



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, July 7, 2020 at 8AM Via Zoom – Westport, CT

Attendees: Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Ramin Ganeshram (Westport Museum), Susan Ellis, Maggie Mudd, Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Catherine Lewis, Elaine D’Aignault (Westport Human Services), Rev. Alison Patton (Saugatuck Congregational Church), Althea Seaborn, Dolores Paoli, Lee Goldstein (Westport Board of Education), Zoe Tarrant, and Candace Banks

Guests: Danielle Teplica, Darcy Hicks, Elizabeth Falk, Sal Liccione (RTM Member), Cody Daigle-Orians (Westport Library), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police), Sam Arciola (Deputy Police Chief, Westport), Thomas Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Helen McAlinden (Homes with Hope), Tom Foran, Melissa Kane (Third Selectwoman), Candice Savin (Chair, Westport Board of Education), Cheryl Scott-Daniels, Danielle Dobin (Chair, Westport Planning and Zoning/Chair, Affordable Housing Subcommittee of P&Z), Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary School), Josiah Tarrant, Lauren Francese (Social Studies Coordinator K-12, Westport Schools), Jennifer Tooker (Second Selectwoman), Keri Jockers (Bedford Middle School), and 2 attendees by phone.

The meeting was called to order at 8:02 AM. Harold stated that the minutes for our June meeting are ready, but that they will be distributed later. They are voluminous since our June meeting covered April and May due to COVID-19.

During this time, all Town committees that are allowed to meet must meet virtually and because of regulations, the Town must host those online meetings. These regulations dictate when and how we can conduct a meeting.

Harold reviewed today’s agenda. He then commented that the discussion that is going on in the world now with respect to race is a statement of humanity. The color of a person’s skin has made a difference for 400 years; now that we are more aware of this difference, we need to be aggressive about how to proactively take a look at ourselves and to make progress toward equity. We need to examine not only ideas but our policies and practices, so we want to challenge every organization to take a look inside at itself to see what is driving inequity. To do that we need to look at all organizations through a different lens in order to affect change and move us toward equity → anti-racism.

First Selectman: Jim Marpe wants to talk actions and not just words. Jim announced three initiatives that speak action:

- 1) historic plaques are being replaced at Town Hall and newly mounted on Main Street in addition to a Black Lives Matter statement at Town Hall;
- 2) a Police Review Panel (Civilian Review Board – CRB) has been announced consisting of Jen Tooker (Second Selectwoman), Melissa Kane (Third Selectwoman), and Harold Bailey;
- 3) affordable housing is being actively sought after to ensure that Westport is welcoming to all families.

Discussion on Initiative 1 – Historic Plaques:

- Ramin added that the historic plaques will present history in an appropriate manner for the time being, but they will represent our history on into the future.
- Sal indicated that any funding that is needed should be made available and that we should have support from the RTM.
- Darcy commented that the symbolism of these actions is very important. As someone who grew up here, Westport has come a long way and she is excited. She’d like to have the Town consider other actions such as hanging a Black Lives Matter (BLM) flag at Town Hall to make more of an announcement to our kids who are frankly traumatized by what they see on their phones.



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Action: Darcy and Jim are meeting later this week.

- Harold stated that BLM makes a statement about community and humanity. We should come up with some ways of expression that will work for the Town. Jim says that he does see the need for symbolism but knows that actions speak louder than words, so he is proposing actions.

Policing (Initiative 2):

Addressing policing has been front and center especially in light of current events. How we go about policing while addressing equity and equality has been a part of police training here in Westport. However, can we do more? Can we do it better? The CRB (the two Selectwomen and Harold) will have two primary goals: 1) to help in recruitment, to ensure that we are doing everything we can to retain recruits, and to expand that thinking to all of our recruitment and retention efforts especially with respect to public safety; 2) to be a transparent vehicle for anyone (resident and non-resident) who perceives themselves as not having received fair treatment in other than the judicial process. Chief Koskinas has been discussing the need for this panel for a while. Now is the right time to implement it so that our policies align with our real goals.

Chief Koskinas:

- The CRB was not forced on the police department by the Town. Over the past 4 years, the department has done a lot to meet or exceed the demands now being outlined in the “#8Can’tWait” movement calling for police department reform across the country. What the department has accomplished is posted on their website. The police department wants to show the public what they are doing. If there are FOIA complaints against any officer, the department looks ultimately at the policy in effect – not at the individual officer. One main important objective in this climate is the morale of members of the force. The department looks forward to working with the CRB.
- The department now has two interns who are reviewing everything that’s happening and will produce a report that will help the department to see themselves from another level.
- Chief Koskinas participated in a 2.5-hour Town Hall meeting along with the Norwalk NAACP. (Please note: this chapter of the NAACP also covers Westport.)
- The Chief was interviewed by the Connecticut Post with respect to the rally organized by Staples students.
- The Chief has reached out through the Unitarian Church to try to contact local BLM representatives in order to have discussions and conversations, but he has had difficulty. However, BLM is a people’s movement versus being a structured organization like the NAACP, so it will be difficult to locate anyone. It would be healthy to have members of the force talk to someone, though, with the objective to understand what the movement is, why it exists, and to break through the myths that are surfacing.

