

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES  
REMOTE PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCING  
THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

**Present:**

Committee Members: Rick Aupperlee, Eric Hutchins, Raven Pfaff, Portia Foss, Diane Lehouiller  
Others: Pam Aupperlee, Scott Meyer, Kyle Nuse, Cal Stanton, Jackie Stanton, Sophia Berard

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

**1. Call to Order**

Rick called the meeting to order at 6:02. He read a quote from poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron, whose birthday is today: *I've always had questions about what it meant to be a protester, to be in the minority. Are the people who are trying to find peace, who are trying to have the Constitution apply to everybody, are they really the radicals? We're not protesting from the outside. We're inside.*

**2. Approval of Minutes**

**Eric moved to correct the date on the March 4, 2021 minutes and the motion was passed.**

**Rick moved to approve the minutes of February 4, 2021 and the corrected minutes of March 4, 2021. The motion was passed.**

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

Rick thanked Portia for her opinion piece in the newspaper and for announcing Racial Justice Committee meetings in last week's newspaper. Eric said her guest opinion in the paper was excellent.

Diane asked if it would be okay to reach out to Bor Yang. Jackie Stanton said she thought at the last meeting Portia said she had reached out to Bor Yang and the Peace and Justice Center and was waiting for them to return messages. Portia said she heard back from the Peace and Justice Center but they felt maybe we should have a more specific topic or theme first. Diane asked if they have a list of presentations we could discuss. Jackie said one workshop she and others have discussed having them provide is called Seeing and Disrupting Racism. Several people in town have attended it. It was agreed that Diane should contact the Peace and Justice Center and ask them what topics they can discuss, then the committee can pick one and move forward.

Sophia said she was wondering who was in contact with Bor Yang previously. Jackie said she, Kyle Nuse and Brian Story were in contact with her. Sophia suggested perhaps the committee could ask someone in the community who has already been in contact with her to reach out again. She had good rapport with the townspeople. The Peace and Justice Center seemed less widely accepted by the selectboard than Bor Yang, but many voices and more perspectives are always great. Diane suggested Jackie could contact Bor Yang and the rest of the committee and Jackie agreed to that.

Cal Stanton said some members of the selectboard did not like the idea of the Peace and Justice Center. Some of that was due to their stance against ICE. He thinks he recalls Bor Yang saying she didn't have any other training to offer. Jackie said she, Kyle, Brian and Bor were trying to come up with the names of different people who could provide training. Maybe we could have a repeat of the first educational piece. Or maybe Bor will have a new idea. No one from the town has connected with her since last August.

Eric said he went to the special meeting of the trustee board a couple of weeks ago. As difficult as that meeting was for a lot of people, he thinks that is how we are going to move on this, by getting people to say how they think and feel and listening to how other people think and feel. He learned a lot in that meeting. He is very wary of us preaching to the choir. That meeting was not preaching to the choir. He thinks people listened to each other from multiple perspectives. It was hard and there wasn't necessarily closure. But if you are not upsetting anyone you are not changing anyone's mind. It made him realize that there is a lot of fertile ground to work from on moving forward.

Sophia said that meeting turned out to be something that quite a few people did not expect. It was great that more people were at the table. It was another rehash on what the Black Lives Matter flag means to everyone, which is not what everyone thought it would be.

Jackie said a diversity of opinions were expressed. Some people who came to the meeting said they felt no flag other than US and state flags should be on public property. That is a valid point of view but she is not sure they know that a Black Lives Matter flag is already flying on public property in Johnson. There were untrue statements that went unchallenged at that meeting, like a statement that people had been calling the fire department racist. It is unfortunate that statements like that get put out and are not corrected.

Eric said when people speak up with misinformation, that is an opportunity. That is how we move this forward. We have to correct one fact at a time. He feels there is a lot of room for progress. A lot of people disagree but they are still listening to each other.

Cal said the Black Lives Matter flag is up now. The process of getting it put up revealed systemic issues. The meeting shouldn't even have been about the Black Lives Matter flag. The big issue he was concerned about was that the fire department has too big a seat at the table.

Diane said it sounds like Peace and Justice shouldn't be contacted because the selectboard isn't in favor of using them. Jackie said there are two new members of the board. She doesn't know how the current board feels about them. Bor Yang is inexpensive and Peace and Justice costs a lot of money. Maybe the committee should talk to the boards about money before talking to Peace and Justice about doing education.

Eric said because of the month-long interval between committee meetings and having to get approval from both boards, he suggests recommending all the possible education available and letting the boards choose, without anticipating their disapproval.

Diane said she can contact Peace and Justice and find out what topics they can present and bring that back to the committee. Eric suggested, rather than that, talking to both Peace and Justice and Bor Yang and recommending both to the selectboard and the trustees at their next meeting. He doubts they will approve too much education. It was agreed that Diane will reach out to the Peace and Justice Center and Jackie will reach out to Bor Yang. Eric will submit a recommendation to the selectboard and Diane will submit a recommendation to the trustee board. Diane suggested asking Bor Yang to repeat the first training she provided but also asking her if she has other options.

Kyle Nuse suggested that when Eric and Diane go to the selectboard and trustees they may want to remind them that both the town and the village have formally adopted a statement that says Johnson is committed to educational programming. This is part of their commitment.

Cal said there may be ways to effect change through other committees in town. For instance Tuesday Night Live could encourage diversity. Sophia said she is on the Tuesday Night Live committee and that is a mission of hers.

Diane said she has two suggested recommendations regarding public displays. One is flying a banner over Route 15. We have to get permission first from the village and town. If they agree then we need to request a permit and the request needs to be on town letterhead. If we get the permit the banner can be up for no more than 21 days. The bottom needs to be at least a certain distance above the surface of the road and securely fastened. There is no cost to us for putting it up.

Eric asked why the selectboard would need to give permission if it would be put up in the village. Why would they have anything to say about it? Diane said she doesn't know but the person she spoke to referred to the selectboard. She assumed that we needed to bring it to both boards. Eric said he thinks if the banner will be hanging in the village we only need approval from the village trustees.

Raven said if we can't get a permit to hang it over Route 15 we could also recommend hanging it over Pearl Street. Committee members suggested that would only need approval from the trustees because it is in the village. Donna Griffiths pointed out that the road is a town highway and the banner would be in the town's right of way so she believes the town would feel they needed to give permission.

Sophie asked if the committee has a banner or would need to purchase one. Raven said REAL has one that we could use. Sophie said she thinks if the recommendation is brought to the board it should include information about where the banner is coming from.

Eric said he thinks Donna is right and this recommendation should also be presented to the selectboard. It was agreed that Diane will present the recommendation to the trustees and Eric will present it to the selectboard. Eric suggested recommending putting the banner over Route 15 for maximum visibility.

Jackie said she saw that the banner is currently at the Episcopal church in Stowe. The committee might want to follow up with REAL to make sure it is still available. Raven said the last she heard no other towns were interested in having the banner. It is just at the church for now because no one else was interested in taking it.

**Rick moved to have Eric recommend to the selectboard and Diane recommend to the village trustee board flying a Black Lives Matter banner over Route 15 and the motion was passed.**

Diane said her second recommendation is to put a Black Lives Matter flag and a pride flag on the municipal building. She showed the committee an illustration of what the flags would look like on the building.

Rick said the one year anniversary of the George Floyd incident is May 25 and June is Pride Month. He would like to see the banners displayed in concert with those two dates. Cal said Juneteenth is another significant date.

Eric said he assumes we would need permission from both boards. He asked if the flags need to be acquired. Diane said we would need to purchase them. Eric asked if anyone has a cost estimate. Cal said a Black Lives Matter flag from BLM Global Network, which he recommends, costs about \$60. Rick said he can inquire at work how much the Black Lives Matter flag and pride flag at Laraway cost.

**Eric moved to recommend that the town and the village purchase and display a Black Lives Matter flag and pride flag as displayed in the image that the committee will share. The motion was passed.**

Eric said he thought it was notable that Governor Scott sent a letter to the federal government requesting to increase the number of refugees Vermont can accept. Mark Nielsen's research indicated that we did not have the housing and jobs needed to accommodate refugee families but there may be changes and we should keep apprised of the situation.

Diane said someone sent her a pledge that she thought could be part of job advertising for the town or village, or businesses in Johnson could put it on their websites. She read the pledge, which is about creating space where all are valued equally, not giving support to organizations that promote intolerance, etc.

Sophia said she loves the words. There are probably people in town who feel they don't need it and already do that. There was a lot of pushback to the inclusivity statement. Perhaps the committee could go to Johnson Works first and offer this as a source of some helpful language around inclusivity. She knows everyone in this room agrees with the words in the pledge but some of those words are triggering to some people.

Cal agreed that triggering is the word. He feels no one will put it up. That doesn't mean we shouldn't put things like that forward. They move the needle by revealing how much work we need to do.

Eric suggested the first step might be to get the town and village to do some inventories. This idea might have more traction once the village and town have the inclusivity statement and anti-racism statement on job advertisements. He suggested addressing village and town operations first. He thinks bringing the private sector into this before dealing with the public sector seems like a reach.

Jackie said the notion of pledges is kind of ahead of the curve. NVU is currently devising their own pledge. When the inclusivity statement was passed we said we would like to have it displayed at the town hall but it is still not there. We asked to have it on the website. We are not even there yet with the inclusivity statement. We still have people saying that the inclusivity statement doesn't include Trump supporters, etc.

Eric said he thinks something like this pledge is for down the road. First we should work on getting the inclusivity statement on the town website and documents.

Kyle said it is an awesome pledge. Minemå and the Studio Store would be more than happy to put it on their website. As a business owner she thinks it is a great pledge but she thinks there would be a lot of resistance from other businesses in town.

Rick thanked Diane for writing a report on the Racial Justice Committee for the village annual report.

#### **4. *Review Recommendations***

Brian Story sent Rick an email letting him know that two people besides Sophia were interested in appointments to the Racial Justice Committee. One of them could not make tonight's meeting and was also looking at other volunteer options in town. The other was sent the agenda with a note to let Rick know if she could not attend. Rick said he would like to again recommend that the selectboard appoint Sophia Berard to the Racial Justice Committee.

Eric said there were a number of things he and Diane were going to recommend to the selectboard and the trustees. He asked Brian Story to put them on the selectboard agenda for the last meeting but when the agenda came out it just listed a Racial Justice Committee report. Eric emailed Brian before the meeting that he wasn't giving a report but wanted to give the board the committee's recommendations. The agenda did not get changed. He asked at the beginning of the meeting to change it. He ended up giving a report at the meeting and he mentioned the recommended action items but the board didn't vote on anything. The board said the items needed to be posted on the agenda ahead of time.

Rick said the two other people who were interested in being on the committee were invited to this meeting. One could not attend and the other did not respond even though he asked her to let him know if she could not make it.

Jackie said she was frustrated by the last selectboard meeting. She feels this committee was created by the boards to slow the work down.

Sophie suggested that because Brian has a lot on his plate perhaps Eric should check in with him to make sure it is clear what he is being asked to put on the agenda and that it is being put on.

Scott said the trustees did not intend when creating the Racial Justice Committee to push the subject down the road or bury it. They had no time with everything they were doing as trustees to fully address the topic. He appreciates the comments Eric made at the special trustee board meeting. He thinks everyone was able to speak freely on what they thought at that meeting. It allowed everybody to see what was going on. The views are all over the map. He hopes that everyone involved will build bridges and make connections with people they don't agree with and have polite conversation.

Scott said COVID is slamming the BIPOC population. He thinks it would be wonderful if the Racial Justice Committee could do a Front Porch Forum post to make sure the BIPOC community knows about the vaccine and how to get vaccinated. He thinks the information would have more value for that population if it came from the Racial Justice Committee.

Kyle said she thinks Jackie's take on formation of the committee is correct. That is why she was hesitant about starting the committee. The way the committee was spoken about and created made it seem to her that it was about getting these issues off the board's plate because they were such a big distraction. The way the selectboard handled Sophia's appointment is not in line with past practice. In the past the board has always tried to take a committee's recommendations about appointments.

Eric said he thinks we need to look beyond fault and blame. He would like people to think more about impact than intent. A lot of things said with good intent have unfortunate impacts. He hopes the committee can get the town and village boards to realize that their action and inaction have impacts that are felt and that they need to think about.

**Eric moved to strongly recommend that the selectboard appoint Sophia Berard to the Racial Justice Committee and that that item be on the pre-published agenda for the next selectboard meeting. The motion was passed.**

Raven said she sent information about Racial Justice Committee meetings to be posted on the village and town Facebook pages. She sent it out on March 10th and the village got back to her on the 16th. The town said they would talk about it at the March 15th meeting and they have not posted the information. They didn't talk about it at that meeting. The hesitation to post an invitation to the public is confusing to her. These meetings are open to the public.

