

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Eric Hutchins, Raven Pfaff

Others: Shayne Spence, Jasmine Yuris, Offie Wortham, Diane Lehouiller, Athena Parke

Committee Members Absent: Portia Foss

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:08.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

It was agreed to add a t-shirt idea from Shayne Spence.

3. Written Expression Contest

Eric said he talked to LNSU's new director of diversity, equity and inclusion, Maria Davies. She is willing to help out with the relaunch of the written expression contest. He will email the restorative center and give them updated information. For younger students there are concerns about getting parental consent before work is publicized. We will go with the traditional district policy on that.

Sophia suggested we might want to relaunch on Tuesday, the day after Indigenous People's Day, and link to that. Eric said that is too short a timeline. (*Jasmine Yuris arrived at 6:16.*) Plans have already been written for classes on Tuesday. He said he thinks we will not launch all at once but do continuous outreach to as many people as possible.

Sophia said since the graphic needs to have the date changed it would be great if we could also get "Johnson Racial Justice Committee on it." Eric said he will make recommendations on changing the graphic. The committee agreed that a deadline of December 1 for submissions is good.

Eric moved to extend the deadline for the written expression contest to December 1 and to relaunch the contest with an updated graphic as soon as possible. The motion was passed.

4. Update on RJC Appointment

Sophia said she got an email from Brian Story that the selectboard will wait another week or so to see if they get more applicants for the RJC vacancy. So far they have two. Both applicants are here tonight. There will likely be an appointment made by the selectboard at its next meeting. (*Diane Lehouiller arrived at 6:20.*)

5. Vermont Human Rights Commission Workshops

Sophia said she has been in touch with Amanda Garces from the Human Rights Commission about rescheduling the workshops. They have time in late October, mid November or mid December. We should hear back from the Vermont Humanities Council about our Rapid Response Grant to fund workshops by October 15.

Jeff said for any event we need time to get the word out and to make a decision on location. He thinks mid December would be the earliest we could schedule a workshop and that is a hard time of year. If the workshops are held this school year probably remote will be the best option. Planning for late January or early February would give us more time to put things together and if we can't get a grant we will have time to look at other funding sources. Others agreed.

Diane said she thinks it would be great if the workshops were planned for when NVU students are here so they can be part of it and if we also advertised to high schools and the Studio Center. She doesn't know what NVU's break schedule is. Jeff said they come back from winter break in the third full week of January. Their spring break is in early April. Commencement is around May 14 this year. In the past they have had a speaker for Martin Luther King Jr. day, which has tended to be the first day of classes for spring semester. We could possibly line up with that timing. It may be possible to get funding support from the college.

Raven asked if there is a timeline on when the grant funds need to be used up. Sophia said she didn't see anything about that. She imagines they would let us know if we are awarded the grant. Eric said we could always pay for the workshops in advance.

Sophia said she will check on Amanda's availability in January and February and we can discuss scheduling again at the next meeting.

Diane asked how much the grant is. Sophia said the maximum is \$1000. She, Jeff and Jackie Stanton worked on the application. They asked for \$1000 to pay for two workshops (total cost: about \$600) and potentially an anti-racism story time and materials to make an RJC banner.

Diane asked if there is money in the account at the town clerk's office. Sophia said as of the selectboard meeting a couple of weeks ago she thinks there were two checks. She hasn't checked since then.

Sophia said Portia had mentioned she would be interested in helping advertise the workshops, for instance making a poster. We can look at a task list in the future.

Raven asked if we are allowed to advertise the workshops to the whole Lamoille community or if they are just for Johnson residents. Sophia and Eric said they thought we could advertise to all. Raven said Capstone and Lamoille Health Partners are a couple of places we could advertise. Shayne suggested REAL as well. He also suggested reaching out to them about the essay contest. Eric said once he gets the new graphic about the essay contest he can send it out and committee members can send it to anyone to publicize it.

6. *RJC Response to Neighborhood Watch Meeting/Direction*

Jeff said his wife attended the neighborhood watch meeting last week and he heard parts of it. The sheriff's department was part of it. Shayne said he was there. Eric said he thought the data mentioned in the News & Citizen was odd. Was more shared at the meeting? Shayne said people at the meeting never saw a graph. He doesn't know how the sheriff's department

is putting the numbers together. Based on the numbers it didn't seem like there was an increase worthy of the response but there has been an increase, specifically in certain areas of town. Eric said what he saw was that certain areas were 8% of total calls in one year and 15% of total calls the next year. But depending on whether the total number of calls changed that might or might not be an increase and he wonders if it is a statistically significant difference. The total number of calls for the year was about 4500. (*Athena Parke arrived at 6:35.*) He worries about people acting on perception rather than reality.

Shayne said most of the calls were about quality of life issues like loud music, a drunk person walking down the street, etc. Most were not things like theft or assault. He doesn't necessarily want people to see someone suffering from substance use disorder and think they need to call the police on that person. It is easy for being involved in something like community watch to go to someone's head. There was some sentiment at the meeting about putting up signs. A comment was made that when you walk into a neighborhood and see community watch signs you feel like you are being watched. To him that is not a good feeling and not necessarily something we want people new to the area to feel when they are walking through town. Maybe the signs could have some more positive message like "We have each other's backs."

Offie said based on his experience in high crime areas in Philadelphia, signs stop crime almost immediately but putting up neighborhood watch signs doesn't make much sense if it is not a high crime area.

Eric said we should make sure not to conflate areas that suffer from poverty and substance abuse issues with high crime areas. Maybe we want to put up information for the public on support resources. The arson incidents are concerning but that seems like one individual, not indicative of a crime wave. Jeff said most of those incidents happened last summer. That issue has just gotten more attention recently. Johnson is not really a high crime area. He wonders if there is a role for the RJC to be educators in terms of suggesting that people call based on what is happening, not who is involved, and suggesting that people consider what about what is happening is objectionable and why it needs a police call. He kept hearing "If you see something, say something." If you see criminal activity you should say something, but we know that the kinds of things people call the police for and who they tend to call them on tend to have racial bias to them. He would volunteer to be part of community meetings and be a voice for education. He would be happy to draft something to put out.

Eric said he would say the important thing is to make sure that what we are asking of our law enforcement is based on data. Can we request 10 years of data on calls broken down by area and type of calls? He would say there is probably not a trend. We don't want to feed perceptions about an area in the heart of our community that gets a bad reputation. Jeff said he can reach out to the sheriff's department.

Shayne said he likes Jeff's idea of a statement, maybe providing the perspective of this committee and advising caution.

Sophia asked if the neighborhood watch is going to be having regular meetings. Shayne said he didn't hear a next meeting date.

Sophia asked, was there movement to put up signs? Shayne said yes there was a lot of talk about signs. He is not sure where the money for that is coming from. Putting up signs was the only concrete action that was proposed. The sentiment expressed was that signs would send a message that people are being watched. He is not sure what the wording would be. Jeff said he thinks the selectboard is providing them. Donna said at the last selectboard meeting it was mentioned that the sheriff's department may be able to cover at least part of the cost.

Sophia said it seems like it could be valuable to create a list of other resources for issues people might call the police about. Jeff said he has heard of cards that police officers might have in their cruisers listing different resources. He would love to see more citizens making those referrals to other citizens. We could put together a list like that and encourage people to have those along with signs.

Raven said the restorative center has free bags that contain resources for mental health counseling, family issues, substance misuse disorder and housing as well as Narcan and fentanyl test strips. Sophie asked if they have enough of them that the RJC could post on Front Porch Forum saying they are available at the restorative center. Raven said she thinks they are making them all the time. She can get in touch and see.

Eric said as the Racial Justice Committee he thinks our only role is to make sure that resources are not divvied out based on bias and perceptions.

Athena suggested it might be appropriate to have some of the bags available in the municipal building so people could self-select to get them instead of being given them. Raven said she doesn't see why not.

Jeff said he will look for data and draft a statement talking about reasons to call the police, bias etc.

7. Discussion Around Affordable Housing

Jeff said he went to a forum on poverty, homelessness and housing in Lamoille County. He was thinking about how much housing prices have jumped. He talked to Senator Ram about it. One thing that came up it was that there is funding to build affordable housing but planning commissions and zoning boards tend not to want it. He thinks there is a role for this committee to have policy positions to present to the town. Historically people have been deprived from homeownership based on skin color. Housing issues disproportionately affect people of color. That puts housing in the purview of this committee. Do we want to take on why we think affordable housing helps the whole community?

Shayne said as a member of the Planning Commission he is happy to bring that to the Planning Commission. He thinks making a statement of some kind is important.

Sophia asked if this would be a pre-emptive statement or if we would wait until it comes up with the selectboard.

Eric said Governor Scott has requested Homeland Security to send more refugees to Vermont. Mark Nielsen looked into this last year and was told that Lamoille County doesn't have enough affordable housing or transportation for refugee resettlement. It is a barrier to more diverse people moving into our community.

Shayne said he thinks it is worth being proactive and saying this is an example of systemic racism. The systems are built for the people who are already here, not to bring new people in.

Jasmine asked wasn't something brought up about possible development on Gould Hill? Diane thinks it was the top of Clay Hill. Shayne said extending water and sewer to new parts of town has been discussed in several places. Jasmine asked, with the intention of creating multi-unit housing? Shayne said yes. It is still up for debate but the conversation is around whether there are things the town is doing where extended water and sewer are needed or if there are areas identified for future development or a policy for extending services to private developers. The goal of the Planning Commission is to enable more responsible development. He thinks the two committees can work closely together and make sure any policy is equitable.

Sophie asked if the RJC has an immediate role in this, for instance in its report to the selectboard. She is not sure. Jeff said he is not sure either. He thinks this committee has a role in taking policy positions but he doesn't know what that should look like. Eric said he thinks we should just be aware and think about it more and be prepared to bring it up if there are opportunities out there.

8. *Discuss Budget Needs for RJC*

Sophia said she believes budget proposals to the selectboard happen around November. Do we believe we ought to propose a budget to the selectboard?

Jasmine said Nat drove home the point that he wants to see the committee try to raise money. She is not sure how far it would go if the committee made a budget request. Eric said he thinks it is reasonable to have a working budget for workshops, posters, and messaging without having to ask for each bit of money. We can potentially raise money and show we will take funding fundraising seriously but also asking for a budget is reasonable. The selectboard has not been excited about giving us money. Other committees do fundraising and they wanted us to do that to prove ourselves before giving us a budget.

Sophia asked when the deadline is to get budget requests to the selectboard. Jasmine said she thinks there is a loose deadline around mid-November.

Shayne said as far as he knows the Planning Commission doesn't have a budget. But they have the ability to work with LCPC. He suggested setting some goals of what the committee wants to accomplish (x number of events, x number of fundraisers, etc.) and working from there to build a budget. Sophia suggested that committee members think about goals we could base a budget on and bring ideas to the next meeting.

9. Core Values of RJC

Sophia said at the last meeting Raven mentioned that they have core values where she works. Raven and Portia had previously provided vision statement drafts. The vision statement is still in draft form. Jackie sent an email right before this meeting with a draft foundational document she suggested which would give examples of things the committee believes and affirms.

Raven said where she works, Capstone, they have a long list of core values and they focus on five of them. Core values are a little different from a mission statement or vision statement.

Sophie said she is curious about what purpose core values would serve. Would they live on our website? Would we have our core values at our meetings? What they just be a reference point? Raven said there has been talk at trustee and selectboard meetings and around town about how people really feel about our committee. The core values could bring a sense of what we are really about. If someone felt uncomfortable about something or didn't agree with something the committee was doing they could point to how that was not in line with the core values and maybe having the core values would make them feel more welcome.

Sophie said she is wondering if it would be helpful to finalize a vision statement and get that out to the public so people would know what this committee values and what they could expect at a meeting. Jeff asked what the impetus is for putting out a vision statement. Sophie said we have a draft vision statement but no one has seen it except buried in old minutes. It would provide transparency for the committee. Eric said he doesn't think we should finalize a vision statement. We have a mission statement drafted by the selectboard. Our members are appointed by the selectboard and they approve our more substantial actions. They are the ones that have the vision. With maybe one exception people who come to RJC meetings have generally found them interesting or productive. The people with negative perceptions are mostly people who do not come to meetings. Their perceptions are based on a national narrative gone wrong. He doesn't think public statements will make people who traditionally haven't felt welcome feel more welcome. He questioned spending time on core values or vision statement since the committee only meets once a month. He would have issues with some of the language in the drafts.

Jasmine said she envisions a vision statement about what the committee is going to do in 2022. There is no muddying that because it is action-oriented. She loves Raven's idea of showing people what the committee is about and that might be a way to do it.

Eric said we can say whatever we want about what we are but it doesn't matter if the selectboard is not behind it. He thinks we should focus on what we are going to do.

Jeff said he thinks Raven's proposal was to provide guiding principles about how we are going to do the things we have planned – how we approach discussion and how we go about our work. Raven agreed. Jeff said that is different from a vision statement. It is a set of principles you can go back to if things get heated. He thinks having that in conjunction with a plan for what we are going to do could be really powerful. We would say what we are going to do and how we will do it. He agrees that there are few people out there saying they went to

a meeting and felt uncomfortable. But people feeling uncomfortable about the committee keeps coming up. It doesn't have to be that complicated – just 3-5 values paired with what we are doing.

Athena said she agrees that it would be pretty straightforward to connect what the committee is doing with the values. Maybe words could be pulled from the inclusivity statement for values. A vision statement may be a little wordy or intimidating.

Sophia suggested that next month the committee can narrow it down to 3-5 words or concepts we feel are most important. For the next meeting people should think about that and about our budget request and goals. We can prepare a budget request based on our goals.

10. Set Up Time to Mount Inclusivity Statement in Foyer

Sophia said we have permission to hang the Kate Westcott inclusivity statement sign in the municipal building vestibule. Jasmine said Brian Raulinaitis can hang it. Sophia and Jeff offered their help if he wants it.

11. T-Shirt Fundraiser Idea

Shayne said he has a fundraiser idea – printing T-shirts with the inclusivity statement on them. He showed what the T-shirt could look like, with parts of the inclusivity statement bolded to draw attention to them. The cost would be less than \$10 per shirt. He thinks we could sell shirts for \$20-25 apiece. This would be something Johnson-centric and something people can be proud about. His thought would be to sponsor the initial run of T-shirts and let the RJC sell them. He already has some people interested. Then the committee could decide whether to print more. He was thinking of about 25 shirts for the first run. He was thinking of making them red and white on black.

Jasmine said the oven committee pre-ordered T-shirts and ended up with too many small ones and not enough larger sizes. She suggested we might take pre-orders and then get the specific sizes people wanted. Shayne said that is a smart suggestion.

Eric moved to give Shayne Spence permission to print the T-shirt he showed the committee, using the Johnson Racial Justice Committee name on the T-shirt, with the understanding that profits from selling the shirts will go to the Racial Justice Committee. The motion was passed.

12. Minutes Approval

It was noted that in the September 2 minutes “the News & Citizen article by Sophia” should be changed to “the Front Porch Forum post by Sophia.” **Raven moved to approve the minutes of September 2, 2021 with the suggested change and the motion was passed.**

13. Other Business

Shayne thanked Jeff for the items he had asked to be put on the agenda. He and Athena were planning to bring up the community watch issue. Offie said he found the meeting very interesting.

14. Adjourn

Jeff moved to adjourn at 7:57 and the motion was passed.