

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL EQUITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
TUESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2022

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Shayne Spence, Jackie Stanton, Offie Wortham
Others: Johna Keefe, Athena Parke, Mark Woodward, Brian Vandorn

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:34.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

Jackie asked to add updates on IDEAL Vermont and the budget request. Sophia said those could be first on the agenda. Jackie also asked to add discussion of the committee report for town meeting. Sophia said that could be added in place of agenda item # 3 (Local Resources), which was on the agenda by mistake.

3. Approve Meeting Minutes from 12/1/22

It was noted that the name “Jade” should be replaced with the correct name and that “Shayne said he looked into the IDEAL state initiative” should be changed to “Jackie said she looked into the IDEAL state initiative.” **Jackie moved to approve the minutes of December 1, 2022 with the suggested corrections and the motion was passed.**

4. Budget Request Update

Jeff said he got a report from Rosemary a couple of days ago about what we have spent this fiscal year. All we have spent so far this year was the cost for the minute taker. A lot of what we did last year after town meeting was in the prior fiscal year.

Jackie said we had discussed requesting the same budget as last year. Have we done that? Jeff said the last time he was at a selectboard meeting when they were talking about the budget he said we anticipated having a flat budget.

5. IDEAL Vermont Update

At the previous meeting Shayne moved to request that the selectboard look into IDEAL. He asked if that was communicated to the selectboard. Jeff said no. We need to write something up and he has not been able to attend the last couple of selectboard meetings.

Jackie explained that IDEAL comes from Xusana Davis’s office. The program wants to work with people who have the power to put things into motion. It was our hope that a selectboard member and maybe a village trustee board member could get involved.

Mark Woodward asked what the committee needs the selectboard to do. Jackie said commit to being part of IDEAL. Shayne said a selectboard member would represent the community and bring back initiatives to the rest of the board. He thinks the idea is that whoever is involved would not be from a group like this committee that doesn't have teeth.

Jackie said we used to have a regular slot at selectboard meetings and no one seems to know how that got undone. Mark said it is easy to get a slot on the agenda. Committee members can

talk to Beth Foy when she is developing the agenda. Jackie said we used to have a standing slot, as requested by the selectboard. Sophia said it was at the second selectboard meeting every month. Jeff said he thinks more often than was ideal, committees were just rehashing what topics were discussed at their meetings and not bringing up anything the selectboard needed to act on. It was questionable whether it was of value to the board. Mark said even if the committee is not on the agenda, if a committee member shows up they should be able to be heard.

Sophia suggested that maybe when we make motions to recommend things to the selectboard we could decide at that time who will email Beth to get a spot on the selectboard agenda and go to the selectboard to present the recommendation. Shayne said he is fine with requesting a slot on the agenda when we need it rather than having a standing slot. Others agreed.

Athena pointed out that there is a spot in the IDEAL program for a town manager type person, so the committee should contact Brian Story as well.

Jackie read from an article about IDEAL:

Davis said the IDEAL program aims to prevent municipal leaders from “passing the buck” to partner organizations and informal committees and declining to take ownership of the work themselves.

“We’ve created this space that’s specifically for local leaders in town government because we need them to be able to do what they’re uniquely situated to do,” she said. “But we still need the input, the assistance and the guidance of those community organizations.”

Each community has a team of town representatives who are required to attend meetings, Davis said. Two introductory meetings have already taken place, she said.

“We’re looking for people who have the authority, or at least the influence, to be able to implement what they’re learning,” Davis said. “Otherwise, what we don’t want to happen is for it to just get buried with somebody who has no power to actually bring these issues to the forefront in the community.”

Sophia asked if anyone would like to volunteer to present the IDEAL initiative to the selectboard at the next meeting. Jeff said town meeting will be soon and historically the selectboard has been hesitant to take on new initiatives shortly before town meeting, so maybe April would be a better time to present this. Jackie asked what Mark thinks. Mark agreed that because an individual selectboard member will be needed to participate it might make more sense to wait until April when there is a new board.

6. Land and Labor Acknowledgement

Sophia said the Historical Society said they are okay with the land acknowledgment they have and they wish us luck with ours. They did not indicate that they needed to be involved in helping us develop one. We could have a subcommittee to work on it. For subcommittee members to be able to communicate outside of meetings there needs to be less than a quorum, so no more than three people. Jackie said people who are not voting members could also participate.

Jackie said land acknowledgments are becoming more popular. They are often used to start off a meeting or gathering, acknowledging that this is Abenaki land we are on. She learned that Peace and Justice does a land and labor acknowledgment, talking about the stolen labor of Black people in this country and acknowledging that as well. Sophia said the hope would be that the town would adopt the acknowledgment and it would go on the town website.

Johna, Jackie and Sophia agreed to work together on writing a land and labor acknowledgment.

7. Mission Statement

Jeff said the selectboard approved the proposed mission statement with the list of examples removed. They felt it was too prescriptive with that list. Sophia read the mission statement as approved by the selectboard:

The mission of the Johnson Racial Justice and Social Equity Committee is to encourage and support community diversity, and to disrupt and actively change the oppressive systems and policies that wrongly marginalize populations in our community.

We pledge to uphold our town and village's Inclusivity and Antiracism statements, and promote awareness.

Our work is to educate ourselves and others about the impacts of racial inequality, power, privilege, and oppression in our community to continually seek justice, with the goal of cultivating equitable change in Johnson for generations to come.

She said the next step is for someone to request that it be put on the committee's page on the town website. Jeff said he will make that request and also request that the list of our voting members be updated. So Sophia said it would be nice to have the community agreements on our web page too.

8. Grants

Shayne said he found a new grant opportunity coordinated by the Department of Health with a focus on social and racial equity. It is a placemaking grant with benefits to designated downtown communities. It can apply to a broad range of projects. Examples include recreational infrastructure, beautification, streetscapes, and community spaces. It is a 2 to 1 match. The local community crowdfunds 1/3 of the cost and the state covers the other 2/3. He thinks the grants are between \$5K and \$40K. The grant program is called Better Places. The Planning Commission was looking into it. There may be opportunities for multiple committees to work together on getting a grant. He will be going to some informational meetings about it in February.

Sophia said there is always the rolling Rapid Response grant.

Jackie said the Lamoille health equity collaborative grantees were recently announced and she wishes we had applied for one of the grants. She had assumed the impact really had to be about health but we could have gotten one. The Restorative Center got one for equity focused education for staff and volunteers. GMTCC got \$3,500 for professional development about the Abenaki Nation for staff. Aaron French from Copley Hospital is one of the people running this program and he says there are more grant opportunities.

Sophia said both those examples are similar to the equity assessment we have talked about doing. Shayne said the cost for an equity assessment was around \$50,000 for the school, but that took into account a variety of things such as hiring practices and admissions.

Offie asked who would do the equity assessment. Jackie said there is a wonderful organization called Creative Discourse.

Sophia asked if we can only have one grant for a project. Johna said no, we could have more than one grant.

Jackie said we made a formal request to the selectboard to use ARPA funds. Mark said he hopes in 2023 the selectboard spends a lot of time on ARPA. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something transformational. The selectboard has not really focused on where to spend the ARPA funds. There are board members who would like to spend money on the light industrial park. We have \$600,000.

Jackie asked what the deadline is to decide. Mark said he thinks the beginning of 2024, but the money doesn't necessarily have to be spent by then. He thinks there is a desire on the part of the selectboard to look at how the \$600,000 can be leveraged into even more money.

Mark said he thinks the RJSE committee would need to tell the selectboard what an equity assessment would do for the town. Shayne said we don't know that the \$50K figure would be the cost for us. And we don't know what other groups may exist that could do an equity assessment. There are other resources we can look into. He thinks there is a case to be made for an equity assessment. When we are looking at transformative work he thinks we should all be looking at how to create a more equitable Johnson going forward. Without information on where we are falling short, how do we make changes? He doesn't think the selectboard would necessarily have to allocate enough ARPA funds to cover the entire cost. They could allocate some and we could look for other funding sources as well.

Sophia said it seems like an equity assessment is high on the list of things we want to see for Johnson. Are there other things that we want to talk about getting grant money for, or do we want to focus on that? Shayne said he feels like that is a big goal but it would also be great to get grant funding for events like Juneteenth.

Offie said he would like to work with anyone who wants to do grant writing for the committee because he used to be a grant writer. Johna said she would like to do grant writing. She does not have experience writing grants but she is good at writing.

9. Juneteenth

Shayne shared prices he got for some different types of food Harmony's Kitchen can provide. He estimated how much food we might want and got a quote of \$2000. A \$536 deposit would be due a month before the event. We would need to pick up the food rather than having her deliver it. Sophia said My Favorite Things is a black-owned business with an amazing chef. She can reach out to her and see if she would be interested in catering for the event. Committee members estimated that 50 to 75 people might attend the event. Sophia said she can see if the bread oven committee is interested in participating as well.

Jeff suggested applying for a Rapid Response Grant to help cover the cost of the food. Johna said she could look into that. Jeff said she should run any grant application by this committee. The committee will also need to get permission from the town to apply for any grant.

There was agreement that it would be reasonable to spend \$2000 on food for the Juneteenth event and that the committee should apply for a \$1000 Rapid Response Grant to help cover the cost. Shayne said he thinks people would be willing to donate money when they come to the event. Sophia suggested we can sell T-shirts there. Jeff said Vermont Electric Coop has a community fund that might be a good funding source to help pay for food. Mark suggested applying to that fund for anything the committee might need money for. The maximum grant used to be \$750 and he thinks it has now gone up to \$1000. The committee agreed to apply to the Vermont Electric Coop Community Fund.

Jackie said she contacted the Jeh Kulu Dance and Drum Theater. They are willing to perform at the Juneteenth event. A 45-minute performance would cost \$1100. They also charge mileage so the total would be \$1268. Jeff had suggested to her that we might want to just contract for a 20-minute performance, which costs \$500. Jackie thinks that would be reasonable. The committee agreed that Jackie should contact them and ask if they can provide a 20-minute performance. The total cost with mileage would be \$668.

10. Screenings

Jackie said she has heard nothing back from the Who We Are project. The committee had been thinking a public screening of Who We Are could be a MLK Jr. Day event.

11. Public Displays

Jackie said our last request to the selectboard was about displaying a Progress Pride flag. They then began talking about a policy about public displays and that seemed to be leading towards a rule that there would be no public displays, and then it was all tabled.

Mark said a majority of board members were saying no to public displays on town property and then the question of the college came up. The village also took action on public displays. Jackie said the village made a new rule that prohibited public displays on village property except for the village green. The selectboard was talking about legalities and not wanting to get sued but there are ways around that. Mark said the way around that is to write a policy. Jackie said the college has displayed many flags for many years and they have never been sued. The argument about being sued seems weak to her.

Shayne said he thinks the issue is not so much the organizations raising the flags but the organizations the town says no to. That was what was behind the Boston case. He believes it was a Christian group that was not allowed to put a flag up and they sued because other groups had been allowed to raise flags.

Jackie said policies have been written in other places where the selectboard can decide what flags can be displayed. Mark said there are ways around what happened in Boston. You have to have a policy. The board could have a policy saying that we support flags of any groups that have been marginalized. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. Other towns have developed policies. This just needs to be brought back up.

The committee agreed to try to keep this going. Mark pointed out that if the village has said no to flags except on the village green the selectboard can't choose to display a flag on the municipal building. Jackie said there are other places, like Legion Field and Old Mill Park.

Jeff said he wonders if it would be strategic to wait until after there is a new board to bring this up again. Others agreed that would make sense.

12. Committee Report

Sophia and Jeff will be working on the committee report for the town report this week. We get one page in the town report. Jackie asked if they can circulate the draft to the rest of the committee for approval. Sophia agreed. She said she hopes they can get it done by Friday and then they will circulate it.

13. Other Business

Johna said she would like to be appointed to the open position on the committee. She has been on the Beautification Committee for 3 years. She serves as their secretary. She comes from a diverse background. She has lived in many cities and towns. She would like to share her background and knowledge. She previously sent a letter of interest. She is very committed to this town.

Sophia moved to recommend that the selectboard appoint Johna Keefe to the Racial Justice and Social Equity Committee, Shayne seconded and the motion was passed.

Shayne suggested talking about collaboration with the Beautification Committee and potentially some other committees to do some sort of land acknowledgment/beautification project. The Beautification Committee is very dedicated to incorporating racial and social equity. One idea he had is to do a beautification project near the rail trail where the land and labor acknowledgment would be incorporated into some type of gardening or other project, maybe at the intersection of the rail trail and Railroad Street. He has talked to Kyle Nuse and she is on board with this idea. He thinks the first step is reaching out to indigenous communities to see if there is any particular significance to this land that we might want to incorporate and also whether they might want any involvement.

Jackie asked if he was thinking of something like an artistic plaque. Shane said that is a possibility. He is thinking there could be a message spread across multiple signs, Burma Shave style. Or it could all be on one artistic plaque. He would want to work with the Beautification Committee. Johna said she will talk to the Beautification Committee about this at their next meeting.

Sophia said she thinks the next meeting might be too soon to have a draft land and labor acknowledgment ready, so the subcommittee will try to have it for the March meeting.

Mark said he remembers reading in a history of Johnson that there was an Abenaki encampment at the confluence of the Gihon and Lamoille Rivers.

Johna said the Beautification Committee has been thinking about asking for selectboard approval to make a patio in the area near the covered bridge where the house was torn down. Maybe a food cart could go there as well. She doesn't know if that would be a good place for a land and labor acknowledgment. Jackie said it could be incorporated in multiple places.

Jackie suggested reviewing the action steps identified for the different committee members. Hers are getting in touch with Jeh Kulu about contracting for a performance on Juneteenth and working with Sophia and Johna on the land and labor acknowledgment.

Offie and Johna said they will start looking into applying for grants.

Jeff said he will ask for the committee page on the town website to be updated with the mission statement, the current voting members and the community agreements and he will ask the selectboard to agenda action on the recommendation to appoint Johna.

Sophia said she will work on the committee report with Jeff and circulate it to the other committee members by Friday and she will work on the land and labor acknowledgment. She will reach out My Favorite Things about the possibility of catering for the Juneteenth event and she will talk to the oven committee about participating in that event.

Shayne said he will go to the meeting and present the idea about the collaboration project. In February there will be two different meetings about the grant opportunity he discussed. He will go to those and have information on them at the March meeting. He will wait to hear from Sophia about My Favorite Things before reaching out to Harmony's Kitchen

14. Adjourn

Shayne moved to adjourn at 7:37 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths