

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Portia Foss, Raven Pfaff,

Others: Jackie Stanton, Margo Warden, Shayne Spence, Kyle Nuse

Committee Members Absent: Eric Hutchins

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:03.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

No changes to the agenda were suggested.

3. Review and Approve Minutes

Jeff moved to approve the minutes of August 5, 2021 and the motion was passed.

4. Fundraising – Vermont Humanities Rapid Response Grant

Sophia said Jackie Stanton sent the committee information on the Vermont Humanities Rapid Response Grant. The selectboard has given the committee the go ahead to apply for it.

Sophia is working on the application and Brian Story will work on getting a letter of support from the selectboard. The application asks for a specific project. She is assuming our project is the two workshops we have scheduled. We can ask for \$250 to \$1000. She thinks we will ask for \$1000, which could cover the workshops and possibly also anti-racism story time and money for a banner.

Jackie volunteered to help fill out the application. Jeff said he is happy to look over anything Sophia wants him to.

Jackie asked how much is in the town account for donations to the committee. Sophia said only the \$40 Scott Meyer gave, which went towards the Progress Pride flag. Jackie suggested it would be a good idea to redo the Front Porch Forum post and include a mailing address for donations so people don't have to make a special effort to go to the town clerk's office.

Sophia said she has not yet reached out to the Alchemist and she doesn't think Eric has, but that is a potential option.

Kyle Nuse asked if any other letters of recommendation are needed for the grant in addition to one from the town. Sophia said she thinks just the one from the town. Margo asked, what about asking REAL and the college to write letters of support? Sophia said she wonders if we can include more than one letter of support. She said Brian Story suggested that a letter from the town would be good since this is a town committee.

Sophia said she reached out to REAL and Xusana Davis about grant opportunities and hasn't heard back. Margo suggested someone on REAL Sophia might contact. Jeff gave her the name of the chair of the NVU Diversity and Inclusion Task Force.

5. *Inclusivity and Anti-Racism Statements*

Sophia said Raven spoke to Johnson Works about hanging the poster that Kyle created with the inclusivity and anti-racism statements. She doesn't think there was much interest from businesses. She doesn't know why.

Margo asked what the request to Johnson Works was. Sophia said she thought they were asked whether they would like to bring it around to businesses and they said no. But we could contact individual businesses ourselves.

Sophia said now that we have a final copy of the poster with both statements she plans on taking it to the next meeting of the Conservation Commission to ask them about putting it on kiosks. Lisa Crews has offered to print out and laminate it.

Raven arrived at 6:18. She said she showed Johnson Works the poster with the statements and asked if they were interested in showing it to businesses. There was not an interest in helping with it.

Jackie asked for more detail about the conversation. Raven said a lot of people expressed that they have their own businesses and they enjoy the conversations they constantly have with customers. They think something like that would narrow the conversations and connectivity with the community. Margo asked if it is too big a leap to say that they feel it might limit their business if they post it. Raven said that was the way she took it. Shayne Spence said he hasn't noticed a reduction in sales at JP's Promising Goods from having the poster up. The few comments he has had on it were positive.

Sophia said the response from Johnson Works doesn't stop us from going door to door and showing people the poster and asking them if they would like to display it.

Sophia said she and Jackie talked about hanging the poster at the town hall kiosk, at Sterling Market and at the library. Kyle said she doesn't think the committee has to ask to hang it in those places. The statements on the poster are town-approved statements. She suggested the Ted Alexander Welcome Center as another place to put a poster. Margo said she thinks the Sterling Market bulletin board belongs to the college. Kyle said that is one of the spots where the town posts agendas. There was consensus that the committee could just put up posters in those places without seeking permission.

Sophia said the big sign with the inclusivity statement that was painted by Kate Westcott is in the vestibule at the town hall behind the brochures. We had talked about hanging it up there. Should we discuss that with the selectboard? Kyle said a couple of years ago the selectboard talked about getting the foyer spruced up and Lynda Hill offered to work on it but that didn't get done for various reasons. The idea was that once that was done then the inclusivity statement sign would get hung. She thinks it has been forgotten about. Jackie asked if a final decision was made by the selectboard to put the inclusivity statement in the foyer. Kyle said yes, but it has never been done. The committee agreed to say in its next report to the selectboard that the committee would like to come in and put up the sign.

Shayne suggested that when asking businesses if they would like to put up the poster, after they say yes they could be asked if they would also like to support what the committee is doing with a financial contribution.

Sophia said she will keep the committee posted on the progress of getting the posters printed.

Margo said when the Planning Commission wrote its mission statement it included both the inclusivity statement and the anti-racism statement.

Sophia said she was looking at the town website recently and couldn't find the inclusivity statement and she suggested to Brian putting it in a more visible place. He said it is on every page in the footer. But the town is starting a conversation about website redesign and getting it more visible will be discussed.

Jackie suggested asking non-profits as well as for-profit businesses if they want to put up the poster.

6. *Discuss Job Posting Boards – Ensuring Accessibility*

Sophia said Brian Story reached out to her and Eric Hutchins about job posting and asked if they know of any job boards that have a wider range of people looking at them. Does anyone know of job boards we could suggest to the town?

Jackie said this was discussed by the college's diversity and inclusion committee, mostly in an academic way, but they may have ideas.

Jackie said where she works they developed core values and when people come in for interviews they are given the core values. That could be done with the town's inclusivity and anti-racism statements. Kyle suggested it would be good to bring them up during the interview process.

Shayne listed some national job posting websites he had just found: diversity.com, blackjobs.com, Black Career Women's Network, Professional Diversity Network and Diversity Job Board. Sophia said maybe Xusana Davis would have state specific suggestions.

7. *Indigenous People's Day – October 11th*

Sophia brought up the question of whether the committee wants to do anything for Indigenous People's Day on October 11th. Jackie asked if the college is doing anything. Jeff said he will check.

Sophia said if the committee had a Facebook page or website we could put information related to Indigenous People's Day there. When we previously discussed having a Facebook page, we didn't know who would take on the task of running it.

Kyle suggested maybe there could be a Front Porch Forum post or something in the News & Citizen. Jackie said the Front Porch Forum article by Sophia about the Progress Pride flag was great. She suggested that the photo Kyle took of the flag could be submitted to the News & Citizen.

Jackie said she knows someone who has the Nulhegan Abenaki Nation flag. She will ask if the committee could borrow it. Kyle suggested it might be worth the committee making the investment to get one and then every year it could go up for the week of Indigenous People's Day.

Sophia said when she bought the Progress Pride flag she also purchased a standard 3x5 ft. Black Lives Matter flag that can be put up when the Progress Pride flag comes down.

8. ***Address Concerns Re Community Members Feeling Welcome***

Sophia said at a selectboard meeting some community members talked about feeling that if they showed up at a Racial Justice Committee meeting they would be ridiculed or not welcomed.

Shayne said he can't speak for everyone, but one concern he has had, though things are better since Sophia has been chair, is that Robert's Rules are not always followed. There have been times when he or others have been interrupted when speaking. Making sure Robert's Rules are followed would let everyone know that they are all on an equal playing field and it would go a long way toward making people feel more comfortable.

Jackie said she appreciates that Sophia is good at putting together an agenda. In the past ideas she suggested were not put on the agendas and other items were spontaneously added.

Jackie asked, besides the one community member who expressed the feeling Sophia mentioned, have there been others? Sophia said no. She hasn't gotten any feedback relevant to this topic.

Jeff said informality is nice but because there is safety in structure, if there are people who haven't been at the table before or conversation that needs more structure perhaps then we could revert to a stricter interpretation of Robert's Rules. If there are trainings on Robert's Rules, that might be good so we can be prepared.

Jackie said there are other structures for meetings as well, such as the progressive stack, which is for larger groups with quite a few people speaking. People who haven't spoken before get moved to the front. People who are marginalized (LGBT people, people of color, women, etc.) get moved to the front of the queue.

Margo said there may be people who look at issues through a different lens who may feel they are the odd person out at these meetings. She doesn't know how to bring people in to our larger events.

Sophie said she wonders if the hesitancy is that we are all approaching these issues from different places, perspectives, and educations. People don't want to be judged because they don't know as much as others in one area.

Jackie said the subject matter makes us all a little tense. None of us know it all. Maybe we should have the message that we are all struggling, stumbling, learning and growing. Kyle said maybe it is good to show that we are all feeling vulnerable. Jackie said any discussion on

racism or any ism tends to be framed as divisive from the get-go. Sophie said she loves the idea of showing vulnerability in a Front Porch Forum post.

Jackie noted that few people come to meetings of other committee meetings either. She said she is not sure whether a lot of people feel the way the one person did who commented.

Jeff said a number of people have indicated on social media or in the public record that just having the conversation is divisive or that a Black Lives Matter banner will interfere with someone's enjoyment of the Fourth of July. His perspective is to approach that with curiosity, as an opportunity to open up a conversation. He would love to know why people feel it is divisive to even talk about racial justice. We can create trainings and maybe there could be opportunities with the right facilitator to have open-ended conversations with people who feel racial justice work is divisive or that there is nothing racist about our town. No one wants to hear that they are racist. Instead of focusing on the word "racism" we could talk about exploring whether we have attitudes we grew up with and absorbed are consistent with the way we really want to live. He is not interested in figuring out who is a racist. He is interested in finding out why some people find the committee's work divisive and in continuing to bring education and opportunities for conversation about some things that happen in town that create inequity. He is interested in measurable impacts. There may be inequity that is not the fault of anyone but is caused by historical structure. He is interested in how we can work against that and make sure that access to resources is more equitable. Framing it that way can be helpful.

Sophia suggested shying away from using the term "racist" or labeling people and instead asking, How does racism exist as a part of me or part of our town due to structure, social norms, etc?

Raven said the book *Me and White Supremacy* goes into how you can break it down within yourself. The ideas can also be applied to organizations and groups. One thing she has been thinking about is making some small changes to her language. For instance she tries to make it a point to stop saying "but" in the middle of a sentence because that invalidates what came before it. In conversations with other people asking things like, "What's wrong?" or "What does that mean?" is less helpful than saying, "Can you tell me more about that?"

Raven said where she works they have core values. One of them is inclusive communication. In a situation where a decision was made without including her section, they were able to point out that that went against their core values. Maybe if we developed core values for the Racial Justice Committee then people would have something to refer to.

Shayne said there are some words that have been somewhat poisoned in this conversation. "Privilege" means something different to most of us than it does to the average Fox News watcher. A lot of people feel "privileged" means they haven't worked for anything, that it has all been handed to them because of the color of their skin. If we use that language they tune out. He knows what white supremacy means, but if he were to say to certain groups that America is based on white supremacy, they would not understand that the way he does. There is some language he thinks is not useful to use anymore. He has been trying to explain

to people that no one is teaching critical race theory to 12-year-olds. He has realized that that phrase is poisoned. It would be helpful to think of different ways to express those concepts. There are some people who think having this conversation at all is divisive but for others it is particular words and the way the conversation is being had that is divisive.

Sophia suggested it almost might be helpful to have a vocabulary list on the table of words that might come up and what they mean. She feels like we don't want to shy away from words that have meaning but we want to make sure people know what they mean. That is where education comes in.

Shayne said we have to get people in the door before we can give them that education. He worries that the upcoming trainings will just have the same people who were at the last trainings. Unless we unless we do something to bring different groups on board we will just be preaching to the choir.

Jackie noted that mentioning Fox News watchers can drive people away. That can be offensive to people who like Fox News. When we change our language to avoid words that are triggering and make things more palatable she doesn't know what is sacrificed. There is also a certain amount of arrogance in saying, "I will make this more palatable so you won't get triggered." It is hard work to try to tiptoe around everything.

Raven said she has had some awesome conversations with community members and one thing that came out in those conversations was common goals. She thinks we are on common ground with most people in the community who are concerned about safety and well-being. We all want to better Johnson. We can approach the conversation by saying, "Since we all care about this community, here are some measurable things we can show you."

Sophia said a key to getting other people to the table may be just reaching out and talking to our neighbors. Even if that just reaches a handful of people, that is more people at the table.

Jackie suggested one easy thing would be for each committee member to commit to bringing a new person to the next meeting. Margo suggested it could be even more helpful to try to bring new people to the trainings. But it can be daunting for people to feel like they are going to be educated. She heard something on the radio where two people from very different perspectives just listened to each other, trying to understand the other perspective. Jackie said the trainings will not be that. Maybe we could have a special event meeting that is more for listening than training. She has heard elected members of our boards say that they don't want to be lectured at. There is unwillingness to even go to a training.

Shayne said what we have scheduled is a training but maybe in the future we could have something billed as a conversation with neighbors that would be facilitated. One of the things he thought was most helpful at the previous training was the breakout conversations at the end. It was helpful to hear people who consider themselves anti-racist say that in the past they did things they now know were racist. Leaning into that vulnerability can be helpful.

Kyle said one of the trainings she attended at the Cambridge library was like that. There were a set of questions people had to respond to. Everyone had to listen to each other and be vulnerable. It was really interesting to see where people came from and their perspectives. She found it really humbling.

Portia said she thinks the key to this is having open, honest conversations and building relationships with people. If people don't trust you or if you are trying to preach or lecture and they don't feel heard you can't have a good conversation.

9. *Discuss Recommendation to RJC*

Sophia said Jeff was appointed to the Racial Justice Committee and the selectboard did not take the committee's recommendation to appoint Jackie, which is unprecedented. She thinks it is worth having a conversation with the selectboard before making a decision on reopening the position. She thinks we need to talk to them. She is willing to advocate for our recommendation and she knows Eric is also. She still very much recommends Jackie to the selectboard. She thinks we should ask them to tell us more about their decision.

Portia asked if they gave reasoning. Sophia said only vague reasoning. It is unprecedented for a committee to make a recommendation and for the selectboard not to take it. That hasn't happened before.

Kyle said Beth Foy expressed some concerns over Jackie being on the committee that Kyle would have a lot of follow-up questions on. It didn't make sense to her. She would need examples. Beth was thinking of something specific but didn't actually say it. Kyle was shocked that the selectboard did not take the committee's recommendation. She has never seen that happen before. Sophia said she thinks it is a slippery slope and not the relationship we want to have with the selectboard.

Jeff asked, what if we just send the same recommendation back and ask for more specific reasons if the board does not want to take it? Raven said the committee was charged to interview the candidates. Jeff said it is unclear whether the selectboard even read the letters of interest. Even after reading the minutes he still doesn't understand what happened because no one at the meeting said anything specific.

Jeff said he would suggest that all five committee members try to be there in person when the committee resubmits its recommendation and ask for the selectboard's reasoning. If the selectboard doesn't trust a committee's vetting process and is going to establish a new precedent for filling committee positions, there needs to be a reason articulated. He thinks that is a fair expectation of an elected selectboard.

Jeff moved to resubmit the recommendation of Jackie Stanton for the open position on the Racial Justice Committee to the selectboard and the motion was passed.

The RJC will report to the selectboard at its second meeting in September, on September 20.

Kyle said she thinks this is important for every committee, not just this one. It undermines the entire process.

10. Other Business

Jackie said the last time there were workshops Brian posted on Front Porch Forum and created a Facebook event. Having a Facebook event is helpful because we can get some sense of numbers. She would suggest having Brian do that again.

Sophia said the first training is going to be on Zoom and the second one was scheduled to be in person. We previously held trainings in the elementary school gym. Sophia will talk to the school about having the training in their gym.

Kyle said we made posters before. She probably could just tweak the previous poster.

Sophia said the first one is going to be on Zoom because Amanda Garces felt it would be conducive to Zoom and perhaps more people could attend if they could do it from their own home. The bystander intervention training can be done more thoroughly in person.

Margo asked, do most people have internet? Kyle suggested the possibility of setting up a screen at the municipal building. Someone else asked if people would be able to interact who were watching from there. Kyle suggested maybe Brian could facilitate it. Margo said she doesn't want to assume everyone has internet access. Jackie suggested that maybe the publicity about the training could ask people to contact Brian if they are interested in attending but don't have internet access and then he can set up access at the municipal building if people ask for it.

Kyle said she will see if she can find a copy of the old poster to update.

Jeff asked if it would be wise to prepare for the possibility that the second training will have to be remote. Sophie said she will reach out to Amanda about the potential for that.

Kyle said she got an email from DJ Barry. It looks like the World Cow painting could happen as early as next week. He just needs two sunny days. The Beautification Committee is hoping to do a little celebration around it a couple of weeks after it goes up.

11. Public Comment

No one had any additional comments.

12. Adjourn

Sophia moved to adjourn at 7:56 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths