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In context

Protesters and politicians alike are redefining Richmond by removing racist and obsolete symbols of oppression and inequality from public spaces

City Charter language may stymie efforts to remove Confederate statues

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

As demonstrations in Richmond for racial justice and against police brutality continued for the 12th day on Wednesday, all nine members of City Council already are on board for one monumental change — removal of the statues of Confederate traitors that litter Monument Avenue and other parts of the city.

But even as two City Council members added proposals to change the slavery-defending Confederate names of Jefferson Davis Highway and the Robert E. Lee Bridge, the council quietly was being reminded that removing the city-owned Confederate statues could require General Assembly help to dismantle a legal barrier.

The legal complications that have halted the state's plans for quick removal of the Lee statue on Monument Avenue also could interfere with the city's efforts to remove its statues.

The Free Press has learned there is a behind-the-scenes effort to get rid of the legal barrier.

That barrier is a line in the City Charter — the city's constitution — that makes it a duty of the city Planning Commission to "preserve historical landmarks." Virtually every one of the statues targeted for removal is listed on the state and national registers of historic sites and places.

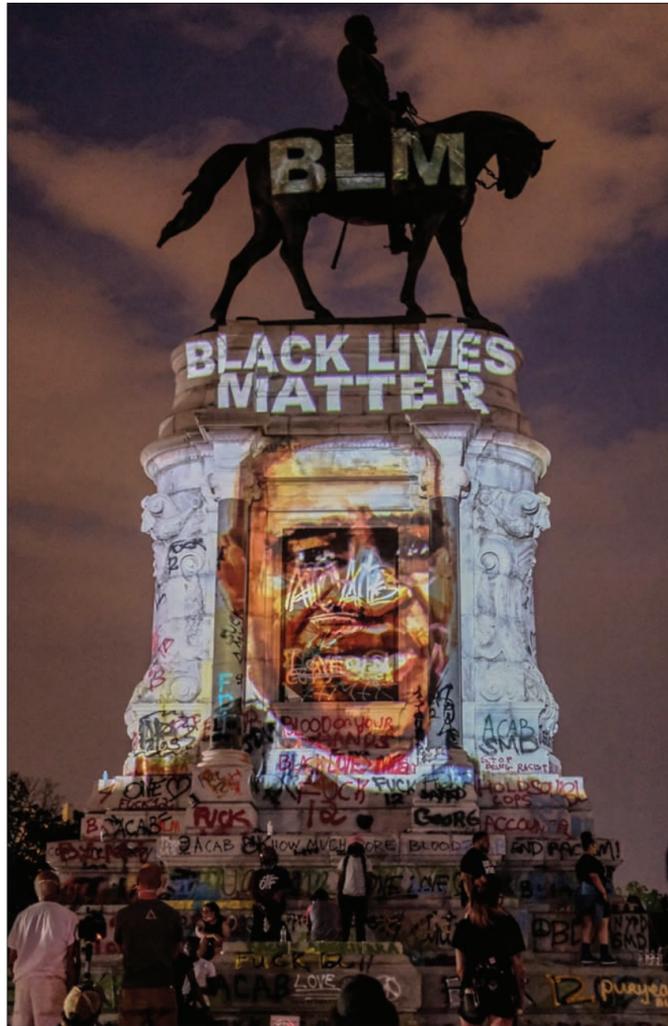
Despite a new state law approved by the General Assembly this year that allows localities to decide what to do with their Confederate statues as of July 1, the Richmond charter provision appears to dictate any action for now.

At least that was the 2017 opinion of then-City Attorney Allen L. Jackson.

Under the charter, City Council itself has no authority to remove public statues. The city Planning Commission controls the location and design of public statues and art under the charter.

In response to a council query, Mr. Jackson

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A Black Lives Matter tribute to the late George Floyd is projected onto the statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on Saturday night by local artist Dustin Klein, a striking signal of change.

By Brian Palmer

The daily explosion of young activists on Richmond streets is forcing a reckoning with Virginia's racist past and the symbols of oppression that hang over it.

With their voices — and their feet and hands — demonstrators have seized control of the stalled conversation about police brutality from politicians and pundits, their myth-busting starting almost immediately after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a white police officer.

Confederate monuments became targets of rage by people who see them as symbols of systemic racism, which allows lethal police violence and abuse of black people to go unchecked.

Even as Gov. Ralph S. Northam announced last week that the 21-foot-tall, 12-ton bronze statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee would be removed from Monument Avenue, graffiti-

Related stories and photos on A2 and A5

ists already had covered its base — as well as the statues of Confederates J.E.B. Stuart, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, and Confederate president Jefferson Davis on Monument Avenue — with hundreds of colorful tags such as "Black Lives Matter" and profanity aimed at the police.

On Saturday night, protesters knocked down the statue of Williams Carter Wickham, a Confederate general and enslaver, in Monroe Park. By Sunday morning, that statue was gone, reportedly taken by the National Guard for safekeeping.

And late Tuesday night, activists wrenched Byrd Park's bronze statue of Christopher Columbus from its base and dumped it in Fountain Lake. On Wednesday morning, city workers hauled it away like a corpse.

Textbook history portrays Columbus as the "discoverer" of the New World, ignoring his genocidal acts against the indigenous

Please turn to A4



A glimpse of history

Marasia Robertson, 4, watches as hundreds of protesters march peacefully down Franklin Street last Friday, one in a succession of civil actions taken in Richmond since the death of George Floyd in Minnesota. The youngster was with family at a local restaurant when the demonstrators marched by.

George Floyd, 'cornerstone of a movement,' is laid to rest

Free Press wire report

HOUSTON

Fifteen days after George Floyd cried out for his mother with his final breaths, the 46-year-old who has become a worldwide symbol in the call for justice was laid to rest beside his mother after a funeral Tuesday in his boyhood home of Houston.

Hundreds of mourners wearing masks against the coronavirus packed the private service held at Fountain of Praise Church, where Mr. Floyd was memorialized as "an ordinary brother" transformed by fate into the "cornerstone of a movement."

During a four-hour service broadcast live on every major

television network, family members, clergy and politicians exhorted people to turn grief and outrage at his death into a moment of reckoning for the nation.

The funeral followed two weeks of protests across the nation and the world ignited by graphic cell phone video of Mr. Floyd handcuffed and lying face down on a Minneapolis street while a white police officer kneels on his neck for nearly 9 minutes. The video shows Mr. Floyd gasping for air as he cries out, "Mama," and groans, "Please, I can't breathe," before falling silent and still.

Please turn to A4



The coffin of George Floyd proceeds to his final resting place next to his mother inside Houston Memorial Gardens in Pearland, Texas, on Tuesday as throngs capture the picturesque farewell on their phones.

Gov. Northam announces plan to reopen schools in the fall

Free Press staff, wire report

Richmond Public Schools teachers and students are to return to in-person classes after a long summer break, but with strict new social distancing guidelines aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

Gov. Ralph S. Northam unveiled guidelines on Tuesday that call for students to be spaced 6 feet apart at their desks and for teachers to wear masks. The guidelines also call for limiting access to or closing altogether certain common spaces such as



Mr. Kamras

school cafeterias. "All Virginia schools will open for students this year, but the school experience will look very different," Gov. Northam said.

Virginia was one of the first states to cancel the school year in March amid the coronavirus pandemic, with students shifting to remote or online learning. Gov. Northam said the state's priorities for re-

opening later this year are based on "the health and social, emotional and physical well-being of students and staff."

The state's guidelines for reopening all concerns, including businesses, government, schools and restaurants, are divided into three different phases. Most of the state is in the second phase of reopening and Gov. Northam said the current metrics look good, meaning the state could enter the third phase in coming weeks.

The new school guidelines only allow for

Please turn to A4

Richmond reopening takes next step Friday under state's guidelines

By George Copeland Jr.

Restaurants, museums, gyms and other businesses in Richmond can open more to the public beginning Friday as the city enters Phase Two of the state's reopening plan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The stepped up opening will apply to Richmond and Northern Virginia localities that are about two weeks behind the rest of the state, including Henrico and Chesterfield counties, under Gov. Ralph S. Northam's guidelines.

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Free COVID-19 testing

Free community testing for COVID-19 continues throughout Metro Richmond at events organized by the Richmond and Henrico County health districts, the Capital Area Health Network and the Chesterfield Health Department.

Testing will be held at the following locations:

Thursday, June 11: Community Supermarket, 1915 Mechanicsville Turnpike, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. In case of rain, testing will take place at the Gill Center, 2508 Phaup St.

Friday, June 12: Hotchkiss Field Community Center, 701 E. Brookland Park Blvd., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Saturday, June 13: Greater Fulton Medical Center, 1718 Williamsburg Rd., 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Event held by Capital Area Health Network, which requires registration to be tested. Register online at cahealthnet.org/communitytesting or call (804) 409-5230

Monday, June 15: Saint Paul's Baptist Church, South Side campus, 700 E. Belt Blvd., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. In case of rain, testing will be held Tuesday, June 16, at Diversity Richmond.

Tuesday, June 16: Diversity Richmond, 1407 Sherwood Ave., 9 to 11 a.m.

Thursday, June 18: Tuckahoe Middle School, 9000 Three Chopt Road in Henrico, 9 to 11 a.m.

Appointments for testing are encouraged by calling the Richmond and Henrico COVID-19 Hotline at (804) 205-3501 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Walk-up testing will be offered while test supplies last.

Chesterfield County testing

Wednesday, June 17: Stonebridge Recreation Center, 230 Karl Linn Drive, 9 to 11 a.m. Testing is for county residents who are uninsured or underinsured. Walk-up testing is limited; appointments are recommended by calling the Chesterfield Health Department, (804) 318-8207.

Redefining Richmond by removing racist and obsolete symbols of oppression and inequality from public spaces

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Taino people he “discovered.”

Elected officials are playing catch-up, but even they are starting to recognize the handwriting on the pedestal.

The Lee statue, said the governor, represents a “system that was based on the buying and selling of enslaved people” and “false version of history, one that pretends the Civil War was about state rights and not the evils of slavery. No one believes that any longer.” And so in the governor’s words, “we’re taking it down.”

In a statement to the Free Press, Lt. Gov. Justin E. Fairfax called the events of last 10 days “inspiring,” but said there’s more to do.

“We must focus on tearing down other monuments to systematic racism,” he said. “Those include rebuilding crumbling schools, changing a justice system that has always been racially biased against African-Americans and continuing to build a health care system that serves all equitably.

“The Confederate monuments must come down,” he continued. “But the monuments to bias and racism that have endured for decades must also be replaced with hard policy that results in systemic change.”

Supporting Gov. Northam’s stance at his June 4 announcement were more than a dozen people, among them Lt. Gov. Fairfax and other descendants of enslaved people; the Rev. Robert W. Lee IV, the great-great-grandnephew of the Confederate commander; state Attorney General Mark R. Herring; and Robert Johns, brother of the late Barbara Johns who, in 1951, led a student walk-out to protest inferior educational facilities in segregated Prince Edward County. Her efforts sparked a lawsuit that became part of the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* striking down separate and unequal public schools.

On Monday morning, state employees, contractors, and others in neon vests buzzed around the monument’s heavily graffitied — some would say contextualized — base, while a trio of men inspected the sculpture from a cherry picker as part of the effort to draw up a removal plan.

But just a few hours later on Monday, Richmond Circuit Court Judge Bradley B. Cavado issued a 10-day injunction halting the removal. A complaint filed with the court by William C. Gregory, a descendant of people who in the late 1800s donated the land for the statue, asserts “that there is the likelihood of irreparable harm to the statue if removed.” This would be in violation of the Commonwealth’s legal obligation to protect the statue made in 1890, Mr. Gregory’s complaint asserts.

The Monument Avenue Preservation Group, a loosely organized group of Monument Avenue residents and others dedicated to preserving the street and sculptures, stated on Facebook that it supports the injunction.

But the governor reiterated his plan to take the statue down, noting in a statement to the Free Press and at a media briefing on Tuesday that the administration is on “very legal, solid ground” and anticipated a court challenge to a removal plan that has been in the works for at least a year.

While the administration is reviewing the order, “Gov. Northam remains committed to removing this divisive symbol from Virginia’s capital city, and we’re confident in his authority to do so,” his office said in a statement to the Free Press.

During the weekend, members of Richmond City Council unanimously said they will back a plan announced by Mayor Levar M. Stoney and Councilman Michael J. Jones to remove the other four Confederate statues on Monument Avenue that are under city control.

This response by city and state leaders — along with the hands-on approach by some protesters — goes far beyond what Mayor Stoney’s Monument Avenue Commission called for in

its 2018 final report, which recommended removal only of the Jefferson Davis statue and for contextual signs to be erected around the others.

The reaction from less radical quarters has been more traditional, but just as clear.

“The Virginia State Conference (of the NAAP) stands with Gov. Northam,” Robert N. Barnette Jr., president of the statewide branch of the civil rights organization, said in a statement released last Friday.

“White supremacy is personified in these Confederate monuments. And while Klansmen, neo-Nazis and white nationalists defend them as an innocent representation of a mythologized ‘American Heritage,’ we know that these symbols glorify treason and a hateful history of black subjugation, reinforced through domestic terrorism.

“In order for our Commonwealth to move forward — to become a state united and free from inequity and bigotry — we must remove, not protect, Confederate symbols from the parks, schools, streets, counties and military bases that define America’s landscape and culture. These monuments are not history and (their) continued presence in this country is a signal to people of color that America has not repudiated racism.”

Meanwhile, state Republicans had a different take on the governor’s announcement.

The state Senate Republican Caucus expressed its “outrage” at Mr. Floyd’s killing, but said the removal of the Lee statue “was not in the best interests of Virginia.” They added: “Attempts to eradicate instead of contextualizing history invariably fail.”

The caucus also questioned Gov. Northam’s motives and took a swipe at one of their own, GOP Sen. Amanda Chase of Chesterfield, a far right candidate for governor, for her “idiotic, inappropriate and inflammatory response” calling the governor’s action a “cowardly capitulation to looters and domestic terrorists.”

City Charter language may stymie efforts to remove Confederate statues

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noted that critical line about the Planning Commission’s duty in section 17.05 of the charter and advised the council that the charter language would need to be changed by the legislature or removed if the Planning Commission was to take action.

Mr. Jackson also counseled that more research was needed to ensure there are no deed restrictions requiring perpetual maintenance when the city took possession of the Monument Avenue statues of J.E.B. Stuart, Jefferson Davis, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and Matthew Fontaine Maury in the early 1900s.

The attorney provided the opinion after 9th District Councilman Michael J. Jones launched his first bid to secure council support for removing the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue. It took two more attempts to win majority support.

The current city attorney, Haskell C. Brown III, did not respond to a request for comment on his view of the charter language.

Sources told the Free Press discussions are underway with members of the Richmond delegation to the General Assembly on legislation to amend or eliminate the words about preservation and to clear any other problems, such as voiding deed restrictions.

In addition, the sources said proposals are

in the works to have council endorse General Assembly action to eliminate the charter language, with the possibility that the legislature could vote on such a charter-change measure at a special session this summer.

Dr. Jones and Mayor Levar M. Stoney announced last week that they would introduce legislation on July 1 to take advantage of the new state law. The mayor has said he wants the changes to go beyond Monument Avenue.

Dr. Jones said he is on board with removing a statue of Confederate Gen. A.P. Hill at Hermitage and Laburnum avenues in North Side, the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Church Hill and other Confederate items that need to be eliminated.

Impatient demonstrators did not wait for legal niceties to topple the statues of Confederate Gen. Williams C. Wickham, an area slaveholder who fought in the Civil War and would go on to become a local leader in railroad development, and Christopher Columbus in Byrd Park.

The Wickham statue was brought down on Saturday night. The removal Tuesday evening of the Columbus statue reflected the protesters’ view that he is to be disdained for unleashing the European holocaust on natives in the Caribbean and in what is now the United States. The City of Richmond long ago stopped celebrating Columbus Day, and last year joined other localities in renaming the October holiday Indigenous Peoples Day.

Peoples Day.

Meanwhile, 5th District Councilwoman Stephanie A. Lynch introduced a resolution Monday that would authorize the Stoney administration to begin the renaming process for the Lee Bridge. The resolution is to be heard in the Land Use, Housing and Transportation Committee next week.

Separately, 8th District Councilwoman Reva M. Trammell on Tuesday submitted a request for a resolution to rename the South Side section of U.S. 1 known as Jefferson Davis Highway. She wants the street to be renamed Richmond Highway.

The resolution to start the renaming process is now in the hands of the Mr. Brown’s office, with expectations it will be introduced at the next council meeting on Monday, June 22.

“I’ve talked with the merchants along the

street, and they understand why it is needed and why it should be done,” said Ms. Trammell, who has been motivated by the demonstrations occurring mainly north of the James River. “They just want peace and don’t want their windows smashed and their stores looted, and if this is what it takes, they are behind it.”

The proposal is endorsed by the Jefferson Davis Neighborhood Civic Association, led by Charles Willis, and the Richmond Branch NAACP.

Still, demonstrators are keeping up the pressure, with raucous but peaceful marches for change, such as creation of a civilian oversight board for Richmond Police. Early Wednesday afternoon, nearly 100 people marched along Franklin Street to the State Capitol, chanting and holding up signs criticizing police, urging racial justice and promoting Black Lives Matter.

Gov. Northam announces plan to reopen schools in the fall

Continued from A1

widespread in-school instruction in Phase Three. Schools can offer summer camps and limited in-school instruction to certain students in Phase Two. (Henrico and Chesterfield entered Phase Two of reopening on June 5, with Richmond scheduled to enter Phase Two on Friday, June 12.)

Gov. Northam’s guidelines leave each of the Commonwealth’s school districts to come up with specifics for how they will reopen. Student schedules may be staggered to accommodate the guidelines, which could mean a mix of in-person and remote learning as well as changing the length of school days.

Each school district will be required to submit plans for reopening, including both private and public schools.

RPS officials said Wednesday that the administration will establish reopening plans after receiving community feedback from surveys to determine the level of comfort for reopening during the pandemic.

A link to the survey will be on RPS Superintendent Jason Kamras’ RPS Direct webpage later this week.

“We need to create the plan with our families because we are educating their children,” Mr. Kamras told the Free Press on Wednesday. He emphasized the importance for people to share their perspectives to help create an effective. “That is our top priority,” he said.

‘Cornerstone of a movement’ is laid to rest

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The former officer, Derek Chauvin, 44, has since been charged with second degree murder and second degree manslaughter and three other officers with aiding and abetting Mr. Floyd’s May 25 death. All were fired from the Minneapolis police force a day after the incident.

Mr. Floyd’s dying words have become a rallying cry for hundreds of thousands of protesters around the globe who have since taken to the streets, undaunted by the coronavirus pandemic, demanding justice for Mr. Floyd and other unarmed black men and women killed by police or white vigilantes and an end to police violence and abuse.

“I can breathe. And as long as I’m breathing, justice will be served,” Mr. Floyd’s niece, Brooklyn Williams, declared in remarks that drew applause from mourners inside the church. “This is not just a murder but a hate crime.”

Ms. Williams was one of several relatives and friends who addressed the service, remembering Mr. Floyd as a loving, larger-than-life personality. The memorial was punctuated by gospel music and a video montage of shared memories of the 6-foot-6 man affectionately known as “Big Floyd.”

His younger brother, Terrence Floyd, spoke about awakening in the middle of the night in recent days, traumatized by the memory of seeing his older sibling calling out for their mother as he lay dying.

His sister, LaTonya Floyd, sobbing in grief, told mourners, “I thank God for giving me my own personal Superman.”

Civil rights activist the Rev. Al Sharpton called Mr. Floyd “an ordinary brother” who grew up in a housing project but left behind a legacy of greatness despite rejections in jobs and sports that prevented him from achieving all that he once aspired to become.

“God took the rejected stone and made him the cornerstone of a movement that is going to change the whole wide world,” Rev. Sharpton said, invoking a biblical parable from the New Testament.

Rev. Sharpton said the Floyd family would lead a march on Washington being organized for Aug. 28 to mark the 57th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech given from the steps of the

Lincoln Memorial.

Some 2,500 people attended the funeral, after more than 6,000 people filed past Mr. Floyd’s open casket on Monday.

Two columns of uniformed Houston police officers saluted his golden casket as it was wheeled from the hearse into the church before the service. The funeral capped six days of mourning for Mr. Floyd in three cities — the first, a memorial service in Minneapolis on June 4, followed by a private service last Saturday in Raeford, N.C., near Fayetteville, where Mr. Floyd was born and one sister and other relatives still live.

Following Tuesday’s service in Houston, hundreds of people lined the route to the cemetery in suburban Pearland, Texas, to pay their respects. A white horse-drawn carriage carried his casket on its last mile to the cemetery, where he was laid to rest next to his mother in a private ceremony.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate in the Nov. 3 election, addressed the funeral service via a video recording, lamenting that “too many black Americans wake up knowing that they could lose their life in the course of just living their life.”

“We must not turn away. We cannot leave this moment thinking we can once again turn away from racism,” he said.

Two voter registration tables were set up outside the church.

Among those in attendance were loved ones of several other black men killed by white police officers or civilians.

The mother of Eric Garner, the New York man who died in a police chokehold in 2014, was present, as was the family of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Georgia man who was shot and killed in February while jogging. Three white men have been charged in his death.

Amid the furor over Mr. Floyd’s death during the past two weeks, sweeping and previously unthinkable things have taken place: Confederate statues have been toppled in Richmond, Va., and elsewhere; many cities are debating overhauling, dismantling or defunding police departments; and discussions and action are taking place to combat centuries of systemic racism. Authorities in some locales have barred police from using chokeholds or are otherwise rethinking policies on the use of force.

“We will have to have a hybrid approach to accommodate the means of families and students,” Mr. Kamras said, noting that the school system may have to shut down again if the pandemic peaks again in late summer or fall.

He said bus transportation for students will be an issue because of social distancing requirements that limit the number of passengers to 50 percent capacity on each trip.

Alternative solutions will be made, officials said, which could mean more virtual, online learning paired with creative and innovative scheduling for in-person instruction. Distance learning will be a full-time option for families that don’t feel comfortable sending their children to school.

“We need to get a sense of where folks are and their comfort level with the environment and use that to implement (the Virginia Department of Education’s) guidance as we begin planning reopening schools,” Mr. Kamras said.

The plan will be submitted to the public and the School Board for review. When completed, it will go to the VDOE for approval.

The Virginia Education Association, which represents teachers and staff, said the measures outlined by Gov. Northam would be costly and called for more federal aid and state spending.

“A crisis of this magnitude requires crisis measures to support Virginia students, especially those living in poverty,” VEA President Jim Livingston said in a statement.

Richmond reopening moves to next level under state’s COVID-19 guidelines

Continued from A1

Gatherings of up to 50 people are allowed under Phase Two, while restaurants, which were open only for curbside, pickup and delivery service and some outdoor patio service, can open for indoor dining at 50 percent capacity. Gyms and fitness centers can open for indoor exercise classes and workouts at 30 percent capacity.

Zoos, museums and botanical gardens are also among the public spaces able to reopen to the public.

“Given the data landscape, the governor’s requirement that all Virginians wear face coverings and my trust in the Richmond community to look out for each other, I’m comfortable with our city entering Phase Two of Forward Virginia,” Mayor Levar M. Stoney said in a statement Tuesday.

These new allowances come with a number of conditions, including signage and communication on social distancing in areas for public gatherings; continuing teleworking and spreading out

work stations to mitigate the chances of infection in workplaces; and limiting the number and duration of and attendance at gatherings such as conferences and training meetings.

Restrictions are still in place for non-essential services, from swimming pools limited to exercise and swimming instruction to no shared equipment for outdoor sports.

Face coverings and masks also are still required in public buildings under Phase Two.

On Tuesday, the number of positive COVID-19 cases in Virginia reached 51,738, with 5,203 people hospitalized and 1,496 deaths, according to Virginia Health Department data.

As detailed by Dr. M. Norman Oliver, the state’s health commissioner, the coronavirus still is disproportionately impacting people of color in Virginia. African-Americans comprise 20 percent of the state’s positive COVID-19 cases and 23 percent of deaths for which racial and ethnic data is available. Latinos comprise 50 percent of the state’s positive cases and 11 percent of deaths.