

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
REMOTE PARTICIPATION VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCING
THURSDAY, JUNE 3, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Eric Hutchins, Raven Pfaff, Sophia Berard, Portia Foss

Others: Jackie Stanton, Margo Warden, Rob Rodriguez, Shayne Spence, Kyle Nuse, Jasmine Yuris, Scott Meyer

Committee Members Absent: Diane Lehouiller

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:02.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

Sophia added a request from Jackie Stanton to put up a pride flag at the municipal building for Pride Month as #8 on the agenda.

3. Review and Approve Minutes

Eric moved to approve the minutes of May 20, 2021 and the motion was passed.

4. Human Rights Commission Scheduling

Sophia said Diane reached out to the Human Rights Commission and they said that their director of policy, education and outreach, Amanda Garcés, is going to start scheduling trainings again beginning June 1 and can contact Diane in early June to set something up if we are interested. Sophia hasn't heard if Amanda has reached out to Diane yet. The committee agreed to move ahead with scheduling a training from the Human Rights Commission.

5. Report on Essay Contest Proposal

Eric said after sharing the essay contest idea with his colleagues and with the LUHS racial justice committee he got some feedback. There were some reservations about the prompt we copied from the Rutland NAACP. Eric considered the prompts Shayne suggested and incorporated a couple of those. Some other educators asked if it needed to be a formal essay or if it could be a slam poem, song, etc. Eric thought it would make sense to accept any kind of written expression so he gave it the name "written expression contest." He shared his draft with the prompt and information about the contest. He said some people suggested opening it up to all of Lamoille County but Eric thought limiting it to Lamoille North district is a reasonable compromise between some board members' desire for it to be just for Johnson residents and our desire to get enough participation during summer. It will be open to anyone in the Lamoille North, including homeschooled students. There will be a Juneteenth event at the school tomorrow and the contest can be introduced then.

Raven said she loves the prompts and the idea of other forms of expression like slam poems. Sophia agreed. Portia asked how we are getting the word out about it. Eric said he will give information to his contacts at the high school and middle school and information will be put out throughout the district through morning announcements, etc. We are doing it in cooperation with the Lamoille Restorative Center and Mark Scott there said that their social media outreach people will help us promote it. He hopes we can promote it in conjunction with Juneteenth celebration activities. He will reach out to Lamoille Union Middle School and send information about it to the state home study program.

Eric moved to approve the written expression contest proposal presented by Eric Hutchins and the motion was passed.

Eric asked if we should create a Racial Justice Committee email address. We could receive any feedback at that address in addition to contest entries. Sophia said Front Porch Forum posts could come from that address. She suggested talking to Brian Story about it. Eric suggested just making a Gmail account. Sophia said she would double check with Brian Story about whether we can do that.

6. *RJC Presence at Juneteenth Celebration in Montpelier*

Sophia said she would be happy to organize a children's poster making station for the Montpelier Juneteenth event. Saudia talked to the committee about it at the last meeting. If the committee is not interested she will just do it as a volunteer community member.

7. *Report on Essay Contest Proposal (continued)*

Eric pointed out that the contest cannot be publicized until we have an email address for entries. He doesn't think we should wait for correspondence from Brian Story. Next week is the last week of school. He thinks the committee should just make an email address and put it on the document he prepared and then he can share it tomorrow morning.

Jasmine Yuris suggested the committee could make an email address for this specific project and ask Brian's guidance about using it in the future. The bread oven committee has a town email address. Brian might want the committee's email address to be affiliated with the town. But it makes sense to have an email address for this project and get it off the ground now. Eric created the Gmail address.

8. *RJC Presence at Juneteenth Celebration in Montpelier (continued)*

Portia said she thinks it is a great idea for the committee to be present at the Juneteenth event. She plans on being there. She talked to Saudia about ideas for a youth tent. She loves the idea of a sign making station. She had ideas like bubbles and Juneteenth related crafts. Sophia suggested there could be a line or cluster of youth activities including poster making. Portia agreed.

Raven said she thinks it is worthwhile to stay connected with other groups in Lamoille County. She can't be at the event in Montpelier but she has a lot of art supplies she would like to donate. She is a preschool teacher and she can see if her employer might also be willing to donate. Sophia said she had made a list of people we could potentially ask for donations. She suggested that any members of the public interested in volunteering or donating contact the committee.

9. *Ways to Solicit Feedback from BIPOC Residents and Visitors*

Raven said she imagined members from the community coming in to give suggestions or talk about their experiences. She feels uncomfortable about doing something like a poll or survey. Sophia said she and Eric thought we could put out a survey or questions that we would not specifically send to people of color but would make optionally available for people to volunteer their input.

10. *Johnson Racial Justice Committee Banner*

Sophia suggested it might be nice to have the banner completed to display at the Juneteenth event. She thought we should discuss what symbols we want on our banner.

Margo Warden suggested asking community members what symbols they want. Black Lives Matter, the fist and the progress pride symbol are some possibilities, as well as using red, green and black (African liberation colors.) There could be a subcommittee for the banner if the whole committee doesn't feel like discussing it.

Jackie Stanton said she thinks iconic symbols like Black Lives Matter and the progressive pride symbol should be included. There are well-known huge movements behind both. Things like the clock tower and river that Kate Westcott included on the town inclusivity statement sign could be included to regionalize it.

Jasmine said she likes the idea of using Black Lives Matter and the fist – symbols which represent bigger movements – but she also really likes the idea of using local talent and making it unique to Johnson. She likes the idea of a call to artists. There could be a committee with two or three people from the Racial Justice Committee and an interested artist to meet on Legion Field with pads of paper to work on it.

Sophia suggested she and Raven could be on that subcommittee. Raven said she would be interested. Sophia suggested they could coordinate outside this meeting about the Front Porch Forum post and plan a day to meet.

Eric said he would caution that, while he is in favor of it, the Black Lives Matter symbology has proven to be controversial in our community. Black Lives Matter is the largest human rights organization in the world but many people in the community have been misled by media and politicians about its meaning. We should educate people about what it means but we have already tried and failed to get a Black Lives Matter sign up based on what people think it means. If we are looking for something people can get behind, that might not be on the menu right now. He thinks there is a lot of other symbology that does the same thing, such as the fist, symbolic colors and the progress pride flag. There are a number of things that symbolize equity, progress, etc that don't mean what Black Lives Matter means to a fraction of our community.

Jackie said we do have a Black Lives Matter flag in our town at the village green. There is also one that has been at the college for 6 to 7 years and one at Laraway. She thinks we need to continue to talk to people about what it means and listen to what they think it means, but not shy away from it.

Kyle said she agrees. She thinks it is important that we stand strong with this national conversation and movement that is already happening in our community, state and country. She thinks it is important that we show leadership in this way. She acknowledges what Eric and others are seeing and feeling but feels we should stand strong because this is so important. She would advocate for continuing to stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Sophia said she will be in touch with Raven to set up a time to announce to the public for meeting at Legion Field. She and Raven could have a basic layout in mind and discuss what to add to it with whatever community members show up.

Portia said she is somewhat undecided. She sees both sides. She sees where Jackie and Kyle are coming from on the need to stand strong and stick with the Black Lives Matter movement without worrying about what people will think, feel or say. But on the other hand she has witnessed the pushback. Our goal is to bring people together to unify and if we are constantly doing things just to push our perspective onto others, we are not getting anywhere. We are pushing people farther away who aren't there yet and don't fully understand what it stands for.

Sophia said when the subcommittee has images in mind we can keep this conversation going.

Kyle said she appreciates Portia's comments but it was never her understanding that the goal of this committee was to unify. Her understanding was that this was a committee for racial justice. But it is the committee's job to figure out what its goals are – furthering racial justice for marginalized communities or unifying the white dominant culture that feels threatened by Black Lives Matter.

Eric said he has read the resolution on formation of this committee. Our goal is to further the things in that resolution. But the committee is operating as part of a democracy. We are not a protest movement. We are a committee within municipal government. We have to educate and advocate for our positions but we also have to propose things that will be approved. We have pushed things forward that were voted down by democratic representatives of our town. What we do has to be within the confines of things that will be approved by the selectboard and trustees. Otherwise it is a waste of time. We are working within a democracy, which means we need consent of the people in government to do the things we want to do. Should we continue to push the Black Lives Matter sign and movement? Yes, but we need to do whatever else we can do in the meantime.

Portia said she agrees that our committee's goal is racial justice. She doesn't think we should tiptoe or not stand strong about that or run away from pushback but we can't force people to think a certain way. If we attempt to force something on people or tell them what to believe we will further push people away who aren't already on board. She thinks unity is an important part of racial justice, especially in a community and state that is mostly white. We need to come together and stand strong about what we believe in but if we are constantly coming off as combative we aren't getting our point across and aren't making a difference. We have to be willing to meet in the middle.

Jasmine suggested Abenaki-related visual elements could be included on the banner. She suggested the banner could be more visual rather than having words. It could be a visual mission statement that could unify people. Jackie is right that we have three Black Lives Matter flags in town. We could make this something new and unique.

Sophia said the banner will have four big long words – “Johnson Racial Justice Committee.” She didn't envision having more words than that because it would get busy. She imagined mostly using symbols and colors that speak louder than words.

Shayne said he supports what Eric and Portia were saying. He has been worried throughout this conversation that there are people being left behind. There are people in our community who are on board with the idea of racial justice and equity but are being sold a false bill of goods about what certain symbols and words mean. It is important to continue to have conversations about those things, but when it comes to this committee, a win would be nice. When it comes to the intentions of board members in setting up this community he thinks if he asked all board members he would get half a dozen different answers about what they thought this committee would do. It is up to the committee to decide how to work through this issue. He thinks the way to do that is to be collaborative and bring a lot of different people to the table even if they don't agree on how to achieve racial justice.

Jackie said this whole conversation for her is bringing up the idea that we are really behind on education. Education really needs to happen in order to move forward.

Scott Meyer said he was a little nervous to log on tonight but he has heard a lot of wonderful conversation that makes him happy. He hopes we can get around some of the tenseness of past meetings and move forward. He has always believed in the full community. Communities move things along. We also can't forget the Native American population. Sometimes it is good to reach out in person and have one-on-one conversations. As a trustee he had face-to-face conversations where people told him honestly what was on their minds without worrying about being viewed on Zoom. He thinks everyone here would be heartened to hear that many people support racial justice but can't get around the Black Lives Matter symbol for whatever reason. He thinks committee members would find that a lot of people who speak against Black Lives Matter have friends, family or coworkers who are people of color who have been harassed and beaten down and are frustrated by it. He thinks one-on-one conversation is very important. A lot of those people do want to move racial justice forward.

Sophia said she and Raven will get people together after the meeting to work on what the banner will look like.

11. Johnson Inclusivity and Anti-Racism Statements

Portia showed some options she came up with for a graphic of the anti-racism statement that the committee could offer to businesses or put on kiosks combined with the inclusivity statement graphic.

Kyle noted that the statement on Portia's graphics refers to the village trustees in the first line. The original statement refers to the Johnson selectboard but the village trustees also passed this. Eric said the one Portia used is the one that is on the town website. Kyle said both the town and the village adopted this statement. Maybe the wording could be changed to refer to the town and village. She suggested a couple of possible formatting changes. She said she loves the image with the municipal building behind it as an affirmation that the statement was officially adopted by local government. Sophia said we should reach out to the town and make sure the statement gets changed on the website.

Eric said the town includes the village. He thinks the statement we use just needs to refer to the town. We should not make it too wordy. The town selectboard represents all citizens of the town. He thinks the website and official communications don't need to mention both the village and town but just the town. He said he will bring this up to the selectboard on Monday and encourage them to put the inclusivity statement and anti-racism statement in all the places they previously said they would.

Scott said there was a request from the community for the trustees to adopt the anti-racism statement and post it on social media and in the village report, which the village manager did after the trustees voted. He feels eliminating the village from the statement devalues everything the trustees have been doing. He doesn't agree with Eric. He believes the village functions on its own, not under the selectboard. It represents the village voters. He doesn't see it as a big deal to include both town and village. It is just one extra word.

Jackie said her understanding is that this was a statement of our elected officials to hold them accountable to this statement and to the inclusivity statement. It was a statement for elected leaders to make a commitment to anti-racism, is that right? Kyle said yes. This was a commitment statement to further anti-racism. Jackie said in that case it is important to include both the town selectboard and the village trustees. This is their commitment to backing up the inclusivity statement.

Eric said the main concern of the village trustees is overseeing utilities and sidewalks. He doesn't know if there is any other committee that has to have members appointed by both village and town and have things

approved by both village and town. The people of the village have special concerns, but racial justice is not a special concern of people in the village. It is a concern of everyone in town. The trustees expressed concerns about double taxation. Perhaps their attitudes have changed over time about what falls under their purview. It seems like they want to step away from their responsibility for this committee, in which case the Racial Justice Committee should be a subcommittee of the town selectboard, representing concerns of all in the town. Every other committee is not responsible to report to town and village and get funding from both. The trustees made a bold statement by endorsing these things but when the town adopted the statement it was already done. He thinks the committee can move forward with approval from the selectboard. He doesn't believe we need ratification of the trustees on issues of racial justice.

Sophia suggested that the committee should finalize the wording of the statement and then see a final version with that wording before approving the graphic.

Margo said her understanding is that the racial justice committee was jointly appointed by the selectboard and the trustees, unlike many other committees. She would be in favor of having both the selectboard and the trustees on the statement.

Eric said he thinks the dual creation of this committee was a coincidental result of a joint meeting of the town and village. There were comments from the trustees about not wanting to fund our proposal because of double taxation so he researched responsibilities of both boards and it seems clear to him that the selectboard represents everyone in the village and the town and the trustees only represent the village. The village trustee board was created to address specific concerns. He thinks his committee should have the approval of the selectboard. The trustees can pitch in when they want but when a request is approved by the selectboard, that is enough.

Jasmine said since the statement was written with the intention of holding elected officials accountable she thinks in order to continue down this road of accountability both the selectboard and the trustees should be mentioned because the statement was adopted by both boards.

Kyle said she agrees. In a lot of ways this committee was set up for failure because it needs approval from both boards, but that is the way it was set up so the committee has to go to both boards. The statement is all about accountability. We can't hold one side accountable and not the other. They both have to be accountable. So it is important that both are named. Both approved the statement and need to be reminded of that. The statement also talks about funding the educational programs and it is important that the boards are reminded of that. As it stands now, this is both a town and a village committee.

Eric said he feels we have to ask the trustee board about use of village property but we can get approval for things like an essay contest without approval of both bodies. He feels we should not shackle ourselves unnecessarily.

Sophia suggested in our version of the anti-racism statement we could name both boards but just refer to the town's inclusivity statement instead of the town and village inclusivity statement. Eric said we don't have authority to edit the statement. He thinks the one approved by the selectboard is the one we are married to. Sophia said it sounds like we can't move forward with the graphic until we have a statement agreed upon. Kyle said the Johnson selectboard adopted one that refers to the selectboard and the village adopted one that refers to the trustees. That is the only difference; otherwise they are the exact same statement.

12. Recommend BLM Banner Fly on Pearl Street

Sophia said that at the next trustee board meeting we will recommend hanging the Black Lives Matter banner on Pearl Street from June 28 to July 31. Since Diane is a trustee Sophia suggested someone else who lives in the village could go and make the proposal to them. Raven said Diane had asked her previously if she could go and she agreed.

13. Request to Hang Progress Pride Flag at Municipal Building

Jackie Stanton sent an email to the committee requesting that the committee propose that the town and village hang the progress pride flag at the municipal building for the month of June, which is Pride Month. Raven asked if we are thinking of putting it on the flagpoles. Sophia said a lot of towns are hanging a pride flag at their municipal building for June. Jackie said she didn't have any specific plan for how it would hang, whether on a flagpole, as a standalone sign or on the building. That can be figured out later. The Vermont State Police have this flag on their Facebook page. Rutland has it.

Eric said we can't go to the trustees on June 14 asking them to fly a flag in June. We should be planning much further ahead. There will be questions about funding, how big the flag will be, etc. He thinks it would be better to plan ahead and do it right next year. He suggests having a calendar for planning ahead. Sophia agreed, especially since the trustee meeting is halfway through June. She loves the idea of having a calendar.

14. Other Business

Raven said our meetings are not on the calendar on the town website. They are under Meeting Minutes and Agendas. She finds the website a little hard to navigate. It would be nice to have our meetings on the calendar as a link like other meetings. She suggested keeping in mind October 11, which is Indigenous People's day.

Eric said Sheriff Marcoux's editorial in today's News and Citizen is worth a read. There are too many narratives coming from a national perspective that are misinforming people. The best thing is to talk to community members. Sheriff Marcoux set an excellent example. He has seen a lot of negative information about this committee from people he has never seen at committee meetings. He thinks that is unfortunate.

Sophia said she will reach out to Brian Story about getting the committee's meetings on the calendar.

Margo said Roger Marcoux's letter was great to read. She was on the grassroots committee that started meeting with him last July. Wonderful progress has been made and will continue to be made. Jackie, Kyle and several other people in Johnson are also on that committee.

Portia said Brian Story recently sent out a mass email about the possibility of having in-person meetings. She asked everyone's thoughts on having in-person meetings. She feels in-person will be a lot more personable. Raven said she personally is looking forward to it. She feels pretty secure with vaccination rates going up. She misses talking to people in person. She has a 4-year-old and wouldn't know what to do with him, but she would love to see people in person. Eric said he did not receive any email from Brian Story. He doesn't have qualms about COVID, but Zoom is more convenient for him. But he is happy to go along with the will of the group. Sophia asked Portia to forward the email she got from Brian Story to the whole committee.

Shayne said one thing to keep in mind if the committee goes to in-person meetings is that the ability to attend through Zoom will still need to be available.

Eric said because of the state of emergency meetings have to be Zoom compatible, but once the restrictions are lifted he doesn't think it will be required. Shayne said there was proposed legislation this past session that was not passed but probably will be passed within the next year and he thinks that will result in a requirement for remote attendance being included in Open Meeting Law. And if the state of emergency is still in effect the committee will have to keep that in mind. To have hybrid in-person/Zoom meetings the committee will want to have cameras set up for people who attend in person. It will require forethought.

Scott Meyer said the emergency management group is working on this. Even if the governor lifts the state of emergency there will still be some restrictions and recommendations. Whether or not Zoom will still be available when the municipal building is reopened is uncertain.

Eric said his understanding is that once the state of emergency is over there would be no restrictions whatsoever on meeting in person or masking. The CDC can make recommendations but no actual restrictions will exist. Scott said he is on a different board in Vermont where they normally have pretty large gatherings. For the summer they are obligated to move forward with pretty rigid reopening plans. He knows what the governor is saying but it is not as if the recommendations from the state will all go away – for good reason. We still have unvaccinated people and variants. We also have VOSHA rules. He is not sure whether VOSHA rules for employee protections will be lifted at the same time.

Eric said he thinks as long as we are under the state of emergency and required to have a remote option we need to keep meeting on Zoom. Once the state of emergency is lifted we can consider meeting in person. Others agreed.

Portia said she thinks at one time we had talked about having a social media or web presence. Have we given any real thought to that? And did we ever end up getting our mission and vision statement on the town website? Sophia said she is not sure what happened with the vision and mission statements.

Jasmine said she loves the idea of a Facebook page for articles and spreading information. If it is an active page it might be a way to get more people to come to these meetings.

Raven checked the town website and said she couldn't find the vision and mission statements there.

Eric said he thinks we should take up the social media presence at another time. He doesn't think we should support Facebook. As an organization it doesn't support racial justice. But there is no reason we couldn't start a web page.

Sophia said a social media presence for the committee will be on the next agenda. And then we can revisit the vision and mission statements.

15. Public Comment

Shayne let people know about the upcoming Johnson Speaks event.

Jackie said the selectboard had talked about how they were going to lay out their expectations for this committee. Is that going to happen at the next selectboard meeting? Eric said Eric Osgood made a comment about that but he didn't think it was necessarily going to be on the next agenda. The agenda for that meeting hasn't been released yet.

Shayne said he felt terrible for Raven at the last trustee meeting. She was kind of alone with the lions. It would be great for other people to show up with her and Eric when they give their reports to the boards to show support.

Portia asked if concrete plans have been made for a walk on June 10. Sophia said no but if we wanted to help promote the event in Montpelier we could suggest that people who are interested in going meet at the village green in Johnson at a particular time and then go to CCV in Morrisville. That may be all we can do last minute, especially since we don't have another meeting before then. Last time we had suggested publicizing that people could meet in Johnson at 2:00 and then moved to CCV.

16. Adjourn

Eric moved to adjourn, the motion was passed and the meeting was adjourned at 8:26.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

UNAPPROVED