

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES  
REMOTE PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCING  
THURSDAY, JANUARY 7, 2021

**Present:**

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

Others: Sophia Berard, Jackie Stanton, Margo Warden, Jasmine Yuris, Kyle Nuse

**Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.**

**1. Call to Order**

Rick called the meeting to order at 6:20. (The start time was delayed because the agenda that was published had the wrong Zoom meeting information and corrected information had to be sent to some people.)

Rick read a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail:"

*"Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with."*

He asked for a moment of silence for reflection on the state of affairs in our country.

Rick said he would like to allow the opportunity for public comment on each item rather than waiting until the end. The committee agreed to that.

**2. Approve Minutes from 11/5, 11/19 and 12/3**

**Mark moved to approve the minutes of November 5, November 19, and December 3, 2020 as written and the motion was passed.**

**3. Review 5 Point Plan Subcommittee Progress**

**A. Education Opportunities**

Portia said she has been in contact with a few a local Vermont speakers who could speak on the subject of racial injustice. She has heard back from a couple and is waiting to hear back from a couple more. Her plan is to secure one soon and so we can host a Zoom session open to the public.

Mark said he contacted Wendy Savery, curriculum coordinator at Lamoille Union. She has numerous grants she is waiting to hear back on. She is trying to get funding for racial justice classes and curriculum at the middle school and high school. He told her about what we are doing.

Rick said he is on the social justice committee at Laraway School, where he works. He has been in touch with the Vermont Humanities Council because Laraway is going to do a schoolwide read of *The Hate U Give*. He discussed with them the possibility that the Vermont Humanities Council might also want to link up with the Johnson Racial Justice Committee. He thinks they are a great resource.

Jackie Stanton asked who Portia has spoken with. Portia said one person is Deborah Luskin, a speaker, writer and educator from southern Vermont who works for the Vermont Humanities Council. She sounded very eager to help with the discussion. Portia understands that the Vermont Humanities Council would be paying her through a grant. Jackie asked if Portia is referring to Deborah Lee Luskin. Portia said yes. Jackie asked how Portia found her. Portia said through a Google search. Deborah never claimed to be an expert but she is passionate about the subject in her personal life. She mentioned some good books we might want to look into: *Between the World and Me* and *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

Jackie said those are great books. She is wondering if we should be connecting with a person of color in Vermont, someone who has done this work and is not just interested in it. Portia agreed. She said she has also been in touch with other people. One is former representative Kiah Morris. She is trying to keep it varied and not just get one perspective.

Margo Warden asked if we have a budget when it comes to connecting with someone we might be bringing in for education. Rick said we haven't been given any funding so far. Eric said he doesn't believe we will get any. He believes the committee's responsibility is to make recommendations to the selectboard and the selectboard will ratify and act and fund if necessary.

Raven asked if the committee is allowed to apply for grants. Rick said that would be a question he could ask the selectboard. He is not sure.

#### **B. Public Displays**

Brynn asked if the committee can have any say on hanging a Black Lives Matter flag on the pole between the municipal offices and the fire department. Raven said she thinks she remembers hearing that this committee was supposed to have a say in that. Eric said that is an issue we could take up and make a recommendation on, but we don't have any power. We have the ability to do research and education and make recommendations to the selectboard and trustees. If we want to take up that issue and make a recommendation to it would be within our rights but he doesn't think this body gets to do any decision making. He recommends reading minutes of the meetings where that was discussed to see the variety of opinions.

Rick said there seems to be a gap between putting up the flagpole and flying the American flag and putting up the Black Lives Matter Flag. When the original proposal to fly a BLM flag at the municipal building was made there was an offer to donate a flag, but that offer was withdrawn. Meredith explained that the trustees would be looking into purchasing a flag of the correct size. One of the trustees, Scott Meyer, had suggested maybe there could be a small ceremony around the flying of the BLM flag. That was back in October but nothing has happened since then. He doesn't know if they plan on doing anything. The question of where the flag is could be brought up at the next trustee meeting. As Eric says, we can make recommendations but it is up to the boards to make motions and make things official. As the committee was set up the board didn't give it authority to pass anything. The minutes state that they were willing to wait for the Racial

Justice Committee to be appointed and take a recommendation before doing anything, but that's not what happened.

Jackie said leaving it up to the committee was papered over by several more motions. She believes as it stands now they are going to fly the BLM flag at the village green. In October they said they would get it up as soon as possible. At NVU, their BLM flag was stolen and they put up a new one within 5 days. She is not sure what the holdup is with the village. It is not hard to do if you really want to do it.

Brynn said she has a Black Lives Matter flag she could donate. She thinks it is standard flag size. She doesn't know its durability or thickness. Raven said she feels like that is better than what we have now, which is nothing. She asked if there is any update on the plaque. Rick said the plaque is in place.

Margo asked if this committee has any sway. Could we move it forward with a recommendation from this committee? Rick said he believes we could recommend flying the BLM flag at the village green and we also could recommend reconsideration of flying it at the municipal building. As was stated in minutes, the village actually owns the flagpole. It is on village property. The flags are municipal property. His interpretation is that the village trustees make decisions and the fire department is accountable to the trustees, not the other way around. When Gordy Smith referred to the firefighters' monument, that was poetic license. He believes it belongs to the village. He feels it may be open to a public display. He is not ruling that option out.

Eric asked if the committee wants to make a motion about flying the BLM flag on the village green. He isn't sure if we want clarity about the property or past minutes or intentions of the trustees first.

Mark said he is not a fan of the whole Black Lives Matter piece, but he thinks it is a good question to put forward to the village. It might add some pressure to them and allow us to see how much our say goes into it.

Eric moved that the committee recommend to the village that they pick a date to raise a Black Lives Matter flag on the municipal flagpoles within the next 2 months.

Rick said he thinks we need specificity in the motion. He suggested moving that the Black Lives Matter flag fly on the pole closest to the municipal building, that the State of Vermont flag fly below the American flag on the middle pole and that the fire department flag stay on the pole closest to the fire department. The flag code mandates that no flag fly higher than the American flag so in times when the American flag is flown at half staff all flags have to be lowered but none can touch the ground.

Eric said he read newspaper articles and minutes on the Black Lives Matter discussion and he was really interested in it. He is sympathetic to the firefighters' view about this being a political issue and them not wanting to delve into political issues. He thought about that for a while and concluded that the raising of any flag is a political statement. You can see Canadian flags raised all over Vermont as a symbol that the place flying the

flag is welcoming to Canadians. He has never heard debate about raising a Canadian flag. Why not? That is a foreign nation. Other flags are raised in a variety of places to symbolize brotherhood with Jamaicans, Israelis, etc. There is rarely debate about that. Raising the Black Lives Matter flag is symbolic that the town takes a stand against injustice. He thinks that is a good thing for us to do. It is not political to show that the town is welcoming and inclusive of people from all cultures and backgrounds. He gets why people feel threatened, but there are many compelling analogies that make him feel it is a pretty welcoming thing to do and should not be threatening. He thinks it is good for our town to show we are open and inclusive. If we can establish that reputation it is good for everyone here.

Sophia Berard said she thinks Eric's suggestion of the committee making a recommendation to pick a date to hang the flag on the village green seems like the clearest path to getting it raised. She thinks if the committee dives back into the question of putting at the municipal building that is a can of worms and could lead to the trustees dragging their feet longer.

Portia said she personally doesn't think where we fly it is very important. She was thinking that there were more important battles for us to fight besides flying the Black Lives Matter flag but she understands what Eric is saying and she agrees. If you see a Black Lives Matter flag while driving around it makes you feel good. This is not a very diverse state. When she is driving somewhere and sees that there are people who are sympathetic and inclusive, people who care and empathize, it does mean a lot. Her thought when she read about pushback to flying the BLM flag is that there are more important things we could try to strive for but she does feel like visuals are important. She doesn't feel like we should try to push it for the municipal building. At the end of the day what difference does it make where it is flown?

Eric said flying the flag does send out a message and it gets us in a room with people who disagree about this and that is really the point of this committee. If flying the Black Lives Matter flag is controversial, he wants to hear why people feel that way and let them know his point of view. Getting people who feel differently about these issues to talk to each other is part of the work the committee needs to do. That is an end in itself. Another reason to put up the flag is the bigger messaging issue. When people of color drive through our town, do they feel welcome here? Do they see signs and messaging that makes them feel like this is a place they would want to live or visit again? He thinks that is meaningful.

Rick said at the December 14 trustee meeting we were told that there will be a special meeting in the village to address questions and concerns. He hopes issues related to the flag and the fire department will be part of that meeting. They have not set a date for it yet. That same evening, the town of Stowe only took 30 minutes to approve flying a Black Lives Matter banner over the Mountain Road. Before the selectboard meeting the town manager let the public safety officers know of the intent to fly the banner and the police department wrote a letter of endorsement. These things shouldn't take five months or five different motions to resolve.

Rick asked Eric to restate his motion. **Eric moved to recommend to the village trustees that they raise a Black Lives Matter flag in the Village of Johnson within the next two months.**

Jackie said the original request was made in June. It is January now. The flag was requested to be at the municipal building for a reason. The intention was for it to be an extension of our inclusivity and anti-racism statements and the town hall is the seat of our governance. When it is outside the municipal building it says that it represents the values of municipal officials

Mark said he agrees with what Portia and Eric are saying about the Black Lives Matter flag. But he is going to abstain from the vote as there is an ugly side to it as well. There are two sides to every coin. It is similar to the rebel flag. He visits Arizona and those flags are all over there. He has one in the back of his car in a plastic bag. But there are some very negative pieces to that as well. It is a politically charged piece. He is fully behind it as far as it relates to the inclusivity statement and being welcoming. He is not pushing that hard against it.

Eric said this is a democracy. We listen to everyone and then we act on what we believe the consensus values of our town are. That this is taking longer than it did in Stowe means that more people are involved and that is good. There probably were people in Stowe who objected and weren't part of the meeting. Hearing everyone is one of the strengths of our town.

Jasmine Yuris asked if Mark could give more concrete reasons why he feels the need to abstain and why he is against Black Lives Matter. Is it the movement itself or the flag?

Mark said he reads the Black Lives Matter website, follows their newsletter and follows them on Instagram. He watched videos from the three women who founded the organization. He understood what they were talking about and he doesn't have an issue with that. When Kyle Nuse asked him if he would like the Black Lives Matter flag flown at the town hall, he said no. There are some negative pieces behind it. When you see the CNN headquarters in Georgia being smashed through in the name of Black Lives Matter, he doesn't endorse something like that, any more than he endorses what happened in Washington DC yesterday. Black Lives Matter is a very polarizing topic right now. What Eric said about the Canadian flag is something he never thought about that way before. He is not going to argue with anyone on this committee about flying the Black Lives Matter flag. If you compare the Black Lives Matter manifesto to our inclusivity statement, the language isn't even close. That manifesto talks about Black lives only. It doesn't include Native Americans. It doesn't include whites. Some people he talks to feel all lives matter and he thinks that is probably where the fire department was coming from. He is good with the idea of using the Black Lives Matter flag to be welcoming but he wants the committee to understand that there is another side of it, just like there is with the rebel flag. When our major news networks watch cities burn down in the name of Black Lives Matter, that is not where he is coming from with it. If we talk about it as welcoming, he is all about that. He has talked to a lot of people about refugee resettlement. If he was against that he wouldn't be doing this much work.

Rick said those Canadian flags you see are mostly not on municipal property. The distinction is that this is on municipal property. The discussion and debate was around what they considered government speech. But the federal government has defined that Black Lives Matter is not political speech; it is humanitarian. Any politicizing of this is strictly opinion. The opinion of the federal government is that it is not political speech and is protected under the Hatch Act. The original proposal was not only to display a Black Lives Matter flag to support people of color but also as a symbol of our governance and unity within the community. Some are saying it is divisive and he understands that but that is an opinion. At the recent meeting in Stowe someone said that when she sees the Black Lives Matter symbol she feels safe. She will stop and get gas. She feels like a town has her back. It promotes a sense of safety. He would like to see specificity in the motion. He noted that Margo suggested in the chat that maybe the committee could recommend that the village fly the flag on Martin Luther King Day.

Diane Lehouiller said she really sees the flag as a welcoming thing. She thinks you have to put yourself in the skin of someone that is dark and see how important it is to have a town have your back. It is important to have symbols around that make people feel safe to be in our town. People who are opposing this don't come to the meetings. How do you get them to discuss it and have their facts or opinions stated so we can have good discussion and come to a reasonable conclusion? She said she would like to know what the Confederate flag means to Mark.

Eric said he thinks this is a good opportunity to emphasize that we are not all going to agree. Motivations and opinions about racism and anti-racism are going to be different. It is not our job to convince everyone that our beliefs or principles are right but to pass recommendations that will make our town more inclusive. We should talk about motions and recommendations and pass them or not. If we try to do purity tests or convince each other that our particular viewpoint is right we will waste time. He thinks we already have a consensus too make a recommendation. He called the question.

Portia said she agrees but she doesn't feel that it is a waste of time when we have discussions because it is useful to hear another person's point of view. Sometimes it is compelling to hear something put in a way that you haven't thought about before. In response to what Mark said, two things came to mind. She has heard from a lot of friends that Black Lives Matter is very polarizing and a lot of people don't support it because they don't support the organization and what they stand for, and she doesn't either. She doesn't support all of the rhetoric but she does support the statement "Black lives matter." She thinks it is important that we separate the two. Just because you don't support the beliefs of the founders of Black Lives Matter doesn't mean you cannot be for the statement that Black lives matter. She doesn't feel that people are generally taking the people involved in the attack in DC yesterday as representative of Americans, but there were many American flags all over the place there. Those people really believe they are patriotic. Mark brought up people who have the Black Lives Matter flag and are destroying public property or are racist. That is no different than the people in DC who were brandishing American flags and claiming to be patriots but being insanely unpatriotic.

**The motion was passed with Eric, Mark, Portia, Raven, and Brynn voting yes and Rick voting no.** Mark said that he is voting yes. He likes the thought of people feeling welcome in Johnson. He likes the idea of separating the movement and the statement. To answer Diane's question, he has spent half his life in Arizona and he always interpreted it as being a very rebellious state but he read some history and that is not altogether what that flag is about.

Rick said when the committee was given the outline with the five-point plan we were also given Appendix A and Appendix B. Appendix B is Johnson's anti-racism statement. He read the statement.

**Rick moved to recommend that the village trustees adopt the anti-racism statement adopted by the selectboard.** He said he feels they should adopt it so there is unity within the community around the documents that give the committee authority to have these conversations.

Jackie said she sent a request to Rick today for this recommendation. The inclusivity statement was created through a grassroots effort and passed first in the town and then in the village. Then the second statement was passed by the town. It makes sense that it would now be passed by the village so all are on the same page with articulating community values and board members can all embrace and uphold them. Especially with this joint committee it makes sense to her for the village in town to be on the same page.

**The motion was passed.**

**C. Policies and Procedures**

Eric said he put together several draft proposals. He took ideas from the Vermont Equity Council's recommendations and some other areas. He searched around the state and country. But most of the good local work has been in places that are more diverse.

His first proposal is that we recommend changing messaging on all town documents to include the inclusivity statement. The Town of Brattleboro on all their advertisements for hires says they strongly encourage applicants from underrepresented groups to apply. While a lot has been made of the Johnson inclusivity statement, it is hard to find on the website. He thinks it should be on the front page. And it is not on anything else. There is a document about opportunities for businesses in Johnson that has nothing about the inclusivity statement. The inclusivity statement should be on documents like that. There is a document about attractions of Johnson that has nothing about the inclusivity statement. He thinks if the inclusivity statement is going to mean something it needs to be front and center on town messaging and documents.

Raven asked where it is on the town website. Eric said he found it by typing "inclusivity" in the search bar. He forgets where it was.

Eric's next proposal is that we create opportunities for feedback from citizens and visitors, particularly people of color. He feels we need to offer formal avenues for feedback. Brattleboro did some very active outreach. Their town manager put out a

memo about work he did to do outreach to people of color and racial equity organizations.

Another suggestion is to see if we can leverage Johnson's opportunity zone designation. It offers tax incentives to people who want to invest in our town. Could we add an additional tax incentive for people of color? Could we advertise our economic opportunities more widely than in the state of Vermont?

Another suggestion he has is an equity and diversity audit like the one Hartford is doing. It asks questions about diversity and inclusivity in the way you do business.

Rick said Brian Story mentioned at the selectboard meeting the other night that the whole Johnson website is under reconstruction. It was put out to bid and a firm was hired. It would be nice to make a recommendation that the inclusivity statement be front and center on the website. Lamoille County is part of the Working Communities Challenge Grant. Women and people of color are encouraged to be part of the county plan to implement that grant. It is a 3-year grant of \$100,000 a year. If we make a recommendation he thinks they would be willing to listen to it.

Eric said in the last 10 years the white population of Vermont has declined 1%, the black population has increased 27% and the Latino population has increased 21%. There is a lot of concern about losing population and young people in Vermont. Making ourselves attractive to people of color is how we will increase our population. He is committed to the moral purpose of this committee regarding inclusivity and tolerance, but there is something for everyone in the town who already lives here. It will help our town if we are a welcoming and open place.

Jackie said she would hope the NVU community would be involved in the feedback project. Opportunity zones are really for very wealthy people. The town has offered tax abatements to businesses like Pomerleau or the owner of the grocery store. That is something we could advertise to Vermonters of color. A lot of this type of work is being done right now in Burlington. They declared racism to be a public health crisis. They have blueprints we might be able to borrow. Eric said he looked at a lot of that, but we don't operate on the same scale with the same kind of budget and resources and our community is not that diverse.

Raven said she really likes the idea of the inclusivity statement being posted everywhere. Perhaps we could eventually get a nice graphic printed with the inclusivity statement that people could pick up and use so it is not changed.

Jackie said when the inclusivity statement was first adopted this was all talked about – putting it on town letterhead, offering it to businesses to put in stores, etc. Kate Westcott painted the inclusivity statement on a giant board that is eventually going to be in the town lobby. There has been talk about that type of messaging but it has gone to the wayside. Thanks for reviving it.

After some further discussion **Eric moved to recommend that the Town of Johnson and the village trustees add the Johnson inclusivity statement prominently to the website and add it whenever possible to town communications, publications and advertisements. The motion was passed**

**D. Engage with Community Residents**

Rick said he spoke with Jeanne at the library and got a pretty good idea about resources the library has related to racial justice and BIPOC issues. Jeanne put something on Front Porch Forum shortly after their conversation. He spoke with people at REAL and would like to invite them to a future meeting of ours once we have a body of work we can share. He also spoke with Heather Hobart at Lamoille Restorative Justice. She said she would be willing to offer the services of Lamoille Restorative Justice and would like to be invited to one of our meetings. He talked to Casey Romero, who is working on the Working Communities Challenge Grant and she gave him feedback on how the work we are doing will fit in with the award Lamoille County will receive.

**E. Coordinate with Local Partners and Stakeholders**

Mark said he has been in contact with many people about the refugee resettlement program. He is currently working with someone out of Leahy's office. Johnson is a little too small to do this all by itself. We probably will need help. You can't just take in 10 refugee families. Rutland took in 100 families. There is an infrastructure issue – public transportation, jobs and housing. You have to be State Department certified and Homeland Security certified and he is trying to get an idea what we would have to do to be certified and how much we have to grow to make it work. It is quite an involved process.

Eric asked, when Mark says there is an issue with infrastructure, is he saying we don't have capacity here? Mark said you need to have a certain level of public transportation, a certain number of jobs that might be available to refugees, and housing. He is trying to get an idea what the application looks like to send to the State Department to get certification. We can't even consider being part of it until we get certification. Johnson is a little small for what they are looking for. He needs to continue to look into it. Rutland was the last refugee resettlement program approved by the State Department. They have 37 different languages going to their schools. They had 100 plus families join their community. Under the Biden administration the number of refugees is going to explode because Biden very much backs that. What Mark is looking at is not only what Eric brought up about being able to move the needle through contact with people of color but also bringing in refugees as an economic engine.

Rick said one thing that was brought up at Monday's selectboard meeting was that there is no available housing in Johnson. We have a lot of apartments but due to COVID people are not being evicted. Landlords are struggling. Available housing is going up in cost. In the last six months property values have gone up about 10 to 12%. Entry level homes cost over \$200,000 now. Affordability could be an issue.

Raven said at the last meeting she said she could bring back numbers of what our housing rate looks like. When COVID first came to Vermont they started putting homeless people in hotel rooms and empty apartments. As summer came on more housing opened up but when winter started people were put back into hotels or empty apartments. At one point

almost every single homeless person was in a place. That is no longer the case. She doesn't have exact numbers but there is little housing available.

Rick said there is a committee in the county called the Lamoille Area Health and Human Services Regional Command Center. They deal with housing, mental health, etc. The housing situation is really tight. That group would be a resource. Greg Stefanski is the chair.

Raven said she works for Capstone. She has been in contact with Greg Stefanski a lot. He used to be the Lamoille area community engagement and partnership manager for Capstone and he has lots of connections. The two of them are putting their heads together to think of resources and ideas. In her classroom she is working with someone who is on the Capstone racial justice committee and also in REAL. Raven has been invited to sit in on one of REAL's meetings and also one of Capstone's racial justice meetings.

#### **4. Public Discussion**

Rick asked if any members of the public had input.

Margo asked if the Racial Justice committee will report out at town meeting about progress, goals, etc. Rick said he was waiting to hear the updates on the five points. Then he thought he might about whether we are part of town meeting. Under Other Business he had planned to bring up the possibility of writing a letter from the Racial Justice Committee to be included in the town report. We would have to have something in writing to the town by the end of the month. He asked if anyone thinks a letter should be drafted. There was no response from committee members.

Rick read a statement Robert F. Kennedy made on the night Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated:

*What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another; and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.*

*We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past and we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; and it's not the end of disorder. But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.*

#### **5. Adjourn**

Mark moved to adjourn, the motion was passed and the meeting was adjourned at 8:30.