

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Raven Pfaff, Offie Wortham

Others: Shayne Spence, Jasmine Yuris, Jackie Stanton, Margo Warden, Diane Lehouiller, Jasmine Yuris

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:04.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

No changes to the agenda were needed.

3. Approve Meeting Minutes from 10/7/21

Jeff moved to approve the minutes of October 7, 2021 and the motion was passed.

4. RJC Resignations / Size of Committee in Question

Sophia said since the last meeting Portia and Eric have resigned. Portia can't commit to the level she wants after the birth of her third child and Eric will be moving out of the county so he has to resign. Jackie said that is a huge loss. Portia wrote a great op-ed for the newspaper and Eric is a steadfast advocate for justice who speaks with strength and integrity. She will miss both.

Sophia said the selectboard is thinking of lowering the number of members for this committee from 6 to 5 so it will be an odd number for votes. They wanted us to have a chance to talk about that and see how we felt about it.

Offie said he thinks it should be kept to at least six. He doesn't see why it should be limited. Anyone who wants to be involved should be involved. Jackie said she is curious why having an even number is an issue. (*Margo arrived at 6:09.*) She looked on the town website and all the other committees have an even number except the Conservation Commission. There is a notion that it needs to be an odd number because of tie votes but in this committee almost every vote has been unanimous. She feels the selectboard is trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist. Jeff said two rationales were given. One was having an odd number for votes. (*Diane and Jasmine arrived at 6:10.*) The other was so the board can operate with a smaller quorum. He thinks the voting number is not important for this group. Anyone who wants to can be at the table and do the work. The selectboard did make a point of saying that if they are going to change the size that probably needs to be warned so that people can show up and give input on it. He is personally indifferent to the official number. Offie said he thinks we should do whatever we want to do. Right now we are restricted to six members. If we want to have more we should just tell the selectboard we want more people. Sophia said she doesn't think it should be a smaller number given that division of labor is already strained. She thinks the committee could potentially grow and perhaps should not even have a limit.

Jeff moved that the committee's stated preference to the selectboard be to continue to have six members. The motion was passed.

Jeff said he thinks maybe the selectboard is thinking that the committee doesn't need so many members because there have been a lot of openings on the board recently. Shayne said he doesn't think there is any issue with having six members. Sophia said she thinks the back-to-back resignations are probably a factor. But that happens sometimes and the reasons for people resigning are very reasonable.

5. *Written Expression Contest*

Sophia said Maria Davies, the Lamoille North Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Coordinator is going to help with the relaunch of the written expression contest. Does anyone on the committee want to be a point person for the contest? So far there have been no submissions. The point person would be in touch with the school district and check to see if submissions come in. Offie volunteered to be the point person for the contest.

6. *Scheduling Human Rights Commission Workshops*

Jeff said he is hoping to connect with the NVU student who leads the Coalition of Minority Students. If the workshops could be at a time when they would be available to NVU students, that would be good. Jackie said she would love it if the leader of the Coalition of Minority Students could be connected to the RJC. Jeff said it is possible we could get funding from the college if we can offer the workshops to students.

Sophia said the first workshop is on implicit bias and a few days later there will be a bystander intervention workshop. The workshops will be put on by the Vermont Human Rights Commission, with Amanda Garces as lead facilitator. We are looking at scheduling them for February or March because there is another event in January that we want to work around. Margo said we want to make sure they are not scheduled for the week in February when students are on break. Jackie said she is all for partnering with the college whenever we can. There was discussion about possible locations for the workshops. Shayne said if they need to happen on Zoom the Jenna's House space could be used.

Jackie said the Lamoille Family Center is hosting a workshop in January on talking with kids about racism, which will be put on by the Peace and Justice Center.

Offie asked if it is possible to get a roster of all the groups in the county working on racial justice. Jackie said the main three groups are the RJC, the diversity and inclusion group at the college and REAL. Hardwick has a group but Hardwick is not in our county. Shayne said the Lamoille County Planning Commission has a subgroup working on these issues. Sophia said in mid-October she and Raven went to a meeting at The Alchemist for racial justice and JEDI groups around Northern Vermont. Offie mentioned how when he lived in Philadelphia different groups there tried to work together and not duplicate services. Sophia said it would be worth reaching out to REAL and asking what is on their agenda.

Jackie said the Family Center workshop on talking with kids about racism will be by Zoom on two different Wednesday evenings in January.

7. *Discuss Budget Needs*

Sophia said Brian let her know that now and next month is the time to start thinking about the committee's budget. He offered to come to the next meeting to answer any budget questions.

We received the \$1000 Rapid Response Grant. Our project description for that grant included the two workshops, an anti-racism story time and supplies to create a Racial Justice Committee banner. We have received the grant agreement. We have to plan by December 1 how we are going to use the money. And we will have to submit a report. Jasmine asked if the money has to be spent by December 1. Sophia said she doesn't think so. She thinks we just need to submit a grant report. She is not sure when we can schedule the anti-racism story time. When she hears back from Laura she will let the RJC know.

Sophia said the RJC has received \$376 in donations and spent \$40 for a flag so we currently have \$336. Last time we talked about having goals in mind for our budget proposal and basing requested budget amounts around the goals. *(Raven arrived at 6:43.)*

Jeff said he had reviewed the grant agreement and all expenses have to be incurred before December 1. So we should at least get invoices for everything before December 1. He is happy to work on that. Margo asked if that means dates need to be selected for the workshops. Jeff said it would be great if the Human Rights Commission is willing to send an invoice with dates to be determined.

Jasmine said she would like to know what the committee's vision is for the next year. What does the committee want to spend money on?

Jackie said events are fun. We have had a Juneteenth celebration in our town for the last 2 years. We could make that a big thing. Maybe for Martin Luther King Jr. Day we could make a giant cake and invite the whole town. We could have fun events that would happen annually. Others said they think that is a good idea.

Jeff said he was thinking about what could be done to build on the implicit bias and bystander trading. He is not totally sure. Transportation is an issue in Johnson and statewide. You can never have enough bias training and bystander training. People who grew up in primarily white communities need to keep working on it. He would love to see a pattern of providing that training every other year and also do something else to build on it.

Diane suggested we could do movies at Legion Field or Old Mill Park. Shayne said there could be movies at Jenna's House. Jeff said REAL worked with the movie theater when they were doing drive-in shows to show movies related to racial justice.

Raven said it would be nice to do something related to indigenous people beyond raising the Abenaki flag. Sophia suggested there could be something with the Studio Center related to indigenous people. Jackie talked about the value of working with the Studio Center.

Diane said using the granite sculpture bases in the village is something this committee could work on. Maybe we could have a theme such as indigenous people's art. That was something

Eric Osgood brought up. Jasmine suggested the RJC could connect with the Beautification Committee on that. Shayne suggested this committee could work with other organizations to get art in place from an artist of color. Jackie said we could work with the Studio Center. Shayne said a few months ago after Raven brought up the idea of doing an art show with the Studio Center he spoke with Elyzabeth Holford and she seemed interested. She said the Studio Center would be willing to help find artists.

Jeff suggested maybe picking two or three priorities for next year. (*Diane left at 7:06.*) He suggested having activities for Indigenous Peoples' Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day and some training that builds on this year's workshops. Margo suggested having a calendar for the year laying out when the committee may want to plan different activities. Shayne said it is not just the selectboard that needs to vote on the budget for this committee but also the voters on town meeting day, so it is good to make it as clear as possible what the committee will do with the money. (*Margo left at 7:11.*)

Sophia said she can draft some goals and send them to the committee so we can discuss them and have something to present to Brian at the next meeting. Sophia asked if other people who are not committee members want to be included when she sends that out. Jasmine, Shayne and Jackie asked to be included and said they would also like agendas to be sent to them. Jasmine mentioned she was told that committee agendas should be sent not just to Susan but to all three people who work in the office.

8. *Neighborhood Watch - Statement*

Jeff said he made some progress on the statement he was working on, but it is not ready yet. He will send it to Sophia soon. He mentioned the RJC at the sheriff's advisory group that has been meeting approximately monthly with the sheriff's department. Roger Marcoux expressed interest in working with us.

Offie asked if the neighborhood watch is meeting. Other committee members said they didn't think so. Shayne said he has not seen anything about additional meetings. The most recent Facebook post was almost a month ago. Jasmine said neighborhood watch signs with a large eyeball have been made. The library voted against hanging one. Jackie asked, the signs were paid for by the sheriff's department and the selectboard? Jasmine said she thinks so. She is not sure if the cost was split 50/50. People can come to the municipal building and pick up a neighborhood watch sign.

Sophie suggested that the committee can talk about the statement next month after Jeff finishes it.

Offie asked who is organizing the neighborhood watch. Shayne said there are a few people involved. He believes the sheriff's department is in communication with the group.

Offie asked if those signs really decrease crime. Jeff said he looked into that. The research is not conclusive. The signs can affect property values because they can create a perception that there is more crime.

Sophia said part of the idea about the statement was providing quick resources people can call for issues like substance use or mental health rather than calling 911. Raven said that is where she brought up the free bags that include information on resources last time. We can have them at the municipal building. The recovery center puts them together.

9. Update on T-Shirt Fundraiser

Shayne said the t-shirts with the inclusivity statement are being printed. The company is very busy right now and having supply chain issues so it might take a little longer than typical to get them. He presold 25 of them, so 25 are still up for grabs. The t-shirts cost \$7 to \$9 and he priced them at \$25 so we can make about \$850 in profit on 50 of them.

10. Social Justice in Sports

Sophia said there were recent incidents in Winooski and Hartford and at a Lamoille North girls' soccer game of harassment by spectators. There were racial slurs used in Winooski. The Hartford incident involved sexist slurs. She is interested in discussing how we can potentially work to mitigate that or intervene if it happens in our rec department. The Vermont Principals' Association adopted a statement to read at the beginning of each sports event. It calls for officials to stop the game to meet with coaches and the site administrator to determine the course of action if there are incidents of harassment or hate speech.

Offie said he would like to find out what the sheriff's policy is on incidents like this. What is their response? Do they have a policy? Does the officer know what to do? Will the people who are doing this get arrested? Are there any negative repercussions? There has to be some punishment. He can check with the sheriff's department and see if they have a policy in Lamoille County. Jackie suggested maybe we should just wait until Roger Marcoux comes to our meeting, which Jeff said would happen. Offie said he will call the sheriff tomorrow. Shayne said he thinks absent a crime being committed, there is not much LCSD can do. If the school asks them to escort someone off the premises they could help but he doesn't think they will have a policy on this type of situation because of how speech is protected. He thinks the Principals' Association statement is great. Jackie said the statement says what will happen if hate speech of this type is observed and/or reported. In Winooski people said it was reported but they didn't stop the game. She thinks acting on reports of hate speech is the real change with this statement.

Raven suggested we could ask to be put on the agenda at a Rec Committee meeting and talk about what could be on paper as far as an action plan if something like this happened. Jackie said we don't have to create a document like the Principals' Association statement because it already exists, but we can ask how to support the Rec Committee. She is sure they know about this statement and will take their cue from it. Shayne said it might be worth having them adopt it as their policy.

Jasmine said she wonders if the name of this committee should be changed to Racial and Social Justice Committee.

11. Other Business

Sophia said she can take on the job of reporting to the selectboard. Someone doesn't necessarily have to be at their meetings in person every time. They are okay with written updates.

Raven said as seasons are changing and things are getting darker and colder a lot of people's mental health goes downhill. People are fragile right now. She wanted to put that on everyone's radar. BIPOC people have unique circumstances around mental health.

Sophia said Mindy Blank presented information at the meeting at The Alchemist about a group called Every Town in Vermont that is trying to secure land in every town in Vermont to be used by the BIPOC community. She asked Mindy to come to the next RJC meeting to share the group's mission.

Shayne said at the last couple of meetings we have had great conversations about housing. Jeff mentioned he was thinking about putting together a resolution to take to the selectboard about housing. Shayne put one together that he can send out. He will discuss it at the next Planning Commission meeting and he would appreciate anyone with input showing up. His resolution recommends that the Johnson selectboard use ARPA funds to establish a revolving loan fund to help with housing expenses, repairs, upgrades to bring buildings up to code, weatherization or purchase of new housing. If this is done at the local level we can make sure it is done with our values in mind.

Jackie asked, don't we have a revolving fund? Shayne said yes but no one uses it and it is only for businesses.

Offie asked, is the assumption that this is supposed to increase the minority population? Shayne said he thinks it would have that impact. It would benefit everyone. When we talk about the reasons we are not very diverse a lot of that has to do with housing and transportation. A lack of affordable housing is one thing that keeps people of all kinds from moving here, but people in affordable or subsidized housing are more likely to be people of color. He is not doing this just to benefit Black and brown people but it would have a disproportionate positive impact on them.

Offie asked, are you just trying to make things more comfortable here for poor minorities? Or are you trying to attract people to make it more diverse from all socioeconomic classes, not just the poor? Shayne said he tried to encompass all different types of housing. He wants it to be something that everyone understands they could benefit from.

Offie said his belief about why more people of color don't come to Vermont has to do with lifestyle. People move into areas with people who are more like them. If we want to attract middle and upper class people of color, they don't have anything to do with poor Black people. They socialize with people with similar education and socioeconomic level. If we make a pitch to people across the country that this is a compatible place because of the lifestyle, a lot of Black people would move here because of the lifestyle and the friendly, liberal people.

Shayne said he thinks all of that is true but someone who might want to move here for the lifestyle might still have a hard time finding a place to live in Johnson. Our rental vacancy rate is just 1.3%, the lowest rate for a county in the entire nation. Offie asked why there is low rental availability here. Shayne said we are not building a lot of new houses and the

number of people is increasing. From 2010 to 2017 no building permits were issued in the Town of Johnson. Some others pointed out that building permits are not required in Johnson.

Shayne said he is presenting this resolution to the Planning Commission on Wednesday and anyone who wants to speak to it can come to the meeting.

12. Adjourn

Jeff moved to adjourn at 8:18 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

UNAPPROVED