Eric said he posted meeting information on Front Porch Forum. He also got a list of every Lamaille Union High School student who is a resident of Johnson and sent them the information. Portia sent meeting information to the News & Citizen. And tonight's turnout is the lowest the committee has had.

Jackie said she noticed the information was on the village Facebook page and not the town page. She thanked the people who posted it. She asked if anyone sent the information to Sue

Lovering. Diane said she sent her an email. Jackie and Eric noted that they did not see the information in Sue Lovering's column.

Raven asked if it is okay if she contacts the Town of Johnson and asks them again to post the information. The committee agreed. Eric said he assumes we will again post information on Front Porch Forum and in the News & Citizen before the next meeting. Diane said she will contact Sue Lovering again. Portia asked if there is a way to make this a recurring event appearing in the paper. Jackie said yes; if she asks, the paper can put it in every month.

Kyle asked if the Zoom link is in these postings. Raven asked if it is appropriate to put that in the posting. Eric said yes, though it is not very useful in a paper article. Cal said he has heard it can be difficult to find the Zoom link. He has heard that some people are afraid to come to meetings because they fear they would be called racist. He thinks it would be good to let them know they do not need to worry about being called racist, that no one has been called racist. Scott suggested maybe posting in the events section of Seven Days. It is widely read, including in Johnson. He said he has noticed that trustee board agendas always have the Zoom address as a clickable link but selectboard agendas may not. Not having a clickable link may be holding some people back from attending. And meetings are at 6:00, when many people eat.

Scott suggested maybe there could even be an article in Seven Days. Eric said that probably would attract people from Chittenden County and he doesn't think we want to do that for these very local conversations. Jackie agreed. Jackie said she doesn't think the link is preventing people from coming to these meetings. The trustee board special meeting was able to draw people never seen at trustee meetings before. As Eric says, these are people we need to listen to. How did the trustees get those people? She doesn't buy that it was the moderator. Scott said he is not really sure. He told people that he talked to to show up. Jackie asked if he can do that for these meetings. Scott said he can try. Now that he is getting off the board people are not coming to him to vent as much anymore.

#### **5. *Public Discussion***

There was discussion about possible reasons people may not want to come to Racial Justice Committee meetings.

Rick said Derrick Jensen said, "Unquestioned beliefs are the real authorities of any culture." We have to ask ourselves individually, what are my beliefs? How do we expand this committee's conversation to people who may not question their own beliefs to get the conversation in a broader context?

Cal said he thinks we need to have ways people will feel safer to come to these meetings. He thinks it is a huge task.

Sophia said she had the idea of possibly posting on Front Porch Form a Racial Justice Committee reading list. And when we post about the meetings, we could post something that makes it clear that we are not a racially woke group of people – something humble about how we are all working towards this and people can come and learn with us, a message that

lessens the us vs. them feeling. We could reach out with other materials in addition to books, like the Xusana Davis presentation.

Eric said he thinks being welcoming will not attract more people. It's not that people are racist or afraid of their way of life changing. It feels like there are other things they want to be doing and they think this is taking a lot of time and energy. He thinks the way to keep them involved is to keep suggesting things like hanging the Black Lives Matter flag and having education from Bor Yang or the Peace and Justice Center and keep having items on the selectboard and trustee agendas. We need to keep bringing up incidents, facts and statistics and keep pushing the conversation.

Raven said she would like to hear from Asian community members about their experiences if we could figure out a way to make that happen.

Jackie said, regarding the idea of posting a book list, people don't read books. They might read an article or interview.

Scott said he agrees with Sophia and not so much with Eric. He thinks it speaks volumes when we have humility and say that we are looking for guidance on how we can move this community forward. A hard line approach won't work. If we really want people coming to these meetings he thinks Sophia's comments are on the money.

Rick said he feels there is some misunderstanding that there was a group that was unwilling to compromise on the Black Lives Matter flag. Community members asked for something different and compromised on putting the flag on the village green. He noted that for COVID awareness the flag is supposed to be lowered on the 19<sup>th</sup> of every month but that is not happening with the flag on the village green. Scott said tomorrow he will send that request to Meredith.

Rick read a quote from Maya Angelou: *Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible.*

Raven said a documentary about a Black man from Barre who went missing is coming out on April 9 in Burlington.

## **6. Adjourn**

Eric moved to adjourn at 8:24 and the motion was passed.

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*