be wildly popular, because of how moving it is and how it does justice to fallen police officers," Murrell said. "A year from now, everyone will be proud of it, even if they aren't now."

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Guest Editorial

Selling the Unborn: The Crossroads for Police Unions

In the 1980's, Australian state and territorial governments started slowly eliminating the defined pension benefits for public employees by "selling the unborn." Employees hired after a certain date would receive less pension benefits than existing employees. While the unions protested, current employees did not want to lose or reduce their pensions to protect future employees. The die was cast and 25 years later there are few defined benefit pension plans open to new employees. The impact on policing is that an Australian male police officer works an average of 14 years and a female officer works on average 7 years. Since there is no defined benefit after 20-30 years of service, these experienced officers take their superannuation (same as a 401K plan) and seek other employment at a younger age.

I have been warning American police unions for more than a year that local and state governments understand that the general public can be manipulated to resent public employees having health insurance and pension benefits that far exceed what they have. In the private sector, 91% of all employees are now at-will, and without a union contract. In fact, 50% of all private sector employees have no pension plan whatsoever. The taxpayer is funding benefits for the public sector that they are not getting, and public employers and the media are feeding upon the widening disparity in benefits between the private and public sector.

Traditionally, police unions have argued in the Court of Public Opinion whenever public employers have attempted to

reduce benefits. And the public has generally supported their police officers. But the widening gap between private and public sector benefits, a slowing economy and the fear of a recession do not bode well for police unions who believe the general public will raise a hue and cry to save defined pension plans for police officers or public employees.

It has started slowly with attacks on pensions in California and is now escalating nationwide. The media has jumped on the bandwagon advocating for pension reform. Local and state elected officials feel the political winds shifting away from public employees and their unions. Many police unions have already fallen and acquiesced to selling the unborn. More police unions will come to the crossroads in the next few years as the pressure mounts to make a decision: fight to retain a defined pension for all current and future employees and face perhaps a drastic reduction for all employees, or save the current employees at the expense of future employees.

This is a battle police unions cannot afford to lose and cannot avoid. There are many arguments as to why police officers need a defined benefit pension and affordable health insurance. The recruiting and retention crisis cannot be contained if local and state governments reduce benefits. There is plenty of evidence that two tier benefit schemes demoralize the workforce and divide the union into the "have's and have not's." Police unions need to know the facts, educate elected officials, the media and the public. The only sin is being unprepared for the battle ahead. ■