Action: Harold will work with Chief Koskinas on this.

- The department has challenges recruiting and retaining officers of color. There are women on the force, but no women of color.

Discussion on Initiative 2 – re: Policing:

- Faith stated that there is no BLM chapter in Fairfield County. The purpose of BLM is not at all about killing police; it is about equal justice.

Faith asked about training. Chief Koskinas gave an example of someone who was asked to come into the department to talk to the officers to let them know how he felt during his encounter with



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officers. The point is that communication should lead to understanding. The force is now interacting with Althea on training. The Chief constantly emphasizes de-escalation training at all opportunities – to be adhered to during car stops, for example. “Use words, not hands or tools.” Because of the RTM, they have the funding to do the training that is required and that does have a significant impact. They are thankful.

- Alison asked about the calls to the police department from residents who see a “black man on their street and the police need to respond”. Is there any training as to how to vet those calls and not respond? Chief Koskinas stated that particularly during the summer months any black man seen on residential streets causes phone calls to come in. Dispatchers investigate before they send a car out. If someone is going door-to-door, it is not necessarily suspicious. Pre-COVID, door-to-door magazine sales were conducted frequently and thus were the reason “black men were being seen on the streets”.

Affordable Housing (Initiative 3):

Affordable housing includes workforce housing. The question is how, we as a community, can get people in without trying to meet an artificial goal pertaining to one-bedroom and studio apartments. We want families. For example, we have a number of town and school employees who live in Westport, but not nearly the right number. Danielle Dobin and Helen McAlinden were on this Zoom.

Faith asked whether the Town will offer housing for teachers of color?

Danielle Dobin:

- It is wonderful that more residents are attending the Affordable Housing Subcommittee meetings. In general, people are connecting the dots to housing discrimination and desegregation. More people are listening versus becoming defensive which is helping. Even Staples alumni are speaking out to their parents and our community.
- There are two P&Z sponsored initiatives with respect to Affordable Housing: 1) eliminate the multi-family cap that now caps the number of affordable units; 2) allow more accessory dwelling units (ADUs) which translates to having a larger footprint than 300 sq. ft. and the ability to have more than 2 plumbing fixtures. These changes will make more units available to family members; but they can also be rented to teachers, for example.
- Also, the P&Z has approached the State to obtain land owned by the Department of Transportation so that a new affordable community for families can be developed in Town.
- Workarounds that can also be used involve looking at Town-owned properties like LongShore and creating a private foundation to raise money to provide housing grants. As we look at moving the housing caps, we know of private workforce housing projects that may come forward.

Discussion:

Helen McAlinden is excited about the conversations going on. Although she is new to Homes with Hope, she has worked in affordable housing for a while. She has been talking with Carol Martin and with Danielle and hopes to be a big support.

Melissa: The concerns expressed about ADUs have to do with density. Density is a dog whistle, so we need to change the language we use when we talk about zoning. Westport has a certain look. It is about scale, so P&Z has to have a conversation about scale versus density.



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Schools/Strategic Planning/Staples/Board of Ed: Tom Scarice:

This call is helpful as a new resident of Westport. Tom was unaware of all the housing issues and had only heard of housing being provided to some teachers in the private school arena. This goes beyond the purview of the Westport Board of Education.

The Board of Education met last night and is now considering the transition entry plan. Addressing systemic racism is definitely a goal. Overall, we need a seamless plan put together in combination with the ADL and other groups to flush out clarity. Clarity is power. We need to be clear on what we are trying to accomplish – not a year from now, but this summer. Initiatives were underway before he came. It's a larger issue than just the high school; so, there's lots of work to be done and he welcomes it, but we need support and help. He thinks there are lots of people who want to help. All in all, the schools need to do what they do best – instruction. Otherwise, we won't do as well. This goal, though, does rise to the top and we just want to be clear up front as to what we want to accomplish.

Harold emphasized that TEAM Westport has collaborated with key administrators. A lot of that work was pulled together in the base-line presentation given to TEAM Westport's Parent Group last week.

Action: Mr. Scarice will review the presentation and later have a conversation with Harold.

Lauren's world for the past few months has consisted of school reopening and working on recommendations from the Teaching and Learning Committee.

- There are 138 members on the Teaching and Learning team. The Subworkgroup on Equity and Access has been working on reopening as well as on larger system pieces. Lauren recommends that this group stay together and serve as a starting point for working on a future plan for equity and access. It's a really busy time, but really exciting.
- On the Social Studies front, the Area Studies curriculum is being redeveloped to be of global scope and to have more diversity. A lot of the work started this summer. A course on Black, Asian, Latin-x studies has been mandated by the State to be made available in the curriculum.
- Social Studies is working as a team with Rebecca and collaborating resources to talk about issues. The English Department has embraced Young Adult texts and has started a Book group on Wednesday nights. Rebecca recommends the book Cultivating Genius where a literacy coach presents how to work with our classroom teachers and schools to open a broader lens in literature.

Faith stated that we want to be able to support Mr. Scarice in the process of hiring an Equity and Inclusion Director (will Westport consider that in the near future?). [Catherine L: This is TEAM's recommendation too.] South Windsor is an example where this has taken place. Tom would like to have this discussion as a part of our system's instructional vision along with having some knowledge of Westport and then come to the community and the public with a framework.

Lee said, "Let's work together. Welcome, Tom."

PTA Parent Updates/Book Clubs/Film/Other: Catherine and Zoe:

- The TEAM Westport Book Club will be discussing Stamped, the Remix by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds next Tuesday from 7-8:30PM via the Library's Zoom. Book discussions are great ways to get educated and to challenge our belief systems. Registration for the Book Club event: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/teamwestport-virtual-book-club-stamped-by-jason-reynolds-tickets-109646595920>
- We had a high demand in June for our 3 discussions, via the Library's Zoom, of the book How to be an Anti-Racist by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi.



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- Two TEAM Westport groups are being established – one will work on town and community issues; the other is a parent work group where parents will have an active role in the schools with respect to equity. We want change and will evaluate how the schools are responding. The school environment impacts all children. If parents show up and advocate, good things can happen. On July 21st, the Parent work group will meet again. The Community work group meeting date is to be set. We can Invite Danielle D. to talk at the parent group meeting if she'd like to.
- Liz Falk and Ngassam Ngnoumen are heading the PTA Diversity Reps and are planning to attend the parent work group meeting. Lauren Francese would be happy to join a session of the parents' work group. Former Staples' students have reached out and want to create courses with respect to equity to be offered at Staples. Not everyone is aware of the work that has been going on.
- Harold offered that Staples Alumnae students have gotten together to do videos to corroborate why we need to change curriculum diversity and the way the Town looks at it. We would like to give them a slot in late July or August to talk about what is missing and what needs to be added. We want to get young people at Staples to listen as well as their parents and the greater community.

Westport Library: Cody Daigle-Orians:

- 100 patrons can now come into the building when it is open; curbside service will still be available.
- We're planning a program series around race in the Fall through a lot of different lenses. We missed Dr. Ibrahm X. Kendi for the launch last August of How to Be an Anti-Racist, so we are now trying to get him back. We have other possibilities and are researching their cost and availability.
- The Adult Section has been meeting with Children's and Reference to address programming while keeping the issues of equity and racial justice in mind and to, thereby, look at how all of our programming can be improved upon to reflect equity. Community members will look at how the Library intends to be an equitable institution and to assess status. The Library will look at all of its processes and practices and measure against equity guidelines. We are in the early stages. A team will soon form and will provide an update in the Fall. In general, it has been quiet since we don't have a building. However, we have been successfully supporting virtual TEAM Westport sessions.
- The PreK session on equity will be coming up on July 22nd. It is sponsored by the United Way, the Library, TEAM Westport, and the PreK Association.

Westport Museum: Ramin Ganeshram:

- The Museum has put out an Equity and Inclusion statement.
- The Museum will provide any historical data needed by any organization in the Town or School.
- We must have clarity as to what facts are facts especially with respect to Westport history.
- The Museum cannot be open now because of a structural defect – many decades in the making.

Interfaith Clergy: Rev. Alison Patton:

- Anti-racism training in four sessions is being conducted for the congregation at Temple Israel.
- There is a "Dismantling Racism" page on the Saugatuck Church website containing a short, curated list of fiction by authors of color. This is a starting place. People just did not know where to look for a different world view. A TED talk led to ways for folks to be aware of voices in literature, so a few titles were put together. There is so much that can be done.
- Chief Koskinas should reach out to the Council of Churches in Bridgeport. They may have relationships we can cultivate. If the Chief wants to set something up, we'll take it on.



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- <https://06880danwoog.com/2020/07/04/westport-weston-clergy-let-us-not-sleep-through-this-revolution/>
- We have officially postponed the trip to Alabama to the Equal Justice Initiative tentatively scheduled for this Fall.
- We heard that movies will be featured by the Remarkable Theater Group. The Selectmen have to approve the showing of “Do the Right Thing” in their meeting tomorrow. Then the date will be announced. They are screening multiple films at the Imperial Lot. It was important to involve TEAM Westport in selecting and promoting the films and in messaging them. We hope that “Get Out” will be shown at a later date since it is quite applicable to current events.

Essay contest: We want to be able to use the Library for the Essay Contest awards and will make an announcement by next time. The awards have been postponed since April.

A “Rock and Roll” concert was held last weekend.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 AM.

The next meeting will be scheduled and announced when determined.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary