

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
REMOTE PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCING
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Rick Aupperlee, Eric Hutchins, Raven Pfaff, Portia Foss

Others: Brynn Nuse, Jackie Stanton, Cal Stanton, Sophia Berard, Jasmine Yuris, Diane Lehouiller, Kyle Nuse, Margo Warden

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Rick called the meeting to order at 6:00. He read a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Rick said we were informed of Brynn's resignation at the special meeting. Her resignation letter was dated January 17. She voted at the special meeting. He is not sure with the wording of her resignation letter whether she is still a member of the committee tonight. He was going to leave it up to her to decide.

Scott said he will suggest appointing a new committee member for the agenda of the next trustee board meeting. Rick said the trustees will have to advertise, then meet with anyone who applies and make an appointment. He doesn't know if that can all be done before the next meeting in March. Eric said he feels we need someone to fill the position. He suggested just warning the vacancy, getting applicants and having the trustees appoint someone. It is not an elected position with power. The board can just appoint someone tomorrow if they want to. He would not say it needs to be a long drawn out process. The board could appoint someone at its next meeting. Scott said he would like to be consistent about how we appoint members of committees. He feels like that would not be consistent with what we have done in the past.

Raven asked if people who have applied before have to apply all over again or just let the board know they are interested again. Scott said that is a good question. When Brian and Phil left the trustee board recently the trustees asked the people who had also been candidates for their positions to move into their slots. It would be very easy to do something like that with the Racial Justice Committee. He gets nervous about that if we have more than one person who wants to

join. He tries to ask the same three questions to every candidate so it is consistent. If only one person is interested then it is easy. He wants to make the process as transparent as possible

Eric thanked Brynn for her service on the committee, showing that young people have a contribution to make in town government. He hopes she continues in this role and whatever community she lives in. The other committee members also thanked her. Brynn said she really enjoyed her time on the committee and hearing the opinions and voices of others. Rick said even though she is not a Johnson resident she is free to join meetings as a member of the public.

2. *Discuss Appointment of a Committee Officer: Secretary*

Rick said the committee previously appointed a chair and vice chair but did not appoint a secretary. He thinks it is time to consider appointing one. He asked what other committee members think.

Eric said he noticed the selectboard has taken to posting the videos of their meetings on the town website. We also have a minute taker. When we have a video recording and a minute taker he is not sure what duty the secretary position would fulfill.

Rick said as we start moving into taking action more, he would like to have a person who can make contacts after we discuss it. If it is not something we need funding for, we could get information, line up speakers or events and then make a recommendation to the selectboard. He thought a secretary might be advantageous for that.

Eric asked if Rick is suggesting that we might need to appoint someone to do the necessary outreach that might come from motions of the committee. Rick said something like that.

Raven said it is something she is relatively good at and something she has thought about. Portia said she thinks it is a good idea but she couldn't volunteer for it. She has a lot on her plate right now.

Eric said he thinks as duties come up whoever has the ability or desire should take them on. He is afraid if we made Raven secretary a lot of load might fall on her when others might be able to help. He thinks we can delegate responsibilities as they come up.

Rick moved to fill the position of secretary. He said if the motion passes we can move on to make an appointment but we don't necessarily need to do that tonight. The VLCT rules of procedures say committees should have a chair, vice chair and secretary. We just elected a chair, who is responsible for setting and posting the agenda, and a vice chair to fill in when the chair is not available.

Sophia Berard suggested that if the committee doesn't appoint someone today they could see how tasks get handled. There may be someone who tasks naturally go to and then the committee could decide whether it makes sense for that person to be the secretary.

Jackie Stanton said she thinks people could just follow up as they have been doing so far. She doesn't think it needs to be that formal. It could slow the work up.

Jasmine Yuris said she understands that Rick is wanting to keep track of documents and requests. The library trustees just started using a platform called Trello, which is incredibly helpful. Maybe the committee could look into a platform like Trello where they could have their own page with documents, requests, and recommendations made to the town. And maybe one person could be the overseer of that.

Cal Stanton said let's give ourselves room to not get bogged down in this stuff so it doesn't get in the way of initiatives and ideas. He thinks there is time to let this grow naturally. People will emerge with their different interests.

The motion failed unanimously.

3. *Review Progress in Areas Specified in the 5 Point Plan*

A. Education Opportunities

Rick said Mark told him that he is planning on meeting with the mayor of Winooski on refugee resettlement and creating opportunities within the community and he may have a recommendation to bring back to the committee.

Portia said she is still waiting to hear back from a few potential speakers and has been putting feelers out for some others.

Sophia asked, wasn't there supposed to be a second part of some previous training? Jackie said almost a year ago we had our first training in town and we were working on our second but it was abandoned in August when the idea for this committee came up. She had hoped it would be brought to this committee but the selectboard decided not to.

Rick asked if Jackie spoke to Brian Story about it. Jackie said yes. She, Brian Story, Bor Yang and Kyle Nuse were the ones working on that.

Rick said he will talk to Brian and see where we are with that and if we can get it moving. He would like to see it happen.

Eric said we haven't discussed speakers at all as a committee or what would be appropriate. Rick said he is just getting information, not looking to make something happen. He thought he might speak to Brian and see what information he could bring back to another meeting.

Diane asked who Portia is contacting. She is getting people to come to Johnson to speak right? Portia said yes. She is looking into getting local authors and speakers who could do a seminar on Zoom to educate the community. Diane asked who she is looking at.

Portia said she got hold of some authors. She contacted Kiah Morris but hasn't heard back from her. She is still putting feelers out. She thinks we should look into getting the ball rolling on the training Jackie was working on. She is open to any suggestions about education ideas. She thought a good start would be a speaker who could do a Zoom seminar with the community invited.

Cal Stanton said there have already been two Bor Yang trainings so the next one is already in the hopper. It has already been initiated.

Jasmine said she would advocate for the committee to take a stance and maybe have a vote tonight. It would be more effective if Rick reached out to Brian with the committee having voted to continue with Bor Yang training or start a new training with the Peace and Justice Center. She would like a motion tonight to recommend either a third training with Bor Yang or to go with training from the Peace and Justice Center. She knows amazing things are coming out of that organization. Scott said the Peace and Justice Center does amazing work. When they do educational programs there often is more than one person. Sometimes even the best presenters don't capture everybody's imagination so it can be helpful to have multiple presenters.

Jackie said before the Bor Yang training people went to the selectboard and asked for specific training from the Peace and Justice Center about seeing and disrupting racism. That was an excellent workshop that a number of people from town went to. The selectboard said no to it. Two members of the selectboard, Mike and Eric, said the Peace and Justice Center was an extremist organization because they helped to organize a demonstration against ICE. The selectboard went to training from Bor Yang, which turned out to be wonderful. She would love to go back to the Peace and Justice Center. It is a wonderful organization. But there are stumbling blocks there. You have to pay for these workshops. It might be cheaper with Zoom because people don't have to travel.

Scott said he doesn't know how it works if one board agrees with a recommendation from the Racial Justice Committee and one does not. It may be worth having a joint meeting with the trustees, selectboard and Racial Justice Committee to come up with ideas about how to deal with recommendations from the committee when one board may be in favor and one may not.

Rick moved that the Racial Justice Committee reach out to get information from the Peace and Justice Center, Bor Yang and others who may be able to present educational opportunities to the community. Eric said he doesn't think we need a motion to do outreach and exploration. That is part of the function of the committee. He feels anyone who wants to can contact them about options and bring the information back to the committee.

Jasmine said when she recommended a motion she was hoping everyone on the Racial Justice Committee was well versed on the Peace and Justice Center and Bor Yang but she is now realizing everyone is not. She just wants to see the committee make a choice. She thinks this is the most important piece of the whole Racial Justice Committee. The workshop people got to attend in person was amazing. She thinks more of that work needs to be done and done tomorrow.

Raven said she will look into the Peace and Justice Center. Portia said she can look into the Peace and Justice Center and Bor Yang.

Raven said she heard a suggestion from the public that members of the public would like education around Juneteenth, which is an awesome idea and a great starting point.

Eric said he knows this is an unpopular opinion but when he is exploring anti-racist ideas and things we can do for our community, the evidence-based actions are around attracting and retaining people of color in our community and making laws and policies that make the lives of people of color safer and more comfortable. Unfortunately the research says racial sensitivity trainings or speakers where only willing people show up do not reduce racism. What is more effective is laws and policies that materially make the lives of people of color better and safer. He does like compulsory education for people who are under 16, people in law enforcement, etc, but for the willing there is no evidence that education will accomplish our goal. If we do get a speaker, he will attend, but he thinks the focus should be on actions.

Jasmine said with the first Bor Yang training selectboard and trustee board members were asked to attend. People from the fire department, NVU etc were invited. People who are making policies to make this town a safer place for people of color to live were urged to come to the training. She thinks in order to make these recommendations to the selectboard or trustees, board members need to be on the same playing field as people on this committee. She thinks we all need to be coming with the same tools in our shed so we can pass motions to make this a more inclusive place.

Eric asked if board members attended. Jasmine said she thinks all the selectboard members and trustees came. Scott said he did not. He was not available. But he has had a lot of diversity training with the state. Jasmine said a lot of unlikely characters showed up and were transparent about their views changing just within those 3 hours.

Diane Lehouiller asked if this committee can think of some policies that can be brought to the selectboard and trustees. Eric said he made some recommendations at the January 7 meeting that have yet to be passed on to the boards. That will come up later on tonight's agenda.

Cal said he doesn't think Eric's opinions are unpopular. He is on board with what Eric said. But without performative actions like raising a flag or standing on the street with signs we wouldn't even be talking about this. There were some board members at the board Yang training. He thinks Gordy was the only one who showed up from the village. Realistically we have to do these things to show that there is a passion.

Margo said she is hearing from Eric that it's not words, it's action. How do these trainings bring the community together and where does that fit on the continuum of words, then education, then action?

Eric said he doesn't want to denigrate education. Since spring there has been a huge anti-racist movement. A lot of people are waking up to things people of color have lived with for a long time. The actions of well-meaning white people have been largely clumsy and not very effective. There have been a lot of performative actions like Facebook posts, discussions, workshops and sensitivity trainings, while people unarmed people continue to be shot on the streets or incarcerated or have less wealth and opportunity at every level. There is a lot of energy being spent by well-intentioned white people that doesn't address the problems we want to tackle. Education is something we should do, but it's the first of a thousand steps, not an end. We can spend a lot of time on procedural or educational steps

rather than getting down to business and making things happen that make our community inclusive. Some of the stuff he is hearing makes him a little impatient. We need to make things happen that change people's lives.

Rick said education was part of the resolution to form this committee. We should follow up on the charge we have been given.

Jackie said she understands what Eric is saying. She has read a lot of the same studies. As Rick said, education is a charge of the committee. Education keeps the issue on the front burner. It keeps the conversation alive. It is a starting place. She heard an interview the other day with someone who wanted to change laws but people were telling him that unless we also change hearts and minds then four years from now the law changes might be overturned. Changing hearts and minds can be performative, but as Cal said we would not have this committee without the performative stuff.

B. Public Displays

Raven said the Black Lives Matter flag is up. It went up on Sunday. She said the Racial Equity Alliance of Lamoille (REAL) put up a banner across the road in Stowe. By law the banner can only be up for 21 days. Their idea was that it could be a traveling Black Lives Matter banner. They asked if Johnson would like it. That is something that would probably have to be discussed at the next meeting.

Eric said he would refer them straight to the trustees. They are the ones that would approve it. Raven said she had a brief conversation about it with a trustee.

Cal asked, when things like the banner are brought to the selectboard or trustees, would Racial Justice Committee representatives be there to speak to them?

Sophia Berard said she thinks if it comes as a suggestion from the Racial Justice Committee and members of the committee are at the meeting backing it up it would probably have a better chance of passing. Margo said it should be something stronger than a suggestion.

Rick said years ago there were wires across Main Street where banners were hung and we did away with that when we did the Main Street project. He is not sure if the infrastructure is in place on Pearl Street. There used to be a place banners could hang there.

Scott said he had the idea of doing something similar months ago and was told that it is a State of Vermont right of way through Johnson and there are rules about verbiage over the state highway. If the other municipalities that were going to put up the banner were named, that would add strength to the idea and encourage board members to agree. He doesn't have an issue with it. He is not sure how it works with the Public Service Board or the state highway people.

Raven said she heard nothing with words can be on a state highway. She said she is seeing comments in the chat saying that NVU hangs banners on Pearl Street. The infrastructure is still there.

Scott said if the banner is off Route 15 we don't have to worry about state highway rules. He is hearing it could be on Pearl Street or possibly School Street.

Margo said the banner says Black Lives Matter on one side and on the other it says, "Building a safe community of inclusion, equity, justice, dignity and respect. All are welcome with kindness and belonging."

Cal said he wants to make sure we are not scrutinizing racial justice more than other things. For instance, has this scrutiny been given to NVU banners that hang on Route 15? Scott said he knows an NVU banner is usually put on Pearl Street. He remembers seeing them on Route 15 but not for a while. He doesn't know.

Eric asked if it ever required a motion of the village trustees to put up the NVU banners. Scott said he doesn't know.

Kyle said Route 15 is definitely not an option and there hasn't been the option of having a banner go across it for at least a decade. Stowe has converted their main street to a Class 2 road, which cost a lot of money. Pearl Street or Railroad Street are possibilities. Eric said he presumes School Street is also. Kyle agreed.

Cal said another thing would be to make sure the Racial Justice Committee is on board with that idea, which he would hope they would be.

Eric moved that the Racial Justice Committee recommend that the trustees contact the Town of Stowe about borrowing and raising their Black Lives Matter banner on School Street, Railroad Street and Pearl Street in the Town of Johnson. Raven said she is not sure if we need to contact REAL or Stowe. Jackie said it's REAL that owns the banner.

Rick said he believes Route 15 is not an option. He thinks that is because the state maintains the infrastructure of Route 15, whereas in Stowe the town maintains the highway. He does support flying the banner as the motion was stated. He doesn't know what infrastructure is in place on Railroad Street for flying a banner. He does recall that there has been an NVU banner by the bridge on Pearl Street.

The motion was passed.

C. Policies and Procedures

Eric showed the documents he had previously shared with the committee on January 7. He had four policy recommendations and he thinks the committee ratified one of them and wanted more discussion on the others. The first was to include the inclusivity statement on the town website, documents etc. He is not clear of what part of it the committee moved to recommend.

The next thing he recommended was to provide an opportunity to get feedback from citizens and visitors who are people of color. He doesn't know what would be appropriate for outreach to people of color who visit our town. Their feedback could help us understand how to serve them better.

We are in an opportunity zone which qualifies us for incentives to people who open businesses. He doesn't know if we advertise that widely or if we can offer even more incentives to businesses owned by women or people of color that open here.

There is another idea that he is not sure about because our town is so small. The Town of Hartford did an equity and diversity audit of all town offices and functions. We could do something similar to see what we are doing as far as how we operate the town to reflect our principles.

Eric said the committee passed a number of motions on January 7 and ratified those actions at the meeting on January 26. The selectboard met on February 1 and they didn't address any of the recommendations. He wonders why the committee made recommendations and he hasn't seen the town or village respond to them yet.

Rick said he did go to the selectboard on February 1 and spoke to them at the end of the meeting. He read them our recommendation to display the Johnson inclusivity statement prominently on the website and wherever possible in town communications, publications and advertisements. They said they weren't sure how to interpret the recommendation. The trustees have not met since the ratification of the motions took place. They will meet next week and his intention is to bring the recommendations to their meeting. There were two additional recommendations for the trustees. One has already been done. It was to raise the Black Lives Matter flag in the next two months. The other one was to adopt the anti-racism statement adopted by the selectboard. They have only had a bond information meeting since the ratification of the motions, not a regular trustee meeting. Their next meeting is February 8.

Scott said he would suggest looking at public open meeting law. At the beginning of selectboard and trustee meetings items can be added to the agenda but they can't be substantial items, especially not items that will be voted on, because not enough notice is given to people ahead of time. Maybe that is why the selectboard did not act on anything, because it was not warned for action on the agenda.

Kyle said that is right. Rick brought the recommendation up at the end of the meeting under other business. Moving forward, she thinks recommendations from this committee need to be brought to Eric and Brian and added as proper agenda items to be voted on. Any action taken needs to be a proper agenda item that was talked about in advance.

Jackie said when this committee passes resolutions she thinks they should be emailed immediately afterward to the selectboard and trustees with copies to every member of the Racial Justice Committee. Eric agreed. He said the wording of the motions could be lifted straight from the minutes and forwarded on. That sounds like a good idea. Does someone want to take on the responsibility for that or should he do it?

Eric asked if it is correct that none of the motions passed on January 7 have made it onto the agenda for the selectboard or the trustees. Rick said that is correct. They didn't make it onto the selectboard agenda because by the time they were ratified on January 26 the agenda for

the selectboard was already written and published, so he added it under other business. He wanted to make them aware of what recommendation we had. He doesn't know if the agenda for the next trustee board meeting is set yet. He can contact Meredith. Scott said he will be talking to Meredith tomorrow about the agenda. It hasn't gone out yet.

Eric said he will email the motions from January 7 to everyone on the Racial Justice Committee. He doesn't know who to send them to to make sure they get to the boards. If someone gives him that information he will forward them. Scott said Meredith would be the key person for the village. Eric asked, so Brian and Meredith would cover the bases? Scott said that is how the chain of command should work.

Eric suggested maybe someone else could send out the motions from tonight's meeting.

Scott said the inclusivity statement is on the village green on an engraving below the flag. The selectboard has a mural at the town offices. He thinks the town and/or the village will try to figure out the how to include this statement on documents that go out. They would need to take some kind of inventory to see what fits and how it would look.

Kyle said she thinks it would be easy to put the inclusivity statement prominently on the first page of the website and she would like to see the anti-racism statement there too. She doesn't know exactly what other documents there are. That would be a question for Brian. On website Johnson Works did last year the inclusivity statement with a picture of the mural that has the statement on it is on the front page. They made it a priority to have it front and center.

Cal said the selectboard and trustees are not used to dealing with social justice and anything brought to them will be met with resistance and seen as somewhat of a nuisance to certain members of these boards. It is important that the Racial Justice Committee members be able to deliver and back the recommendations and convince people on the board. He wants to make sure people realize that all the things the committee is talking about bringing to the boards will be met with a certain amount of scrutiny and seen as somewhat of a nuisance.

Margo said there was something on a previous agenda about drafting a statement for the town report. Rick said we did not have a quorum in order to move forward with that. We have missed the deadline to submit something because we did not have a quorum that night.

Jackie said, regarding Eric's idea about polling people of color who live in town, she is hoping the NVU community could be involved in that. Even though people there may not be residents, they do live in the town. In our town the most vocal person of color who comes to meetings is Offie Wortham. He thinks BLM is racist and he didn't see a need for this committee. The committee should try to draw in as many people as possible, not just the most vocal. Many students and staff members at NVU are not residents of Johnson but they spend a lot of time here and would have valuable opinions. Eric said Mr. Wortham is a valuable reminder that people of color are not a monolith. We need to reach out and hear as many voices as we can. We need some feedback mechanism where people can feel comfortable saying what their experiences have been in this town. He is not sure what that would be like but he thinks it is important.

Scott said he thinks polling people of color is very important to make sure we don't make a misstep. He is not sure how it would get done but it is a good idea.

Raven said her agency uses Survey Monkey for polling staff every quarter about how they feel in their environment.

Diane asked if it would be a good idea to put the inclusivity statement and anti-racism statement in the town report. Eric said it is too late. Diane asked, how about the village report? Scott said it hasn't been developed yet. The Racial Justice Committee will be mentioned in the piece he writes for the report. He thinks the inclusivity statement should be included. Diane suggested maybe both statements. Scott said he agrees but he is just one voice of many.

D. Engage with Community Residents

Rick said he spoke with Jeanne Engel at the library about resources and she gave him a list of racial justice resources they have. He spoke with several people at REAL. He speaks to people in the community and reminds them of this committee and when we meet. He is promoting it through word of mouth.

Rick said he would like feedback from the committee about putting something on Front Porch Forum stating the date and time of meetings, similar to how Brian Story advertises selectboard meetings. Committee members agreed that would be a good idea.

E. Coordinate with Local Partners and Stakeholders

Raven said she hasn't really gotten anywhere with that as of late. She suggested book clubs could be an option.

Jackie said when the refugee resettlement idea was first proposed by Mark, Margo made some good points about why it might not be feasible. Mark was excited and curious to explore it but basically found out that it is not going to work. She feels it is almost a waste of time and energy to look into it further. She wishes that if the committee goes down an avenue and finds it cannot come to fruition they would drop that area of interest and move on to something else that can move us forward.

Jackie said at the last meeting she attended she was discouraged and disillusioned to hear a member of the Racial Justice Committee talk about a Confederate flag he owns and how there is another side to it. She was aghast and surprised that the rest of the Racial Justice Committee didn't say anything. Maybe people need to do more work or maybe the committee itself needs to do more work before moving ahead. She is concerned about that and wonders if others are concerned.

Eric said he thinks everyone on the committee is in a different place. Everyone has different realizations and education and blind spots. It is up to us each to explore our own. He understands why those comments would be frustrating but he feels this committee's job is to come up with policy recommendations for the boards, not to explore how the views of other committee members align with our particular views. If someone says something Jackie feels is so out of line that she feels they shouldn't be on the committee maybe she could go to the boards. This committee isn't going to remove anyone from the committee. He doesn't feel

like discussing this would be productive. He has had on his to-do list making an educational video on the history of the Confederate flag and what message public display of it sends. But he thinks this committee has so much to do that it should not be vetting individual committee members' views. If Jackie finds the views really offensive maybe she should take it to the boards or talk to Mark individually.

Raven said she reflected on Mark's comments. She personally doesn't align with those views. She thought about how when she was brought onto the committee she was asked about listening and communicating. Even though she does not agree with the views of one committee member maybe he can be an asset in talking to people who agree with him, people who typically would not listen to us. Maybe they would listen to him.

As far as the refugee question, Raven said it made her think about resources we would need to beef up before anything like that would be possible. She always thinks about mental health. A lot of resources need to be beefed up. Resources for suicide prevention are more limited for people of color and suicide rates are higher for people of color. For us to get a more diverse group of people into our area there are a lot of things that need to be pumped up.

Eric said he thinks the committee concluded at the January 7 meeting that Mark had explored refugee resettlement and we didn't have the infrastructure for it. He thinks that has already been dispatched. He thinks we put that idea to rest because our town is just not large enough and does not have the necessary infrastructure.

Rick read a quote from Rosa Parks in honor of her birthday: "Racism is still with us but it is up to us to prepare our children for what they have to meet and hopefully we shall overcome."

He read a quote from John Lewis, whose birthday is February 21: "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something."

4. *Adjourn*

The meeting was adjourned at 8:09.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths