

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, Diane Lehouiller  
Others: Jackie Stanton, Cal Stanton, Sophia Berard, Jasmine Yuris, Kyle Nuse, Margo Warden, Pam Aupperlee, Scott Meyer, Mark Nielsen

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

**1. Call to Order**

Rick called the meeting to order at 6:05. He welcomed Diane Lehouiller to the committee. He said Mark Nielsen sent him an email stating that as of yesterday he was resigning from the committee because he is taking a new position at work.

Rick said he wanted to recognize the 230<sup>th</sup> birthday of the State of Vermont. Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery, though Pennsylvania abolished it while it was still one of the 13 colonies.

**2. Approval of Minutes**

**Eric moved to approve the minutes of January 7 and January 26, 2021 and the motion was passed.**

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

Eric said a document Brian Story recommended to the committee was Engagement Tools for Municipalities, created by Vermont's Local Solutions and Community Action Team. It lists steps communities can take to advocate for equity and racial justice in their communities. It was one thing he used when he was thinking about policy. One section of that document that he would like the committee to think about suggests: *Look at the language and imagery on the municipality's website, public comments, signage, publications, applications, social media posts, and more to ensure a consistent tone of welcome and inclusion. We recommended that the town and village include the inclusivity statement and anti-racism statement on publications, the website, etc.*

Another section he would like the community to think about suggests inviting new people to engage in municipal meetings in new ways. He thinks we could do more to get people involved in these meetings. People don't understand how welcome the public is to come to committee meeting and make their feelings known. He doesn't know if we need the town's permission to do posts on Front Porch Forum and other social media to try to get more diverse feedback. The documents suggests: *Engage youth by reaching out to schools and giving young people advisory seats on commissions and boards.* There are a lot of kids at LUHS, many of whom live in Johnson, who are passionate about racial justice. He wonders if we should invite students to some of our meetings. Those kids have good ideas and know a lot about what is going on in our communities.

Eric suggested that breaking up the five different points that the committee is charged with into individual responsibilities is diluting our powers. He can't come up with policy

recommendations for the committee to approve without more support from other committee members and the public. The document suggests: *Consider new ways to recruit volunteers for specific, deadline-oriented projects instead of a long-term committee appointment with unclear work plan and charge.* He thinks we should be thinking of specific action plans and involving people on the committee and from the public. We could pick something to all do together. On committees he is on as a teacher he finds that when there is an action plan and everyone gets assigned steps to do it seems to move things a little faster.

Eric said he went over the village trustee board meeting minutes for the past couple of months. The Black Lives Matter flag is raised. We asked to have the inclusivity statement put front and center in messaging. Meredith said at a meeting, "Our website is a joint venture between the town and village so any decisions about changing how the statement is displayed need to be agreed upon between town and village. If the trustee board and selectboard both directed staff to work on figuring out how to more prominently display it, they could do that." He thinks we should suggest that the boards direct staff to do this. We made recommendations that went to both boards but no action steps were made. He thinks we need to give specific action steps to the boards.

Portia said she is 100% on board with what Eric said. She has been feeling a little overwhelmed because the education piece is a lot of work. She loves the idea of collaborating and getting input from committee members and community members. We could break it down into more specific roles and actions. She loves the idea of involving students as well.

Diane said she agrees. She went through the minutes from the last meeting and it seems as though we are not moving along at all. She thinks someone needs to go to the trustees and the selectboard and maybe have a specific date for them to decide on something. We don't know if they want to pay for the Peace and Justice Center to provide training. She can't remember if Bor Yang charged for her training. She doesn't think she did. She thinks a couple of people need to go to meetings and request to have specific dates chosen for decisions to be made.

Rick said he agrees with Eric. He is on the racial justice committee at his school. They have students working on things like a poster contest and t-shirts. They have had a pride flag and a Black Lives Matter flag up for seven or eight months. They are very visible and vocal about it.

Kyle said she thinks this is a good plan. It might be advantageous and effective if Rick or a committee member gets on the board agenda for a regular report or check in. That is a great way for the board to see and hear the committee and for the committee to check in and ask if they have done certain things. She just saw that Xusana Davis is going to be presenting at NVU. She doesn't know if there is an opportunity to collaborate with whoever is putting events together at NVU, if that could be a joint effort in the future.

Portia said she left a phone message with the Peace and Justice Center and sent them an email but she hasn't heard back. She will keep trying. She also tried to call Bor Yang but wasn't able to get through to her. She feels that because of Covid we are limited in what kinds of outreach and events we can do. She had the idea that at some point in the future we

could do a walk for unity where people from all backgrounds walk together for unity or justice. Another idea she had was getting articles in the paper on the topic of racial justice or publishing reading or movie lists in the paper. Once the library is open again we could partner with the library to do book readings, trainings, seminars etc. We can have a speaker over Zoom. Another idea she had is more related to policy. She was thinking about schools having curriculum on inclusivity and African-American history, not just in the month of February but diving deep. She has been thinking that one of the best ways to combat ignorance is relationships. We can educate people and change policies but if people have preconceived notions and stereotypes and don't know people of color, that is a problem. Relationships and empathy are what will turn the tide. Events like a unity walk or barbecue or in the future maybe something like a world culture fair could help open people's minds to people who are different from them. She feels like a big part of ignorance is not knowing people who are different.

Eric agreed that relationships and events that bring people together are helpful. It is hard to plan events with the pandemic.

Sophia suggested maybe pairing with the community oven. There could be different culture experiences for people, say once a month in summer at the community oven.

Rick said the Johnson Public Library just did a reading of a young adult novel called *The Gold Cadillac*.

Jackie Stanton said the Johnson Public Library also did several Zoom events. One of them featured the PE teacher from Johnson Elementary, a man of color from Philadelphia. The library also recently had a book discussion about the young adult version of *Stamped*. There are a lot of great things happening in this town that this committee could piggyback on or promote.

Portia asked if we could get a notice in the News & Citizen to let people know that our committee exists and when our meetings are. Diane said she thinks there is a calendar of events in the News & Citizen that we could probably publish our meetings in. People could also write in to the paper and we can use Front Porch Forum.

Jasmine Yuris suggested contacting Sue Lovering, who writes the Johnson column in the News & Citizen. She wonders if anybody from the committee will be able to attend Xusana Davis's talk at NVU. Eric said he can't go because of his schedule. Rick said he would have to look at his schedule. Portia said she would like to go. Raven said she is not sure she could because of her work but she will look into it.

Diane said she contacted David Blackmore of the Agency of Transportation and asked him about putting up a Black Lives Matter banner on the ground near the municipal building, like a lawn sign. He told her that what is important it is that it has to be out of the highway right of way. That means that from the middle of the road to the sign has to be at least 25 feet. He thinks we could put one on the lawn in front of the municipal building. He said we would have to get permission from the town and village. She doesn't think we can put a banner over

Route 15. David Blackmore did say there is a permit process for banners that are placed over a state highway but there are a few regulations to comply with. She looked up some information and what she saw basically said that you can't do that. She is getting mixed messages. She has some phone calls in to find out the bottom line about flying a banner over a state highway. She was thinking we could put a Black Lives Matter banner on the lawn in front of the municipal building. She was thinking of one about 5 ft x 2 1/2 or 3 ft.

Rick asked, it is sort of like a lawn sign? Diane said yes. Rick said he thinks we would have to go to the village trustees. He doesn't think the town owns the property. He doesn't know which board needs to approve it but we could go to both boards. Diane asked, they both own the building itself, correct? Rick said he is not clear about that. Diane said we could attach it to the building itself. Kyle said that was an idea that was proposed at one point, she thinks by Nat Kinney – putting it on the building itself because that is jointly owned. Her understanding is that the town and the village jointly own the building and all the property surrounding it except the flagpoles and the small walled-in area around them.

**Rick moved to recommend that the trustees and the selectboard place a Black Lives Matter banner either on the municipal building or on municipal property at least 25 feet from the center line of Route 15 in order to be in compliance with Department of Transportation requirements. The motion was passed.**

Kyle suggested being very clear about the size and the look, maybe even having a visual when going to the trustees or selectboard, because they are going to have questions about that.

Eric said he thought we had already sourced a banner we were going to get from someone else.

Raven said REAL has a banner they have put up over the road but it is only permitted to be up for a short amount of time. They had thought of circulating it around Lamoille County and it was offered to us. She doesn't know where that stands. It wouldn't hurt to ask them if it could stand on poles or be tacked up on the building.

Diane said she looked on Pearl Street to see where that might hang. There is a pole on the Masonic temple close to the road and a nearby pole on the other side of the road near the Studio Center writing building. There is a wire to attach it to the pole or perhaps it just hangs from the wire

Kyle asked if Rick's motion is about a permanent banner. Rick said yes.

Sophia asked if the person Diane talked to about the municipal building gave a suggestion about a banner or had one in mind. Diane said he said that if we are going to put something in the ground it has to be a certain number of feet away from the center of the road and if we have a banner over a state highway we have to follow regulations and apply for a permit. She meant for the banner to be permanently placed on the side of the building facing the road.

She was thinking of something about 5x2 ½ ft. but she doesn't know if that would seem really small or not. She is not sure how big it should be.

Jackie said she loves this idea. She remembers Raven talking about the possibility of a Juneteenth celebration. Maybe this could be tied into that.

Rick said he is thinking about the size of the banner and also cost and how we go about funding it.

Raven said REAL has a GoFundMe. She is not sure if that is something we can do as a town committee, but that is a thought. She doesn't foresee a whole lot of funding being put into our committee.

Rick said we don't have any funding to work with. We need to ask the town and village for funding. If REAL has a banner, would it make sense to ask them if we could use their banner and put it on the municipal building temporarily, maybe tying it into Juneteenth?

Eric said there are two things we are talking about. One is borrowing the traveling REAL banner. He suggests not talking about that right now. The other suggestion is a permanent banner in that location. He thinks that is what we should be pursuing now. We have a motion but it lacks specificity. Eric suggested someone on the committee like Diane could figure out what banner would be recommended to the boards and the motion could be changed to refer to the recommended banner.

**Eric moved to amend the previous motion to specify that the committee recommends that the town and village purchase and permanently hang the Black Lives Matter banner recommended by the Racial Justice Committee. Rick accepted the amendment and the amended motion was passed.**

Raven said she has been to two REAL meetings and she really loves the discussion that goes on. We had thought about polling Johnson citizens about racial equity or how they feel in the community. That also opens up the opportunity to invite them into our committee meetings and give them room to speak about what they would like to see changed or what would make them feel safer or more welcome or just hear their experiences and what is important to them to see from our committee. We could connect with other racial justice groups in Lamoille County. There are actually a lot of them and so many great ideas are coming from them. Those are ideas she has come up with but she doesn't know where to go with them. It has felt murky and vague and hard to be productive.

Rick said he thinks it is a great idea to open it up to the public. If we meet on the first Thursday, as we have been, then our next meeting would be on April 1. If Raven would like to reach out to some of those groups she mentioned, that would be great and we can follow up with the town and village Facebook pages and an announcement on Front Porch Forum. Raven asked if that is for the purpose of connecting with other groups or the public. Rick said he thinks it is a great idea to invite other committees to our meeting, especially REAL, in

conjunction with publicizing meetings on Facebook and Front Porch Forum to get more community involvement.

Raven said she would like to see us at some point really connecting with the public to see where they, whether they even know this committee exists and what they expect from us. It would give us ideas on starting other types of work.

Margo asked if there was a report from this committee in the town report. That would be a way for people to know about the committee. Has the village report been created yet? Information could possibly be in there along with an invitation. Eric said there was not a report from this committee in the town report because we did not have a quorum when it would have been timely to produce a report.

Diane said she has a list of things we may need to do including getting the statement in the village report about this committee and putting the inclusivity statement and anti-racism statement in the village report. If we put information on Front Porch Forum, contact Sue Lovering and write letters to the editor she thinks people may start to attend the Zoom meetings. Rick said he thinks our mission statement should also be part of the committee report that is in the village report.

Sophia asked if anyone knows the deadline for getting things in the village annual report. No one did. Diane said she can find out.

Eric suggested that we move from a subcommittee structure to action steps. We have a member who was on two subcommittees and left and a new member who is not on any subcommittees. Let's restructure and assign action steps before the next meeting so all members can contribute to all five action points. He asked if it would be okay to go through a list of action steps he made. Rick said yes.

Eric composed a possible statement that he suggested could be put on in the newspaper, on Front Porch Forum, in Sue Lovering's column, etc: *The Johnson racial Justice committee meets on the first Thursday of each month on Zoom at 6:00. Members of the public are invited and encouraged to attend to give their input on how we can make our town and village more welcoming and inclusive communities.* Committee members agreed that was a good statement to use.

Portia agreed to send it to the News & Citizen for inclusion in the calendar. Raven agreed to put get it on the town and village Facebook pages. Diane said she will send it to Sue Lovering. Eric said he can put it on Front Porch Forum.

Eric said we had mentioned that we should get a representative on the agendas for the village trustee and selectboard meetings. When there are motions made he will pull them from the minutes and forward them to Brian and Meredith and they will get them on the agendas, or so he has been told. But there could also be a representative from this committee at meetings to report on things we are thinking about and they can ask us questions. Diane volunteered to be the representative to go to village trustee board meetings. Eric said he will go to the next

selectboard meeting. Eric said Diane should email Meredith about getting on the trustee board agenda and he will email Brian to ask to get on the selectboard agenda.

Diane will look into Black Lives Matter banners. She asked if she can use her own judgment about what would look good. The committee agreed she can.

Eric said he will forward the motion passed tonight to the village and town.

Diane will find out the deadline for getting something in the annual village report.

Eric said he learned that a law enforcement study committee has been meeting regularly. He went through all their minutes. He thinks the Racial Justice Committee would have something to say about training and how law enforcement interacts with the public. He doesn't know if someone from our committee should reach out to them or visit their meeting. It is complicated by the fact that it also includes Hyde Park and Wolcott.

Diane said there is a group that meets with Roger Marcoux pretty much on a monthly basis. They have talked about how his police officers feel about Black Lives Matter and how they would like to see deputies interact with people. He is very open to listening. They talked to Katie Palmer, the resource officer at LUHS.

Eric asked if this is an official committee or an informal group of concern citizens. Diane said it is an informal group of people who wanted to see changes in law enforcement so they are talking about changing some of the things we can possibly change. Roger has a hard time finding deputies and he wants them to help with that.

Kyle said it is a grassroots organization of people that got together right after George Floyd's murder. It felt like they needed to put some pressure on police reform. They have been getting together with Roger and sometimes state representatives come. They set an agenda with him beforehand. They talk about policies within the sheriff's department, bias, traffic stops, etc. They are talking about the sheriff's department putting up a Black Lives Matter flag. It has been very productive. She thinks having a representative from this committee on the law enforcement study committee is a good thing. It is one more avenue for Roger to hear concerns. There is really good work on policy change on racial and social issues within the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department.

Eric said he was at a recent meeting with Dan Noyes, Kate Donnally and Rich Westman. The Vermont ACLU has a very well thought out 10-point plan for reforming law enforcement in this state. It really serves a lot of the purposes of this committee to have that kind of thing enacted statewide. It is beyond the reach of this group.

Eric asked if anyone wants to sit in on any of the law enforcement study group meetings. That group talks about law enforcement policies and what our towns may or may not contract for. They don't talk about race. He thinks it's a perspective that should be part of their decision making. He will probably try to go to those meetings as a member of the public.

Sophia asked when their next meeting is. Donna Griffiths said she takes minutes for them. Their next meeting is next Wednesday at 6:30. That meeting is specifically to ask questions of Roger Marcoux and they may not be open to having someone show up who wants to talk about something completely different. Eric said he can't make it to that meeting.

Kyle said that group sent out a survey to all selectboard members about priorities. In her responses she planted a lot of seeds about community policing. It may not be a new topic if they are bringing up the survey results.

Diana asked if Eric is done with the points we need to cover for the next meeting. Eric said he is not clear where we want to go next with regard to education. Maybe because of Covid that is still hanging. He will leave it to the group to decide.

Diane asked if we should check with Meredith to see where we are at with getting the inclusivity statement on the website. Eric said Meredith had said at a trustee board meeting that staff would get it on there if directed. Maybe when he and Diane talk to the boards they should encourage them to direct staff to do it. Diane asked if we should ask for a specific date for them to get it on the website and possibly other documents like letterhead and village bills. Eric suggested we can ask if they are going to do that and see what their response is and then if another month goes by without action we can get more pointed. Diane said she will also ask about putting the inclusivity statement and a statement about the Racial Justice Committee in the village report.

Scott Meyer said the village is working on this. Those statements will be in the village report and the village made room in the newsletter that is sent out with bills to talk about the Racial Justice Committee.

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

Mark Nielsen apologized to the committee for resigning as quickly as he did. The committee needs someone who can dependably be there and he wasn't going to continue to be able to. He gave an update on his progress working on the refugee process. He had about an hour long conversation with the director in Colchester. They are not going to be able to do anything with the refugee program for Lamoille County for about 3 years because of their staffing and the number of refugees that are going to be accepted into the United States. He is going to continue to work with her on it and he can update the committee. He learned that there is not an application process. Once a community has done the work and gotten community support they assign a case agent or counselor and that person works with the community to meet the requirements. He can report back to the committee if the committee wants him to or the committee can continue to work on this but he is happy to work on it himself. He talked to the director about guest speakers for the school system and for this committee. There are people within the refugee committee community that are willing to do that.

Mark said he loved being part of this committee and he was learning a lot. He will continue listening in when he can and he will keep the committee informed on what he has been working on. He will forward Rick a note he got from Mayor Lott about what they have done in Winooski. Mark said they were very open to a Lamoille County resettlement piece, not

just Johnson. He would like to continue working on it. They reduced down to 30 people coming into the State of Vermont and they are hoping to go up to about 300 people in the next couple of years. Their staff was cut by 75% in Vermont alone. They are working on rebuilding that staff so they can assign people to the different communities that are interested. He thinks the 3-year period is good for us to get the word out. Community support is huge to them. As part of his work on the Vermont School Boards Association he is working with Rich Westman to write language to be introduced as a bill in Montpelier to get more money for English as a second language and for students to get a foreign language so the money doesn't come from local taxpayers but from potential federal grants.

Jasmine asked if it is possible for this committee to act similarly to other committees so that if someone has a step off the committee this committee has the power to appoint a replacement without needing to go to the selectboard and trustees. She thinks the committee could use its best judgment. She is wondering if Diane and Eric want to pursue that question at the meetings they attend. She thinks it would make turnover time smoother. She is on other committees in the town and when there is a vacancy they choose who will fill the spot.

Rick said given that we are a joint committee appointed by the selectboard and trustees he doesn't think we have the power to do that. He thinks it would be good for Eric to speak to the selectboard about getting another person on the committee as soon as possible.

Kyle said she thinks the selectboard's policy is that when there is a vacancy it has to be posted at least once in a public place and candidates need to write a letter of interest to Brian or the chair of the committee. There has to be a chance for people to see the opening and apply. But the committee can certainly send a strong recommendation.

Scott said the village doesn't have experience with committees. They don't really have any other than this. He doesn't know how to handle vacancies. It may depend on how the motion was made.

Diane said she was appointed to the committee without having to go through the application process again. The trustees asked if she was interested and then she was appointed. Scott said he thinks Meredith got legal advice and made sure that the way they did it was legitimate. There was conversation about fairness if somebody else was interested.

Sophia said at the selectboard meeting when they accepted Mark's resignation they said they were going to post the vacancy. She sent a letter of interest to Brian Story and she could also send it to this committee Diane said she would like for the committee to get it. Rick asked Sophia to send it to the group.

**Eric moved that the Racial Justice Committee make a strong recommendation to the selectboard to appoint Sophia Berard to the Racial Justice Committee and the motion was passed.**

Eric said he will forward the motion to the board and bring it up at the meeting. Sophia has been at all the committee meetings and has contributed. She is well suited to being on the committee.

**5. Adjourn**

Rick read a quote from Vernon Jordan, who recently passed away:

*You are where you are today because you stand on somebody's shoulders. And wherever you are heading, you cannot get there by yourself. If you stand on the shoulders of others, you have a reciprocal responsibility to live your life so that others may stand on your shoulders. It's the quid pro quo of life. We exist temporarily through what we take, but we live forever through what we give*

**The meeting was adjourned at 8:03**

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*

UNAPPROVED