

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
REMOTE PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCING
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2020

Present:

Committee Members: Rick Aupperlee, Portia Foss, Eric Hutchins, Mark Nielsen, Brynn Nuse, Raven Pfaff

Others: Brian Story, Sophia Berard, Margo Warden, Jackie Stanton

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Rick called the meeting to order at 7:00

2. Reaffirm Decisions on Officers and Rules Made on 11/5

Rick moved to reaffirm the votes at the November 5 meeting to elect Rick Aupperlee as chair and Portia Foss as vice chair and the motion was passed.

Mark moved to reaffirm the rules of procedure adopted on November 5 and the motion was passed.

3. Discuss Purpose and Mission

Rick read the five points from the selectboard/trustee resolution on this committee:

- Education opportunities for the community to learn about issues of racial and social justice.
- Public displays to express support of racial and social justice.
- Policies and procedures to promote racial and social justice.
- Engage with community residents to continue the conversation on issues of racial and social justice.
- Coordinate with local partners and stakeholders to further the cause of racial and social justice.

Portia read a proposed mission statement:

A collaboration of community to encourage awareness and education on the topic of racial injustice to inspire ourselves and others to continually seek after truth, empathy and justice, recognizing the power of unity and understanding and empowering each other to action in hopes of cultivating positive change.

Raven read one she wrote:

Johnson's racial justice committee strives to achieve racial equity, racial justice and positive transformative change for Vermont's historically oppressed and marginalized peoples in the personal, social, systemic and structural domains of our community. We use honest, intentional dialog and active listening to challenge our societal and personal assumptions and further understanding of those who differ from ourselves. The racial justice committee works to build awareness, solutions and leadership for racial justice by generating transformative ideas, experiences and information. We envision a world

where people of all races can enjoy resources, experiences, relationships and embrace collective responsibility.

Mark read one he wrote:

To create a permanent path forward that will guide our community through an educational process with the results being as if seen through a child's eyes everyone being equal.

Eric said he feels there is an overemphasis on education. His own personal experience and most of the science-based evidence says things like implicit bias training and education are marginally effective. Proximity is the major solution. He would say we should be attracting, supporting and retaining people of color in our community, giving incentives to business owners and employers to attract and support people of color for jobs or tourism. What really makes people change is learning about the multiple perspectives and humanity of people who look different from them. While he appreciates that education has a role, he thinks it is overstated. Particularly in a community that is overwhelmingly white, he feels our real efforts should be to get people of color to move to or visit our community and make sure they feel supported and included once they are here. The community in Winooski transformed because people of color from all over the world moved there. It was a big opportunity for students who went to school with people from all over the world. He appreciates that raising the BLM flag sends a message but if we really want to move the needle we need to get people of color attracted to and supported in our communities. There could be financial incentives for businesses opened by people of color and recruiting of people of color for open positions in our town and school. For example, student loan forgiveness for people of color who want to come from other places and teach in our community. Changing the demographics of our community is what makes people overcome their implicit bias. Videos, workshops, etc. don't move the needle like proximity.

Mark said there is something that he has been wanting to study for years. He works for immigration, so it is against his thought process, but would anyone on the committee object if he contacted people in Winooski to find out what process they went through to get those people from Syria and other countries? This would be fact finding to answer questions he has and then he could bring the information back to the rest of the committee.

Eric said he thinks that is a phenomenal idea. He supports it 100%. Rural Vermont has a population problem. There is a drain of young people from our communities. There is an easy solution – attracting refugees in a resettlement program. He doesn't know if we have the resources to do such a thing but looking into it is a phenomenal idea.

Raven said perhaps part of our mission could be research and information gathering. Brian suggested that research like what Mark suggests could be a way the committee interprets the education piece mentioned in the possible mission statements.

Eric said what Winooski did transformed that community culturally and economically in massive ways that he thinks the great majority of citizens of that town are excited about. When we talk about transforming our community in ways that are both economically and

culturally beneficial, not only for incoming people but for people who already live here, that is a message that everyone can get behind.

Rick said he joined a Zoom meeting last week of the Racial Equity Alliance of Lamoille. He would like to get their input on these things and see what they can offer to us. Raven said she works with someone who is on that alliance. REAL and the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance have been working on these issues for a while and may be able to give us feedback and ideas.

Sophie Berard said she loves what is being said. She loves Eric's point about transforming the community. She suggested the mission statement could be brief, like what Portia wrote, and the purpose could include things like what Raven talked about, like conferring with other Vermont communities about the way they are pursuing racial justice.

Cal Stanton said he agrees that Eric's suggestion is a good next step.

Jackie Stanton said she agrees that proximity is how you move dials. There is work going on at the college. She is part of a group there that is working on recruiting people of color as faculty, staff and students. Education is important if it has some teeth and is open to all and even strongly encouraged for some such as board members or employees. She thinks Mark's fact finding idea is a great one. Her only question is that since he almost admitted some sort of bias, saying this is against his wheelhouse since he works for immigration, she is wondering if he is the best person to do that work.

Mark said he worked for ICE and now works for Border Patrol. His education is on the very conservative side of immigration. He had his own thoughts from the conservative point of view about the movement of Syrians into Winooski. As he looked into the non-profits and where the money was coming from, he got those answers. He applied to Burlington College. He is very interested in knowing both sides of the topic. His plan for a master's degree was to go in and research all the things he didn't know. Resettlement was one thing he didn't know about and didn't understand. A while ago, Kyle Nuse sent out a video about the story of a woman of color in Burlington. It was informative and eye opening. He knows a number of people of color of different nationalities. He has gotten to know them as people and it has opened up his mind. His strength is in immigration. He watches people come into the US illegally every day. He tracks worldwide criminal organizations. His weakness is on the flip side. Talking to people in Winooski would help him learn. That is why he is here as well. He is a white guy who has been in Vermont for going on 62 years. He played a game in management school and won because he was considered to have white privilege. He took offense at that because he worked very hard for everything he has gotten. He wants to learn these things to be better at them. If it works out that through his education and what he brings back to this board we can become like Winooski, we can have people come in and learn from them in person vs. seeing it on TV. He wouldn't have volunteered for it if he didn't think he was going to learn something from it.

Jackie said she is wondering if the people will be receptive to him, having worked for ICE. She understands his personal interest, she is just wondering if he is the best representative to do the work. Mark said he has a conservative point of view to a lot of things, but he doesn't often use that. He is not going to introduce himself as a guy from Border Patrol and he is not

going to tell the mayor of Winooski that he knows better than she does. If the team doesn't want him to do that, he has no problem with that. He wanted to do it for his own education and to benefit the team.

Eric said he thinks Mark is in a phenomenal position to be a fact finder. We all have our biases. Because of his knowledge in this area, Mark can give us facts we can act on. He noted that he would encourage everyone on the committee to avoid the terminology "both sides." There is a multiplicity of perspectives around all of these issues. White people are not a monolith; people of color are not a monolith. The strength of this committee is that we are pulling from a multiplicity of perspectives. He said he would love to hear what Brynn has to say.

Brynn said she is just listening to what everyone has to say. She wants to hear the input of other people before making any statements. She feels like she doesn't have enough experience compared to the adult community. Eric said her youth perspective is valued. Brynn said she likes the idea of reaching out to Winooski. She used to live there when she went to UVM. She enjoyed seeing all the diversity. She had coworkers who went to Winooski High School. They had a lot of interaction with the immigrants and said what a great experience it was.

Rick said today the governor announced that 4 communities in Vermont were awarded the Working Communities Challenge Grant – Barre, Lamoille County, Springfield, and Winooski. The grant coming into Lamoille is a little more than \$100K a year for 3 years. Some will be used for workforce development. The person who spoke for Winooski was Kristine Lott, the mayor. She talked about an equity committee and an equity director. Those might be people we want to get hold of. Tasha Wallis was the representative from Lamoille County. She talked about our community being broad, diverse and purposeful. Involving ourselves with and making ourselves aware of the Working Communities Challenge Grant may help with visibility and purpose.

Eric said the grant is mostly based around a navigator position. Is there any way that position can be influenced by Johnson to encourage diverse hires? Could it coordinate with other goals of this committee? Brian said we wouldn't be the deciding factor on that but it could be influenced by us and our local goals. Johnson was the most active municipality in the Lamoille County grant application so we have sizeable influence on how that develops. The grant funds will be divided over multiple years. It is intended to be a growth and learning process. We are starting with one idea, a navigator. There are lots of resources for job training and connecting jobs and job seekers, but it can be difficult to navigate. We are starting with the position of navigator and over time that is expected to change. We can have an influence on that to help our local goals. We can talk about it as connecting people outside the community to resources and jobs in Lamoille County.

The committee reviewed Portia's draft mission statement again. Eric suggested keeping the last half pretty much as it is and including some things other people said in the first half.

Rick said at the last selectboard meeting the board voted to give this committee access to Donna Griffiths as a paid note taker. Brian said the actual vote was to support paid minutes,

but not any particular person. He would welcome this committee's thoughts on an electronic transcription service vs. a paid minute taker. Rick said we also discussed asking the trustees to support a minute taker. Brian said the town and village are going to have a joint meeting on Monday and it is a topic at that meeting. He would like to have it decided by then whether to recommend transcription or a minute taker.

Eric asked Brian's opinion about a transcription service. Brian said when used with an audio recording of an in-person meeting it did a poor job of correctly assigning who was speaking. It was really unsatisfactory. But he is thinking with Zoom, since it already has separated audio lines, it might do a pretty good job of creating a transcript. Eric said he imagines that is much more economical. Brian said it is. The town's concern is that we can afford a minute taker for a couple of committees but if all the town committees want professional minutes, since we are in the middle of a budget cycle, we can't afford that much. We can absorb minutes for one committee. Two is a little expensive but we can do it. But we can't do it for more committees. The board's decision was to take it one request at a time.

Sophie Berard said she has experience taking minutes for board meetings. She had to use a transcription service in the past. Even if we used that, we would probably need someone to read through it and make sense of it. They always jumble words. She thought perhaps she could do the job for money. She doesn't think she would charge as much as Donna. If Donna can work for the committee, that would be awesome. If not, maybe Sophie can do one meeting and see if it works for her. Sophie asked if Brian is allowed to say how much Donna charges. Brian said he would be allowed to, but he doesn't know off the top of his head. It is reasonable, but not cheap. Brian suggested that he negotiate with Sophie and Donna and look into the transcription service and bring back something that will be cost effective, doing his best to balance the interests of the committee with the interest of the town.

Rick said Donna's minutes are impartial and informative. They capture the essence and have enough specificity to make them referential. He would really like something less industrial than a transcription service because, as Sophie said, there are errors sometimes and it takes a proofreader to correct them. He would support making a case for using Donna. He could see where every committee might want a paid minute taker but if the selectboard could look at it on a case by case basis it may not be so much of a slippery slope as discussed at the selectboard meeting.

Eric suggested that Brian find out the potential options and their cost and then the committee can weigh the value and cost to the town and make a recommendation at the next meeting. Brian said he will try to forward something to the Racial Justice Committee in advance of the joint selectboard-trustee meeting. The boards will probably reach a decision at that meeting. The selectboard has voted to support paid minutes. The trustees haven't voted yet. There will probably be some negotiation at that time. They may decide on a specific technique for taking minutes. In addition to Donna or a transcription service it sounded like Sophie might be willing to negotiate a little on price. That is a third avenue that might be a middle path.

The committee reviewed Portia's draft mission statement and suggested some changes and additions.

