



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, July 2, 2019
Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT

Attendees: Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Elaine Daignault, Steve Daniels, Maggie Mudd, Judy Hamer, Zoe Tarrant, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Susan Ellis, Elaine Daignault, Catherine Lewis, and Althea Seaborn

Guests: James Marpe (First Selectman), Dr. David Abbey (Interim Superintendent, Westport Schools), Stafford W. Thomas (Principal, Staples High School), Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police), Lt. Matt Gouveia (Westport Police), Dereje Tarrant, Ted Gilman, Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Brett Aronow, Beth Huisling (Westport Playhouse), Jeff Wieser (Homes With Hope), Shanelle Henry (Greens Farms Academy), Carol Martin (Westport Housing Authority), Cody Daigle-Orians (Westport Library)

The meeting was called to order at 8:05AM.

Approval of Minutes: Catherine O. moved that the minutes from our May 7th and June 4th meetings be approved. Susan seconded the motion. The motion carried. The minutes will be posted accordingly.

Superintendent: Dr. David Abbey introduced our new Staples High School Principal, Stafford Thomas. This is his first day and, thus, his first official meeting in Westport. He is excited to be starting here and is looking forward to working proactively with everyone. The Search Committee was unanimous in endorsing him. We the community are here to help wherever we can.

Schools Strategic Planning / Staples / Board of Education:

1. We noted that the number of teachers in the system decreased at the end of the last school year as budgeted and some of these teachers who were cut were of color. Dr. Abbey discussed “last hired, first fired”. Anyone who is non-tenured has to be released before anyone who is tenured (4 years of service or more). With declining enrollment, cuts needed to be made. Factors such as certifications, experience, attributes, gender, and diversity are looked at, but non-tenured faculty are at risk. The process was followed properly and was concluded prior to his coming into the District. The Board of Education votes on all hiring cuts. New employees of color have been hired in other areas for the coming year so the overall number of people of color in the system will remain the same.

2. Dr. Abbey then discussed the District’s policies and practices with regard to recruitment. Nationally, the statistics are not good for minority teachers (only 2% are African American males). Overall, the percentage of males is at the lowest ever (25%) and this continues to decrease. Disproportionally, males of color are impacted. Recruitment is not easy, but we can do a better job. The district wants to continue to work on our practice. Some of it is training. When we get an opening, we automatically receive 100 applications. You learn to look at things. People who are not of color don’t know the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or the Black Greek organizations (sororities and fraternities), so aren’t trained to look for certain factors. We cannot afford to miss talent.

We also have issues with retention. If a person is cut and rehired, they are vulnerable again because in a downturn they are cut again. There are currently 34 teachers of color and 1 administrator. Many of them are tenured. The goal, obviously, is to get more tenured teachers.

Holly Sulzycki is the new English Curriculum Coordinator for the Westport Schools replacing Julie Heller. Dr. Buono is evaluating training on racism for the staff and teachers, but at this point it does not look like this will occur in August as hoped.



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TEAM Westport Book Club / PTA Microaggressions / PTA Parent Updates:

The goal of the parents' group hosted by Zoe and Catherine Lewis is to organize parents through the PTA in order to encourage conversations around inclusivity and diversity in the schools. Reports of microaggressions have been collected here in Westport which show that life in the school system for students of color is not so great. We would like to increase consciousness among white teachers and parents especially since our community apparently does not know how to talk about race.

TEAM Westport has a subcommittee focused on the school system. There are two main initiatives currently: 1) we hope to form committees to have parents communicate with each principal over the summer and 2) to have a TEAM Westport liaison to each PTA to hear what's being talked about in each school and to discuss.

Zoe and Catherine L. have been talking to the PTA Council, to the superintendent, and to some teachers and showing the video and presentation about what white kids see when they grow up in this bubble. Many believe that our community is "color blind" and that we should be. The reality is that we are not "color blind", that we see race and feel race, and more importantly that we do a tremendous disservice if we think we should be "color blind". The fact is that "color" matters and that we should acknowledge "color" instead of ignoring it.

Housing: Elaine introduced Carol Martin of the Westport Housing Authority. Our discussion about affordable housing was initially triggered by the ProPublica article in May about Westport – *Invisible Walls, Separated by Design: How some of America's Richest Towns Fight Affordable Housing*. In spirit, many in the community would agree that we need affordable housing, but how do we put that template together? For current affordable housing stock in town, we have 15 times the number of applications as we have units and we have 99% occupancy with an average annual turnover of 1.5-2%. Westport is primarily a single-family town with houses averaging \$1M. There is nothing in between affordable housing stock and single-family houses. Eighty percent (80%) of the people we house have incomes ranging from \$78K to homeless. We are also able to house some town employees – mainly some who cannot afford market rents.

The Westport Housing Authority is a body politic created by the Town in the 40's; however, the Housing Authority is separate from the town. It is funded by the state and not the town budget. There are 5 Commissioners appointed one each year by the First Selectman and they each serve 5-year terms. Over the last 10 years, they have managed \$49M in affordable housing.

How can we progress and, as a community, set a plan? We do see the need that was pointed out in the ProPublica article. We have plenty of intelligence, good will, and leadership in this town. We need to understand land use and regulations that have impacted housing choices in Westport and what impact they have.

Hales Court is permanent supportive housing. Fourteen acres of land was sold (for \$1) to the Town to form Hales Court – 40 Cape Cod-style homes at the time. Recently \$25M was invested and there are now 78 Cape Cods housing families. Because of careful money management at all of the managed properties including Casco Creek, Hidden Brook, and a refinancing at Canal Park now, the Housing Authority has money. However, there is a shortage of land. Most of the land in town is privately owned and difficult to get reasonably. We need more rental housing as well. Residents are leaving the state since the availability of affordable housing is not getting better and we are in a housing crisis.



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Jim Marpe emphasized that the public, in general, has little understanding of how the Housing Authority works. It is really a funding process and money has thus far been fairly successfully raised in the private sector by floating bonds. However, we may not be able to get to the 10% affordable housing goal established by the state because we have not worked out how to get the land. Barons South ran into problems. There is no public land available. With everything said, though, we have to be aware that affordable does not equal diverse housing. Our elected officials have to take up the issue and everyone needs to support the effort to achieve an affordable housing goal.

Action: First Selectman is hosting a meeting which will include selected representation from TEAM Westport, Human Services, Westport Housing and P&Z to discuss options for moving forward.

Policing: Chief Koskinas and Deputy Chief Arciola are working on recruitment and retention within the force and are in the process of hiring.

Westport did well in racial car stops. We are not the highest. We stopped 8000 cars in a year. Our population is 27,000. We were single digit in minority stops. Fairfield and Norwalk were higher. People are not getting pulled over because of race. The community wants more enforcement of traffic laws, so this means stopping more cars. Why are people stopped? Statistics show there are 80% fewer accidents if speed limits are enforced, if cell phone use is deterred – along with other forms of distracted driving. Seeing cars pulled over deters crime. Chief Koskinas will offer TEAM Westport as a resource to new officers. Officer training has been consistent over Lt. Matt Gouveia's tenure. It has been accepted by the force and changes are evident.

Westport Historical Society: On Sunday, June 30th, to close out the *Remembered: The History of African Americans in Westport* exhibit, the brick walk honoring early enslaved African American residents of Westport was dedicated in an extremely moving ceremony. The family of two of the people whose names appear on the bricks was present to make it a more touching day. Kimberly Wilson of Westport sang powerfully.

Dr. Abbey and our new Staples principal, Stafford Thomas, had a private tour on last Friday. All of the 8th grade students attended during the exhibit run as well as some sophomores. Lauren Francese, in her role as Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, is revising the Social Studies curriculum and the exhibit can be a model for history units across the state as well as here in Westport. The exhibit has been digitized and will appear online.

Library Partnership / Coming Events: The Library reopened on June 23rd and is fully functioning!

- We shall be setting up a special book section at the Library for TEAM Westport recommended titles. Kathleen Molloy should be contacted to organize that area. We are compiling a list of recommended books to appear on those shelves, so if you have any suggestions, please let us know.
- On Thursday, July 18th at 7, a documentary about voting rights, *Let the People Decide*, will be shown at the Library.
- Dr. Ibram X. Kendi has invited Dr. James Forman, Jr. to join him when he speaks about his new book How to Be An Anti-Racist on August 27th at 7 at the Library. This, however, is the same night as the Levitt Pavilion's Gala and parking will be quite difficult. We may have to reschedule Dr. Kendi's appearance. The book should be available after August 15th. It is a memoir and contains material from Dr. Kendi's training sessions, as well.
- The Saugatuck Story Fest will be held on September 26, 27, and 28th. Rebecca is partnering on behalf of the Westport schools and will have students involved in planning and volunteering during the actual event. Featured authors include: Nic Stone, Tiffany Jackson, Jerry Kraft, and Ibi Zoboi. The list should be completed by the middle of July.



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- Preeti Davidson, on the Library staff, is working with Cody on funding for the Equity Lab author talks, community table, and community talks.
- This is the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage (19th Amendment) so we are trying to coordinate a community celebration. This is an ongoing process. We are trying to get Professor Carol Anderson of Emory University (author of White Rage and recently One Person, No Vote) for both our Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration in January and for the 19th Amendment observance. We are involving other community partners such as the League of Women Voters.

Other events during the 19th Amendment celebration include:

- Journalist Elaine Weiss (author of The Women's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote highlighting Tennessee's role in the passage of the amendment).
- Lockwood-Mathews Mansion exhibit – Norwalk had a lot of women suffragists.
- Black women and suffragism will be addressed.
- Pulitzer prize winner David Blight will be here on December 5th, author of Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom.

Playhouse:

- The Playhouse just closed a wonderful production, *Skeleton Crew* by Dominique Morisseau, with an African American cast.
- The Theatre for Social Justice meeting is coming up.
- The overall strategic plan for the Playhouse is to attract a more diverse staff. Everyone has bought into the strategy.
- Two-time Pulitzer prize winner Lynn Nottage has committed that she will come to speak during the run of her work, *Mlima's Tale*.

Next Meeting:

We normally do not meet in August. Judy moved that we cancel the scheduled August 6th meeting and that we resume our meetings in September. Catherine O. seconded the motion. The motion carried. The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, September 10th, 2019, at 8AM in Room 201, Westport Town Hall.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:26AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary