

Vel Phillips to Become First Black Leader Honored on Wisconsin State Capitol Grounds

Written by GOV Press Wisconsin

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/vel-phillips-pic1-s454.jpg>



Vel Phillips statue receives final board approval to be installed in June 2024.

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers announced today that the State Capitol and Executive Residence Board (SCERB) has granted final approval for the installation of a sculpture commemorating the life and legacy of Vel R. Phillips. Commissioned by the late artist Radcliffe Bailey, the sculpture is slated for unveiling on the Wisconsin State Capitol grounds in June 2024. This will be the first statue of a Black leader or any person of color featured on the grounds of the Wisconsin State Capitol.

A jurist, politician, and civil rights leader, Vel Phillips made history as the first Black American and woman elected to statewide office in Wisconsin, serving as the 29th Secretary of State. She was also the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School, the first Black person and woman elected to the Milwaukee Common Council, and the first Black judge in Wisconsin.



“Vel Phillips was a true treasure and Wisconsin icon who became the first of many before her,

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inspiring generations and defining the trajectory of our state. It is so important to me and to the countless Wisconsinites for whom she paved the way that she receives permanent recognition at the Wisconsin State Capitol,” said Gov. Evers. “The People’s House should be a reflection of the Wisconsinites we serve, and no one is more deserving than Vel Phillips. Future generations of kids will be able to look up at Vel and see a leader who looks like they do—an everlasting example of her historic legacy. I’m grateful to SCERB, the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, Mike Phillips, and so many others for their partnership in making this a reality.”

The initiative to install the Vel Phillips statue, which began more than four years ago, aims to address the lack of representation of the Black community’s contributions to Wisconsin and beyond. 2024 marks Vel Phillips’ 100th birthday celebration, making the sculpture’s approval and installation a milestone in what the task force calls “The Year of Vel Phillips.”



“This sculpture is more than a monument to my mother’s legacy; it is a beacon of hope and a call to action,” said Vel Phillips’ son, attorney Mike Phillips. “It serves as a potent reminder that we all can shatter barriers and champion the values she lived by. We are beyond thrilled and grateful to Gov. Evers, SCERB, and our many volunteers and supporters for getting us to this pivotal moment.”

“Vel Phillips was a formidable leader and trailblazer for African Americans and women, and it’s because of her perseverance that generations of women have been able to be a part of public service in Wisconsin,” said State Rep. Lisa Subeck (D-Madison), chair of SCERB. “The effort to establish this sculpture in her honor has been an effort years in the making, and I am thrilled to have finally reached this exciting milestone today.”

Following bipartisan approval of the statue in November 2021, the Vel Phillips Legacy Initiative, started by Michael Johnson, President and CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County, with endorsement from Mike Phillips, Vel Phillips’ son, and backed by The Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County, will have raised over \$500,000 to commission and donate the sculpture to the State of Wisconsin.

“We are proud to see this day come to fruition. Vel Phillips’ legacy is a testament to the power

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of resilience and dedication,” expressed Michael Johnson. “Through this sculpture, future generations will learn about and be inspired by her indomitable spirit and contributions to our society. We should thank our community, especially the youth, for bringing the issue of lack of representation to our attention.”

“This initiative reflects a community-wide effort to pay tribute to Vel Phillips’ unparalleled contributions to justice, equality, and progress,” said Dave Endres, Chair of the Vel Phillips Legacy Initiative Task Force. “We have worked with the Department of Administration, SCERB, and our legislative representatives since day one of this project and am exceptionally grateful for their collaboration, support, and oversight.”

The Vel Phillips sculpture will stand as a lasting tribute to a Wisconsin woman who broke countless barriers and devoted her life to making a difference in the lives of others. Its unveiling in June 2024 will provide all who pass by the opportunity to reflect on the enduring impact of Vel Phillips’ work and the continuing struggle for justice and equity for Black communities in Wisconsin and across the country.

Details of the unveiling celebration will be announced soon.