



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, October 1, 2019 Westport Town Hall, Room 201, Westport, CT

Attendees: Ramin Ganeshram, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Steve Daniels, Jim Marpe, Rev. Alison Patton, Catherine Lewis, Judy Hamer, Maggie Mudd, Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Dolores Paoli, Susan Ellis, Althea Seaborn, Zoe Tarrant, and Candace Banks

Guests: Stafford Thomas (Principal, Staples High School), Jacob Santos (Westport Country Playhouse), Carol Martin (Westport Housing Authority), Foti Koskinas (Chief, Westport Police), Lauren Francese (Westport Schools), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Lt. Matt Gouveia (Westport Police), Danielle Teplica, Keri Jockers (Bedford Middle School, Literacy Coach), and Tom Foran

The meeting was called to order at 8:04AM.

Approval of Minutes: Susan moved that the minutes from our September 10th meeting be approved. Maggie seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous. The minutes will be posted accordingly.

What's Up?

Catherine Onyemelukwe announced that today is Nigerian Independence Day.

Schools/ Strategic Planning / Staples / Board of Ed

There has been a lot of discussion recently about training at the schools. The ADL has conducted some sessions with teachers.

- Principal Thomas talked about the September incident where swastikas were found and reported at Staples. Some were new and some had been there a while. He received emails from students and parents. Custodians have cleaned all the spots. It was expensive, but it needed to be done since the stalls where most of them were found were not part of the renovation in 2000. It was disappointing that they were allowed to stay up, but we are not sure if and/or to whom they were ever reported.
- Because of the newly instituted "Connections" advisory groups at Staples (10 students each) that meet twice a week, concerns were addressed quickly with an emphasis on how hate can impact people. Lauren came up with Social Studies lessons and is coming up with scripts so teachers can talk about the concepts of "acceptance versus tolerance". Students are members of the subcommittee to present additional topics to be discussed as a school and to ensure that the scripts being used by teachers are understandable at the different grade levels. The takeaway is that Connections provides an opportunity to talk and to have brave conversations and was helpful in addressing this situation.
- Principal Thomas has also been working with the school community to have students pick up the trash they've been leaving behind themselves in the cafeteria. Harold asked if this was going on elsewhere as well. The response was that this is also the case at Bedford. If you ask students to throw the trash away, they do. Care about the environment includes care about our school environment.
- Judy asked: how will you know success and how to build upon it; in particular, how do you address microaggressions? Susan said that there are good climate surveys for the high school. The response: it is important to assess the environment to identify areas of improvement and to build resources to address them. We are looking at them. We do have existing student climate data which informed the need for Connections. From 2015, recommendations surfaced that we needed to build a community. It's not easy. However, what impacts students is important.
- Challenges with respect to the swastikas that can most likely apply to other microaggressions:
 - Everyone in the community should be troubled by the swastika incident, but we are not sure that we had the opportunity to make that clear.
 - With social media, one can easily choose to ignore and click on something else; so, if you don't think it offends you, you can move on.



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- There may be ignorance around what the symbols mean and why it is offensive. [The Social Studies classes talked about what they are and why they are offensive. Kids created a counteracting symbol. Non-Social Studies teachers were helped as well.]
- Some parents do not want their children exposed to anything negative.
- Rebecca said that: some students say the discussions don't get deep enough. Others say that they are numb to seeing it. Still others say that the swastikas are in stalls, so 'who would see it'?
- We have the opportunity and the need to have many conversations.

TW Book Club / PTA Micro-Aggressions / PTA Parent Updates: Catherine Lewis and Zoe – Our next meeting with parents to discuss making the schools more diverse is scheduled for Tuesday, October 15th. However, this is the same night as the visit by former UN Ambassador Andrew Young, so we may have to reschedule. Five meetings have been held to-date. We are working toward having a TEAM Westport/PTA Committee to help organize events and conversations re: diversity and microaggressions. The PTA ideally would identify a rep in each of the 7 schools as a point person to serve on that committee. Microaggressions are happening on all school levels all the time including at the elementary schools. People don't know where to go when there are problems, so this would be a step. Zoe and Catherine will be presenting at the PTA Council Meeting on November 6th.

Policing:

- Chief Koskinas stated that Principal Thomas, Dr. Abbey, and Mr. Marpe were immediately responsive when the call came in from a parent through the ADL about the swastikas. The head custodian at Staples was upset that the swastikas were there and that they had not been addressed previously.
- The police have dealt with several incidents recently where someone of color is defined as being "suspicious". The public gets the message if you "see something, say something", so they call the police. Officers must determine if it's a real threat or rather someone that is in the community for legitimate reasons (normally the case) such as an Uber driver or visitor. The officers are trained to act sensitively in situations when they are called and if they do not, they are given additional de-escalation training. Incidents can involve other organizations such as the ACLU and the NAACP if they are called in to investigate. There is more room for improvement.
- Question from Catherine Lewis: Do you have to have to respond? Reply: Yes. Every call must be investigated. However, residents of the Town need to be aware of their potential implicit bias when calling.
- Chief Koskinas is keeping an eye on any potential negative comments from residents in the Town and addressing them promptly.
- Dolores asked about what to do when we see questionable incidents. She stated that she passed women with hijabs who had been stopped. Response: We can email Chief Koskinas to see why they were stopped.
- 40-50 cars a day are stopped. Ken Barone, who keeps statistics on police stops in CT, MA, and RI came down to visit the department in a meeting set up by Althea. He will be doing a case study on Westport per: Chief Koskinas' request. They usually don't focus on communities like Westport. Westport does not meet the threshold for concern re: the level of stops. Visitors in town (often passing through) are more likely to have equipment violations than residents.
- Alison commented on the challenge of responding to calls and she appreciates the complexity involved in responding. Are the calls triggered by bigotry or bias whether unconscious or conscious? The officers need to exhibit micro-kindness to combat microaggressions and get creative about finding proactive acknowledgment of perceived bias. Chief Koskinas mentioned that one of the gentlemen recently stopped is coming in to talk to the force about language and what makes a difference.
- Zoe asked what stops residents who call erroneously from calling again? Should they be offered anti-bias info? The chief would love to meet on this issue. Jim Marpe stated that follow-up with residents is unique and one-on-one per incident, so people will know the result of their call and have an opportunity to reflect.



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Affordable Housing:

- A member of the P&Z, Elaine, Jim, Harold, and Carol Martin met earlier to discuss affordable housing.
- Jim Marpe referred to a CT Mirror article on affordable housing in which Westport was not presented positively. In addition, an attorney from Shipman and Goodwin has accused the Town of engaging in racist practices by limiting the availability of affordable housing. This attorney wants to overturn the moratorium on affordable housing the State has allowed Westport. Subsequently, the Selectmen have written a letter to the Board of Education against having Shipman and Goodwin continue to represent the school system in legal matters. How do we counter this public statement that we are racist and are using the affordable housing moratorium to disguise our racism?
- Catherine Lewis: Taking a look at the systemic view would be most helpful. We need to address the policies and practices that reinforce racism and get away from whether individuals are racist or not. Are we planning to have policy training from Ibram Kendi's Anti-Racism Center, for example, to establish proactive anti-racist (versus "not racist") values in Westport overall and a plan detailing what we stand for and where we want to be?
- Harold suggested that TW make such a review in the short term and get back to Jim with recommendations.
- On November 7th, there will be a panel in partnership with the Fairfield Historical Society to present a historical perspective on housing. Elaine and the P&Z will be part of this.

There was a session at a Fairfield County's Community Foundation event last week.

- Ramin stated that nothing about TEAM Westport's history is mentioned in the article. We need to make it clear on our own webpage that the process is dynamic, that we know there are issues from the past, and what we are doing now with transparency to rectify the situation.
- Steve said that inherent racism is based upon what people think. The perception is that affordable housing will bring people here with whom no one wants to deal. That perception is racist and is not based on fact. For example, ABC was a problem since the perception existed that those students should not be here. The fact is that some of our public servants would be good candidates for affordable housing. We need to define affordable housing and sell what it brings to this town to get around the perception. Education is key.
- Jim Marpe: Thanks to this group. We'll do additional brainstorming and planning.

Essay Contest: Susan suggested an essay topic and asked for feedback. The Westport Women's Club is offering grants. Catherine Onyemelukwe will apply for funding for the essay contest.

Library: Story Fest in September was great. Two of the sessions were sponsored by TEAM Westport.

Westport Historical Society: WHS has been renamed – The Westport Museum for History and Culture.

Playhouse: Lynn Nottage was here on September 29th and was interviewed by Mark Lamos. It was a tremendous conversation with good turnout. Her play, *Mlima's Tale*, starts today in preview. The opening night is Saturday, October 5th. Jennifer Carroll can set up a TEAM Westport night if desired. Thursday, the 17th is Talk-Back night and is a potential time for TEAM Westport to attend.

Interfaith Clergy/Interfaith Council: Andrew Young is appearing on October 15th at 7:30PM at Temple Israel. The event is free with a private donation encouraged.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:52AM.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, November 5, 2019, at 8AM in Room 201 of Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine E. McLeod
Secretary