

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL EQUITY COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES  
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING  
THURSDAY, JULY 7, 2022

**Present:**

Committee Members: Jeff Bickford, Offie Wortham, Shayne Spence, Raven Pfaff

Others: Jackie Stanton, Diane Lehouiller, Steve Hatfield, Margo Warden

**Absent:** Sophia Berard, Adelle MacDowell

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

**1. Call to Order**

Jeff called the meeting to order at 6:40.

**2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions**

No changes to the agenda were needed.

**3. Approve Meeting Minutes from 6/922**

**Offie moved to approve the minutes of June 9, 2022 and the motion was passed.**

Jackie said she had a question about something she read in the minutes. Shayne had some hesitation about paying LN Bethea. He talked about how people's previous political statements or actions can be a distraction and how there could be controversy about paying her. She asked to hear more about his thinking. Shayne said he has met LN since, but at the time he did not know her and he was hesitant to give her town money without knowing her positions or if there were any statements she may have made that could reflect poorly on the committee. It could come out that a person we paid had made statements that encouraged violence or were anti-government. Whether we agree or disagree with things people have said, they can distract from what we are trying to do. He thinks he made it clear that in the future he would like us to talk to people we are going to pay for anything. But he voted in favor of paying her because he believed it was worth compensating her for the work we were trying to do. Jackie said we paid Jae Basiliere without asking about those kinds of things. Shayne said some things have happened in between the time when we agreed to pay Jae and this coming up that made him reconsider whether we should have conversations with people, check their social media, etc. before paying them with town taxpayer dollars.

**4. Frederick Douglass Reading – Reports and Needs**

Jeff said the Frederick Douglass reading is scheduled for July 9 but there may be a conflict. Shayne said Jackie had mentioned previously that the reading is the same day as Carl Powden's memorial but he doesn't think we knew the time of the memorial at that point. It turns out that both the memorial and the reading are scheduled for 3:00 pm. He knows there are people going to the memorial that would otherwise come to our event. We have only received 2 responses on the Google form from people who want to attend but Shayne has had informal conversations with a number of people who are interested. He personally thinks moving the day would be best. Raven asked if we could change the time to 1:00. Offie said he would suggest that. Margo said people may not want their whole Saturday to be taken up by attending both events.

Raven asked if there is a use permit for the reading. Jeff said he sent in a permit request but has not gotten anything back.

Diane asked how the committee would notify people of a change in the time or day. Shayne said we can post on Front Porch Forum but a notice was also in the News & Citizen and he asked for it to be on WLVB. He doesn't know if we have time to get an updated announcement in the News & Citizen. Steve said it would be better to change to a later time than an earlier time. Then if someone showed up at the original time there could be a sign with the new time.

Jeff said he feels the best options are to keep it at the original time, knowing it may end up being a small event, or to move it to the following Saturday. Shayne said if we want it to be as well attended as possible it makes sense to move it to the next Saturday. Offie said that is even further away from the 4<sup>th</sup>. Diane asked if the committee is planning on doing this every year. Shayne and Offie said that would be the hope. Jackie said she thinks it should either be held as planned or cancelled. She thinks July 16 is getting a little too far from July 4. Margo asked about having it on Tuesday before Tuesday Night Live – on the village green, not at Legion Field. Jeff said he doesn't think we can get permits lined up that fast.

The committee agreed to keep the event at the same day and time as originally scheduled.

5. ***Revisit Progress Pride Flag, Municipal Building***

Jeff said he wanted to give the committee an opportunity to discuss this and think ahead to next June. Jackie asked how the warnings got forwarded to the trustee board. Diane said the minutes just say "Flying the Progress Pride Flag for the Month of June." She thinks that is what the agenda said. Jackie asked who gave the agenda item to the trustee board. Jeff said he believes it was Sophia. Shayne said his recollection was that we intended for there to be two separate requests – one for the village green and one for the municipal building. It appears that they were meshed together in the agenda, which may have had something to do with how the conversation went. Jackie said agenda requests need to have exact wording for each item and these didn't.

Diane said she was thinking the whole time that the agenda item was just to fly the flag on the village green. Nothing was said about the flagpoles at the municipal building. Ken Tourangeau said flying the flag at the municipal building wasn't on the agenda and she agreed with him because she was just assuming the request was for the village green. Steve said he expected at least one person would come to the meeting to speak in favor of it but nobody came. Jackie said two people came. Shayne was there and then Sophia came. It was not properly warned, which was our fault. But Shayne also presented the request incorrectly by saying it was to fly the flag on the municipal flagpoles. Shayne asked, was that not our proposal? Jackie said no. The exact wording of our motions should have been sent to the trustees. We didn't say anything about flagpoles. Jeff asked where on the building the flag would fly. Jackie said it could go on the side of the building or on a sandwich board outside. There are a lot of different possibilities. Jeff said he thought we were talking about the flagpoles. He was not at the village meeting but had he been, that would have been his understanding. Shayne said his understanding when he voted for the motion was that it was to fly the flag on the flagpoles.

Jackie said we can request this again and make sure we do it right for September, which is Vermont Pride Month. Jeff said we should have a motion tonight to request that we fly the Progress Pride flag for the month of September on or at the municipal building as well as on the flagpole at the green. Jackie said we need to ask the town as well about flying it at the municipal building.

Shayne said he remembers that at the trustee meeting where we talked about this, one trustee brought up that there was a feeling that there needed to be a broader conversation about this. He expects some of the people who were agitated about the idea of the Black Lives Matter flag may be agitated again if something like this is brought up. What could that broader conversation look like and how can we make sure it happens?

Steve said he voted against the BLM flag even though he has one in his yard because he was afraid it might mean other groups that would have flags he would object to would have an excuse or an in to fly their flags. And that has come true according to a recent Supreme Court ruling. There was an article in Seven Days about a month ago about Randolph High School. A BLM flag there had generated a lot of good education and response and gotten a lot of students and a couple of teachers excited and then there was the Supreme Court ruling that stated that any other group would have the right to fly their flag so a Christian group applied to fly theirs. He would hope we wouldn't have someone wanting the Confederate flag, but you never know. According to the Supreme Court they might have the right to fly it. His inclination will be to vote against it again. He wants to support this committee and all the good things it does, like the implicit bias and bystander trainings, but to him this is a symbolic thing. There are people driving around in their pickups with big American flags who don't know anything about being a patriot. He thinks the same thing can happen with any symbol.

Offie said there was a Supreme Court case from about 30 years ago that said the Ku Klux Klan had the right to protest and demonstrate. That kind of precedent has been set. Shayne said in the case Steve mentioned there was a school that created policy under which people could fly the BLM flag but when a religious group tried to fly their flag they were blocked and they sued and won. It is not necessarily a one-to-one comparison. But he thinks Steve's concern is valid.

Jackie said a BLM flag has flown at NVU for 8 years and no one has sued them or asked to fly a KKK flag. She was dismayed by the Supreme Court opinion. Black Lives Matter is about a marginalized, oppressed minority. Christians are not a marginalized, oppressed minority. It would take a lot for someone to request flying a flag and be denied and then sue. They would have to pay a lawyer. In the last year alone, Republicans have put forward in excess of 300 anti-LGBT bills, 140 of them directed toward youth and children. This is an important time to step up. In our own community, in Morrisville, a trans person was murdered. It may be a hate crime; they are still trying to figure that out. A trans kid in St. Albans was raped because he was a trans boy. In the last 2 months a queer person told her they were walking down Main St. in Johnson and a carload of men called out, "F\*\*\* you,

f\*\*\*\*\*!” This is a racial justice and social equity committee. She asks the committee to be in this moment and do the right thing. She asks Steve to vote yes in spite of his concerns.

Diane said she thinks it may be possible for us to be specific in our policy that any flag we fly has to align with our inclusivity statement. Jeff said he thinks that is a great policy direction to explore.

**Raven moved to request permission from the village trustees to fly the Progress Pride flag on the village green flagpole for the month of September for Vermont Pride Month. Offie seconded and the motion was passed.**

Shayne said he still believes we have to have a broader conversation about the concerns we heard in 2020 regarding the BLM flag. There are people who were very vehemently opposed to it. Jackie said they can come to the public meeting and talk about it. We shouldn't avoid flying the flag because people might disagree. Shayne said he is not saying we should not do it for fear of them. But he would like to hear more about why they are opposed to it. Jackie said this is a different flag.

**Jeff moved to ask the village trustees and the selectboard for permission to display the Progress Pride flag for the month of September for Vermont Pride Month on or adjacent to the municipal building in a manner to be determined by the boards and the motion was passed with Shayne opposed.**

Jeff said he agrees there is going to be a greater discussion and he thinks the committee will have a role in helping to form it but he thinks the larger discussion will happen around the vote on the committee's request. Steve said it is easy to say that people can come to the meeting to give their opinions, but someone will have to run that meeting and right now that is him. He is chair of the village trustees. It is really stressful to have a lot of angry people at a meeting. The trustees are very stressed now because of multiple issues, including not having a village manager. He just wants to make the committee aware of that.

Jeff said no one's intent is to make life more difficult for the selectboard or the trustees. But he thinks public input around a motion is where the conversation is supposed to happen. If people were here, they would be welcome to have input on any motions voted on here. .

Steve said he knows some good things have happened in this country because people have been forced, like the civil rights movement. But he is not sure how much good something like a flag will do. Jackie said she can tell him what good a flag will do. She has held a lot of pride flags on the street. She has had more than a few adults come up to her and say it means a lot to see people holding pride flags, that they felt alone growing up in Vermont and if they could have seen people holding pride flags and affirming who they were it would have made it easier.

Shayne said he has had several people bring up to him the same concerns we heard surrounding the BLM flag being flown – that it is inherently a political statement, that there are certain unsavory elements involved with the movement. The flagpoles were a very

specific source of contention. He thought a broader conversation could involve getting together with people who have concerns and asking if a flag on the municipal building is different in their eyes than a flag on the flagpole. Is there room for us to have something or is it just a no? If it is just a no, for whatever reason, he would be more comfortable saying we should do it because they will be opposed no matter what. But if we can lower the temperature a little, and listen to understand, he thinks we will all be better for it. He hopes whatever process the board goes through allows for people to speak.

Steve said when people start talking about terrorism and Black Lives Matter it is hard to separate local politics from national politics and it is difficult to talk about national politics now. It is not that productive. If there were specific instances of local people being discriminated against we could rally around that and he would support it. Jeff said Jackie listed a few specific examples. He would argue that by choosing not to request to fly the flag on the flagpole we are trying to lower the temperature. We would love to see the seat of government reflect support for the queer community. Margo agreed.

Jeff said he will submit the requests to the appropriate boards and try to be at the next trustee board meeting. He would be delighted to have lunch or coffee with anyone who wants to challenge why we want to fly these flags and listen to understand.

Shayne said he thinks the discussion would have a lower temperature if there were not an imminent decision at the end of the conversation. Diane asked how he would see a conversation happening. Shayne said he would love to see community conversations around this but he is not sure of the best way to get people to engage. Jackie said that is why we have a racial justice committee. Raven said she hasn't seen a great turnout from inviting people into this space but this is a safe space as long as we are listening to understand. Our job is not to make people think the way we do but to make a noticeable change for minorities. She thinks it is a common goal for everyone in the community to make everyone feel safe and accepted. If the conversation starts to spin at a trustee or selectboard meeting people can be invited to come to RJSE Committee meetings for more conversation.

Diane asked if that could that happen before the discussion at the trustee meeting. Could the next RJSE Committee meeting have discussion with the people Shayne is talking about before the flag request is discussed at the trustee meeting? Jackie said the next RJSE Committee meeting is August 4, but it has a packed agenda. Jeff agreed that the agenda will be packed. Raven said she thinks most people won't come unless they are motivated, which won't be until something comes up at a selectboard or trustee board meeting. Then if people have a problem we can say we have space to discuss it here.

Steve said one stressful thing is that the trustees always have a packed agenda. If the board could have a special meeting just to discuss the flag request and people knew the board was going to vote, then they would come to that meeting and it would take the pressure off if the board didn't have to cover other business. Margo said when people hear "special meeting" that starts elevating the issue. She thinks a special meeting would set everyone up for more contentious conversation. Jackie said maybe it will just be fine and there will be no big difficulty about the conversation. Let's just do it.

**6. Equitable and Inclusive Communities Grant Program – Begin Brainstorming**

Jeff said there is a statewide initiative to list towns that are doing racial justice and social equity work. The point person, Bob Harnish, reached out to Brian Story. He looked at our inclusivity statement and he asked about what we are doing for implementation. Jeff and Sophia have responded that they want to discuss it with the committee. But Bob Harnish decided on his own to list Johnson. His group has a toolkit around implementation – taking the values in our statements about inclusivity and working to implement them in town and village policies. Jackie said that is the charge of this committee.

Jeff said Jackie had previously suggested that we could make suggestions to the town about ways to use ARPA funds. There is also an Equitable and Inclusive Communities Grant Program from the Vermont Community Foundation that can give grants of up to \$10K. Applications are on a revolving basis. Grants are for things that build our capacity as an organization. They could be used for things like stipends for minorities to participate in our work. He and Sophia are thinking of having the August meeting focused on thinking about ideas for possible uses of funding. Maybe we can think about moving values into practices – making sure we recruit for open positions in areas where minorities will see the postings, having inclusive hiring and interviewing processes and employment policies, etc.

Shayne said one idea could be hiring an outside entity to help us look at municipal policies and practices and identify what we could do better. It could also include organizations we help support like the sheriff's department. Margo said the Lamoille Restorative Center just finished their equity review. They had someone come in from outside. Jackie said maybe they can recommend someone to us.

Jackie asked if the selectboard has a timeline for getting input on ARPA fund uses. Margo said at the ARPA meeting the idea of sending out a townwide survey was mentioned. It might include a list of possible items to use the funds on. Jackie said she wonders if we want to get on that survey. Steve said the trustees haven't gotten around to putting ARPA spending on their agenda yet.

**7. Prop 5 Position Statement**

Jackie said we talked about this in May. Prop 5 is a change in the Vermont Constitution to guarantee reproductive rights. Since we first talked about it, Roe v. Wade has been overturned so it is even more necessary. Jeff read from Proposition 5:

*This proposal would amend the Constitution of the State of Vermont to ensure that every Vermonter is afforded personal reproductive liberty. . . . This amendment is in keeping with the values espoused by the current Vermont Constitution. . . . The right to reproductive liberty is central to the exercise of personal autonomy and involves decisions people should be able to make free from compulsion of the State. Enshrining this right in the Constitution is critical to ensuring equal protection and treatment under the law and upholding the right of all people to health, dignity, independence, and freedom.*

Raven said Prop 5 would add this language to the Constitution:

*That an individual's right to personal reproductive autonomy is central to the liberty and dignity to determine one's own life course and shall not be denied or infringed unless justified by a compelling State interest achieved by the least restrictive means*

Shayne said some friends pointed out to him that this language does not prevent any regulation or enforcement. Pro-life groups are saying it would make it so there would be no regulation on abortion up to the day of birth but the language allows regulation. It just has to be justified.

Jackie said she proposes that this committee come out with a statement supporting Prop 5. Many politicians and organizations in our state have already made statements in support, including the ACLU, the largest hospital in the state (UVM) and the largest health insurance company (Blue Cross Blue Shield).

**Raven moved to write a position statement supporting Prop 5 and the motion was passed.**

Shayne volunteered to draft a statement. Jackie said several people can take a stab at it. Jeff said anyone is welcome to bring a draft to the next meeting but Shayne is specifically assigned to write one. Offie volunteered to help Shayne with proofing and editing.

**8. Other Business**

Committee members confirmed that the meeting date of August 4 at 6:30 works for them.

Raven said she is resigning from the RJSE Committee because she is moving to Albany, Vermont. It has been awesome being on this committee. She has learned a lot about the community.

Jeff thanked Raven for all she has done and asked her to send a resignation email to Brian Story. He said he and Sophia will lobby hard for the committee to be able to interview candidates and make recommendations to the selectboard.

Margo Warden said writer Emily Bernard will be doing a reading at the Studio Center on August 22. It is free and open to the public but there is limited seating.

**9. Adjourn**

**Shayne moved to adjourn at 8:11 and the motion was passed.**

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*