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Daytona mayor from 1930s finally gets his plaque

By [Eileen Zaffiro-Kean](#)

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The Daytona Beach monument that has had a blank spot where a plaque honoring 1930s mayor Edward Armstrong was intended to be placed 81 years ago is going to get a plaque for Armstrong now.

DAYTONA BEACH — When a local government decides to honor someone with a [plaque](#), it's usually a pretty mundane event that can teeter on the edge of saccharine.

Not so with the conversation that's been going on at City Hall the past two months about an idea to memorialize a [local 1930s political boss](#) known for, among other things, his part in an armed standoff at City Hall.

City commissioners spent good portions of their [Nov. 20 and Dec. 4 meetings](#) immersed in lengthy and passionate debates about a citizens' request to put a plaque commemorating Depression-era Mayor Edward Armstrong on an unmarked monument on the northern end of the Boardwalk.

When the plaque idea popped up for a third round of discussion at the commissioners' meeting last week, it looked like the matter wasn't going to be resolved until next year. But Mayor Derrick Henry wasn't up for a fourth discussion on Armstrong, so he steered the commission to make a decision even though there was no publicly advertised agenda item.

The decision came on a 4-3 vote — with City Commissioners Ruth Trager, Rob Gilliland and Quanita May all casting no votes — to put a plaque commemorating Armstrong on the monument that has had a blank rectangular space where a plaque should be.

The decision came 81 years after the 1938 City Commission shot down the plaque idea on a 3-4 vote, leaving the monument an unexplained pile of coquina rocks that was erected when Franklin D. Roosevelt was the president.

The caveat on the current commission's decision is the wording will be different than what citizens pushing for the plaque originally suggested. The word "administration" was added in a few spots in a gesture to take the emphasis off the yesteryear mayor. But there is still a lot of homage to Armstrong.

The plaque will include Armstrong's full name, his birthday of July 23, 1880, and his date of death, Jan. 2, 1938. The text of the plaque will read as follows:

Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers built this monument in 1938 in recognition of five-term Daytona Beach Mayor Edward H. Armstrong, an old-fashioned political boss who was one of the most colorful and controversial figures in the city's history. Armstrong's administration acquired New Deal funding and oversaw construction of major infrastructure improvements including the Oceanfront Park complex (which includes the Coquina Clock Tower and Bandshell), new waterworks, post office, bus system and municipal airport, which aided Daytona Beach's recovery from the Great Depression. During an era of legally enforced racial segregation when most blacks in the South were disenfranchised, Armstrong encouraged Daytona Beach's large black citizenry to vote. The Armstrong administration provided numerous jobs and services for all citizens, regardless of race, and helped the city acquire the monikers of the "World's Most Famous Beach" and the "World Center of Racing."

Gilliland said he's uncomfortable including the reference to the World Center of Racing without getting the OK from International Speedway Corp. since Armstrong was such a divisive figure.

"The rest of it sounds wonderful to me," Henry said.

Trager came up with different verbiage she would have rather seen on the plaque. Here's what she suggested as an alternative, to no avail:

"The coquina rock on top of this monument is made from shells and fossil debris compressed under pressure while underground, found mostly in this area, for thousands of years; and it forms the dense building material used in the construction of the Coquina Clock Tower and Bandshell in 1938. These and other buildings constructed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers during the administration of five-term Mayor Edward H. Armstrong (an old-fashioned political boss and one of the most colorful and controversial figures in the City's history) helped Daytona Beach recover from the Great Depression. Because of Mayor Armstrong's controversial tenure, the City Commission of 80 years ago voted not to have a plaque affixed to the monument."

Trager refuses to honor Armstrong, who shook down city employees for 10 percent of their salaries with the threat of having them fired if they refused. When Armstrong was trying to rustle up votes, some say he would also slip locals 50 cents or a half pint of whiskey.

When the governor tried to remove Armstrong from office in 1936, the situation degenerated into an armed standoff at City Hall. Trager called Armstrong “totally despicable.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for approving a monument to a corrupt and greedy man,” said Trager, whose husband’s uncle worked for the city in the 1930s.

The city commissioners who got behind the plaque idea pointed out that Armstrong, who was Daytona Beach’s mayor between 1928 and 1938, encouraged black voter registration. He also hired black people for some city jobs, including in the police department, and opposed the area Ku Klux Klan.

He worked with the federal Works Progress Administration to build the Boardwalk, the Bandshell, a new waterworks, and to turn the municipal airfield into more of a real airport.

Armstrong encouraged the speed trials on the beach, something that drew international attention. And despite the unemployment and grinding poverty brought by the Great Depression, the city grew by about a third while he was mayor.

Gilliland has said he doesn’t think the city should memorialize someone just because he was “less oppressive” than other leaders of that time of racial segregation.

When commissioners voted on the Armstrong plaque at their Nov. 20 meeting, they deadlocked on a 3-3 vote. City Commissioner Aaron Delgado wasn’t there for that vote, and when he returned for the Dec. 4 meeting, instead of just breaking the tie he suggested drafting different language for the plaque.

Rather than placing a plaque only listing Armstrong’s accomplishments, Delgado suggested coming up with wording that’s objective, factual and captures all sides of a multi-dimensional man.

“I don’t think he should be acknowledged without acknowledging the totality of who he was,” Henry agreed.

Flagler Beach resident Randy Jaye and other local citizens have been trying for more than a year to have the plaque added to the monument. Jaye said his group wants to honor Armstrong for his role in getting the clock tower on the Boardwalk. The plaque will be donated by the Daytona Beach chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors.

Jaye said he also wants to teach the public about an important chapter in the city’s history.

“It’s a gap in our history we’re trying to fill,” he said. “It’s kind of an embarrassment that we have a monument and no one knows what it is.”

There is actually already a plaque on the southern end of the Boardwalk with Armstrong’s name on it. The plaque near the eastern tip of Main Street went up in 1928 and commemorates the

Boardwalk's construction. It includes Armstrong's name and the names of city commissioners at that time along with the city engineer.