Eric said one thing he wants to mention is that because we are the community we are, when we encourage diverse populations to move to our community it may not feel like the safest and best place in the world. We need to be prepared not just to attract people but to support them once they are here. That is an important component of that encouragement of diversity. He went to UVM in the late 80's and 90's. There was a large diversity movement and a lot of it ended up with people coming here and then feeling like they were on Mars. That is something to anticipate.

Raven said we know there will be pushback to some of the committee's work. Relentlessly charging forward just creates more pushback so we should be thoughtful about things and build bridges and not burn them. If you create a lot of pressure on people to change, they resist.

The committee continued working on the wording of the mission statement. Sophie said she can see Portia's draft as the mission statement and Raven's as more of a purpose, explaining more what the committee will do. Eric said he sees it as guidelines for how we act but not a concise purpose. Brian said Raven's draft talks about how the committee will do things, but it's not the mission. Those are really important pieces, but he thinks the mission statement should focus on just a couple of sentences. Rick said Laraway has a mission statement and a vision statement. Raven's draft could be how we see the vision of the mission playing out. After some more discussion, the committee arrived at mission statement wording everyone agreed on.

Eric moved to adopt the following as the mission of the Johnson Racial Justice Committee:

The mission of the Johnson Racial Justice Committee is to encourage and support community diversity, and to promote awareness and education on the topic of racial injustice. We endeavor to inspire ourselves and others to continually seek truth, empathy, and justice. We recognize the impact of unity and understanding to empower each other to action, with the goal of cultivating positive change.

The motion was passed.

Rick said he explained to REAL that we were in the foundational steps and trying to find our authentic voice and that he would welcome them to join us once the committee is ready to put something out to a larger audience. He would like to keep that in mind as a possibility for the next meeting.

Brian suggested some changes to the wording of Raven's draft. Committee members agreed with the changes and suggested some more. The committee came up with wording everyone agreed could make a good vision statement.

Eric moved to adopt the following as a draft vision statement for the Racial Justice Committee:

Johnson's Racial Justice Committee strives to achieve a diverse community, racial equity, racial justice and positive transformative change for Vermont's historically oppressed and marginalized peoples in the personal, social, systemic and structural domains of our community. We use honest, intentional dialogue and active listening to challenge our societal and personal assumptions and further our understanding of those who differ from ourselves. The Johnson Racial Justice Committee works to build awareness, solutions and leadership for racial justice by generating transformative ideas, experiences and information. We envision a world where people of all races can enjoy resources, experiences, relationships and embrace collective responsibility.

He said amendments might be made between now and the next meeting and at the next meeting the committee can adopt a final version. **The motion was passed.**

The date of the next meeting was discussed. Committee members recalled that the committee had previously decided to meet on first Thursdays. It was agreed meetings should be scheduled for 6:00 pm.

Raven said she is really passionate about mental health. She might see what she can delve into regarding that. Her biggest concern is what services are offered. She has someone in the Racial Equity Alliance in her classroom. She will talk to her to see if she wants to sit in on the next meeting.

Sophie said she is in a graduate program in mental health counseling. The book for one of her classes talks about equity and social justice for school counseling. If anyone wants to borrow it when she is done with it, she can share.

Rick said REAL is taking a 28-day challenge and reading *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad.

Sophie suggested that at the end of meetings people could share books and articles they are reading.

Portia asked where the mission statement and vision statement will be displayed. Brian said they will be displayed on the section of the website created for this committee. He created that section but it is hard to get to right now.

Eric said he has found episodes 1-4 from season 2 of the *Seeing White* podcast helpful. It has fact-based historical discussion about biology, race and the social construction of race in our history and how that led to the current situation. He has used it for his upper class high school students.

Rick paraphrased James Baldwin: "Not everything you face can be changed, but not until you face it can it be changed."

4. ***Adjourn***

Rick moved to adjourn at 8:41 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths