



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, October 6, 2020 at 8AM Via Zoom – Westport, CT

Attendees: Harold Bailey (presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Susan Ellis, Serena Levin, Candace Banks (RTM), Stephane Kirven, Catherine Lewis, Reverend Alison Patton, Zoe Tarrant, Maggie Mudd, Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Melissa Kane (Third Selectman), Elaine Daignault, Judy Hamer, Dolores Paoli, Lee Goldstein (Westport Board of Education), and Ramin Ganeshram

Guests:

Schools: Stafford Thomas (Principal, Staples High School), Kris Szabo (Principal, Coleytown Middle School), Adam Rosen (Principal, Bedford Middle School), Lauren Francese (K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, Westport Schools), Holly Sulzycki (K-12 English Coordinator, Westport Schools), Keri Jockers (Curriculum Coordinator, Bedford Middle School), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary)

Sara Harris (Operations Manager, Town of Westport), Danielle Dobin (Chair, P&Z), Sarah Ferro, Jill Nadel, Chris Clouet, Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police Department), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police Department), Danielle Teplica, Brett Aronow, Darcy Hicks, Sal Liccione (RTM), Harris Falk (RTM), Kristin Schneeman (RTM), Amy Kaplan (RTM), Elizabeth Falk, Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Ngassam Ngnoumen, and Tom Foran

Welcome: Harold called the meeting to order at 8:07AM.

Schools/Board of Education/Staples: Harold has spoken with Superintendent Tom Scarice who has a standing meeting of Superintendents at this time on Tuesday mornings, so he is unable to join us. He is moving ahead with preparing to do an equity audit. Training will continue. He is also looking at ways to address the school environment as brought out in several ways throughout the years. His plan is to bring together people in each building to discuss and to implement teams.

Principal Stafford Thomas:

- The students are obviously on a different schedule now.
- Principal Thomas has watched the videos of the alumnae/i who reported on their post-Staples experiences at college. These were recorded this summer.
- The DEI team is looking at different aspects to work on.
- Team Staples is meeting. The group is trying to pick up where we left off with Diversity Month to raise awareness and to distinguish behaviors the students are experiencing.
- The Professional Development Committee is back and is looking at mitigating so that Staples will reach inclusive excellence.

Dr. Rosen is excited to see the PTA develop a DEI Committee. Dr. Szabo and he have met with their building representatives. They are able to have one conversation – a silver lining of having the schools merged. Tomorrow they are having a combined faculty meeting to advertise the DEI Committee in the Middle Schools. Despite everything on their plates, they are happy to do this and expect it to be never-ending. Tomorrow they are going to share definitions with the faculty and offer the teachers an opportunity to be more active.

He gave a shout out to Lauren and Keri. Lauren does so much work in our schools and has been tremendous.

Dr. Szabo thanked TEAM Westport for its work. She reported that they are working collaboratively with the DEI reps and are looking at staff training, since they don't feel properly trained. They are looking at bringing someone in most likely in December. They are working with the PTA reps in opening the classrooms for all students. This will be an ongoing process. She is excited to see so many community



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members involved with TEAM Westport since it's not just the schools' problem. She is excited to open Coleytown and is now purchasing titles for the Library. Lauren and Holly are selecting titles and talking to the teachers to encourage recommendations.

Harold proposed that we do something we had talked about for a while – set up a separate schools' group to talk through the issues that parents and students are facing where TEAM Westport might be able to help. In addition, Lauren and Holly and Rebecca need to parse through whom to bring in.

Judy: In terms of advising, TEAM Westport has professional talent to offer. Judy has worked with college students and has a PhD in black women's literature. She is available for conversation.

With respect to a diversity audit, the purpose is to get the data to substantiate the anecdotal and direct testimonials from students. However, what is the breakdown of students in each level? Susan and Faith had related questions. We can certainly talk about details in a monthly meeting that focuses only on the schools as to how to conduct it and how extensive it will be.

Catherine Lewis is excited that the DEI reps are operating. TEAM Westport wants to keep the focus on antiracism and not move away from that. DEI has a broader reach. We need to keep concentrating on microaggressions since kids are being traumatized daily. Zoe seconded that this is TEAM's emphasis.

Rebecca: As Principal Thomas has stated, TEAM Staples is meeting every Wednesday. Four seniors are chairing the group. They are working on a program they can put together with Connections to address microaggressions.

First Selectman/Messaging – Jim Marpe: Jim is happy about the participation and progress in this area.

Sara Harris: We plan to replace the plaque outside of Town Hall that was done through a state program in the 60's since it does not tell the whole history. We are working with Ramin to develop a more inclusive plaque for Town Hall and we are adding a plaque to 22 ½ Main Street where African Americans lived. We are in the design phase; materials have been picked out. One plaque will be in the interior of Town Hall to allow public access. The exhibit will include some work already in the Town collection as well as some new art, so it will be dynamic and changing. It will happen in phases. We along with Pete (the Town engineer) are moving as quickly as possible.

Harold then gave an overview presentation of what is going on with respect to our messaging campaign in 4 areas:

1. Welcoming signage at Town Hall and "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) signage around Town
2. Historical signage using the billboards at the train station (6 mockups have been given to an artist)
3. Hot Line to report any incidents of bias
4. Bus Shelters (trying to see if we can place these on private property). Melissa is working with Elaine and Chief Koskinas to see if we can get this accomplished.

Darcy is glad to hear that BLM visual messaging is going forward and wants to make sure that we continue to communicate the messaging that the banners convey. She proposes that the BLM messaging should be clear and visible and that we should look at it through the eyes of children. It should be located in places where children who most likely will not go into Town Hall can see it.

Policing – Chief Foti Koskinas:

- In the Church Lane incident that occurred in Town, the signage on the posters was concerning especially the messaging (black power, Trump, and Korea). They were pre-cut and delicately posted. The police department was able to identify a 19-year old Staples graduate whose name won't be released



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until a warrant is issued. The other is a 16-year old from Fairfield. Today is the first day for warrant review. More will be revealed later. The ADL is also involved because of the messaging on the posters.

- Vacancies in the department increased after the last pension contract. As of last week, the Civilian Review Panel (CRP) sat down with two candidates. The department has identified a strong African American candidate as well as a female officer. It's uphill to try to hire diverse candidates, but we are trying. Both candidates are outstanding and still have to go through the process.
- De-escalation training and antibias training is being conducted and has been taking place over the past 5 years.
- The force just reached Tier 2 accreditation (a very significant milestone) and has policies in place as to what officers have to do in every situation. This is what the Town and TEAM expect the force to do.
- Chief Koskinas mentioned that another incident has just taken place in Texas where an officer shot a black male who was breaking up a fight. There are lots of white officers who help out, but there are certainly incidents that should not happen. He is working to make sure that does not happen here.
- The Chief and the Deputy Chief are meeting with the Interfaith Clergy today to talk about where we are and where we want to be.

Affordable Housing—Danielle Dobin:

- The P&Z at this coming Thursday night's meeting (7PM) is bringing forth the proposal to remove the cap on multifamily housing. It is important to reach out to the P&Z to let them know your thoughts. This is non-partisan and is widely supported. It is a moral issue – not a political one. Comments can go to PandZ@WestportCT.gov before Wednesday night. Email Mary Young before noon on Thursday to receive the Zoom link. The P&Z hears a lot from people who no longer live in Westport or those who are anti affordable housing. They would like to hear more from residents who are in favor.

Action: Harold will send out the details about the P&Z meeting.

- The P&Z Affordable Housing subcommittee is looking at being able to lift restrictions on guest houses in Westport (Accessory Dwelling Units – ADUs) without changing the look and feel of the Town and will continue to explore what can be done. Kathy Walsh is working to draft the proposal for the next Affordable Housing meeting.

Representative Town Meeting (RTM) Proposed Resolution

The RTM has proposed a resolution that is on the agenda for their meeting tonight. Harold made the following statements about the politization of terms such as antiracism and Black Lives Matter:

- We have adopted strategies for DEI espoused by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi who spoke here in January 2018 for our Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration and who then came back to conduct a class for Town organizations in December 2018. His strategies are being used in our religious institutions to conduct antiracism training and sessions on how to be proactive in eliminating inequity. One of Dr. Kendi's principles is that individuals are neither racist or antiracist on a blanket basis. Instead, our 'moment-to-moment' actions and policies are each either racist or antiracist and these actions and policies influence individuals and our system. There has been a net balance from the beginning with forces pushing for and against systemic racism. So, we should not look at what happens in a moment in time, but what happens over time.
- The Black Lives Matter movement states that black lives have an equal level of respect, leverage, and clout as do white lives. The bottom line is that we should continue to pursue antiracism and policies that include antiracism. There is nothing unpatriotic or political about anyone's humanity being



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questioned. These are some of the responses we have to the current RTM proposal/resolution for the Town to state a position on racism. If we talk about race, we have to make sure that any approach affirms and proactively dismantles racism. Note: there are two resolutions proposed this evening – a broader statement and an amendment to the main resolution.

Discussion and Discourse:

Harold stated that TEAM Westport will support the original resolution; however, he had suggested that we work with the RTM sponsors to revise the wording of the resolution. The members of the RTM who are sponsors for the passage of the resolution want to move forward tonight with the wording unchanged because it shows solidarity with similar resolutions that have been adopted around the state and the Nation. The resolution asserts that racism is a public health problem.

Amy (D3, RTM): TEAM Westport has been doing this work already; we just want the RTM to acknowledge this work on behalf of the Town of Westport.

Danielle D: The resolution should not be diluted which is the substance of the proposed amendment to the resolution. If others want to talk about sex and religious discrimination, they should develop another resolution. This should be about racism only as it is – not other isms. Sexism is a problem. However, the police are not called to remove white women in situations where they would be called to remove black women. At the session *Why is Westport so White*, we heard testimonials. People do not believe these incidents are happening to citizens of color; but they are.

Melissa agrees with Danielle but says the amendment has more support than the original resolution and is likely to pass.

Alison said it is instructive that the primary resolution mirrors resolutions in other communities, but we should wordsmith it a bit. We need to refine what we're addressing. Thanks to the RTM for taking a swing. It is a critical conversation.

If the RTM tries to pivot to supporting the amendment instead of the resolution, see where we need to educate to eliminate the fear. Who would be 'pro racism'? We may be hearing tonight who is.

Some of us have received calls on both sides of accepting or not accepting the resolution. Others say that if we adopt the resolution, anyone who is not mentioned in the resolution is disenfranchised and that we are doing this only for 'those people'.

Amy says there is a reaction to the term antiracist. It is read as being left-wing propaganda. The sentiment is out there and is being propagated.

Sal (D9, RTM) says because of recent incidents (StarBucks and Church Lane), the Town needs to make a statement. TEAM Westport needs to support the statement. A question is whether there has been any previous discussion or conversation or any education to be able to come to a common understanding? Is this the resolution's formal introduction to the RTM? The RTM normally deals with appropriations.

Kristin (D9, RTM). If the RTM is going to take this on, they should handle it correctly. She is on board as to the importance of racism being a public health issue and is aware that this resolution is making its rounds around the country. However, why not just make a statement about racism? She is comfortable with supporting the resolution because of the values expressed. She was surprised to hear that TEAM Westport was not involved in drafting the resolution nor instrumental in taking it to the RTM for approval. She supports concrete next steps, especially since specific actions are not called for in the



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resolution. We don't know what the next actions are other than that TEAM Westport has been taking actions all along.

Candace does not want the resolution to be voted down due to its not being perfect. The conditions it mentions are disproportionately affecting communities of color. She does not think it can fail. TEAM Westport has been creating and carrying out the really important work to deal with these issues. The resolution is a non-binding sense of the meeting and it reaffirms what Westport has done. It supports that work and urges the Town to continue that work. TEAM Westport has been a big force, so we can self-evaluate. The resolution is not at all at odds with TEAM Westport; it asks the Town of Westport to make a statement reaffirming our values. It cannot instruct the Town to do anything. It is a sense of the members that the Town supports what's going on across the country and that we will continue to do what we are doing.

Alison: Thanks for the context. In light of what the RTM has and has not done, this is an invitation to get curious about why we have a need for this conversation, where the hurt is happening, and where we can embrace. This resolution provides the opportunity to invite us all collectively to be curious and to be proactive. It's about shame for white folks. When we talk about racism, we have failed. We need to conceptualize that we are all impacted. We have to understand the system and how not to do damage. Let it be the beginning not the end with us leaning into our values. This is critical. The RTM is not doing it alone. Other groups are involved in the conversation. She agrees with Candace. Individual members will make a public statement to make sure the work does not go down. We are hoping to work together. TEAM Westport will support the general tenor of this resolution; a concern is that we not get caught up in what is misconstrued. Alison will try to watch the meeting tonight. However, she is facilitating the Library session on "Nice White Parents". The RTM, however, will not get to the resolution tonight until later in the evening, so Alison may be able to observe the meeting in time.

Candace explained the process. You can watch the meeting on the Town TV public access station. When time is called for public comment (a very narrow window), you have to submit your email and Jeff Weiser will read it to the RTM.

Danielle D. Anyone of color who submits a public comment should emphasize that you are a resident of Westport who is of color. Saying so helps change the view of who lives in Westport and provides the perspective of someone who has a different perspective.

TEAM Westport Parents Updates/Book Clubs—Zoe Tarrant and Catherine Lewis:

We are discussing the 5-series NYT podcast *Nice White Parents* tonight at 7 in partnership with the Library. The podcast speaks to how liberal white people think they are doing the right thing at all times without consideration for other cultural norms.

We held a training of 25 community members on social justice activism and anti-racism on September 13th. We are also planning additional book groups. White people need to address racism.

Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson: Jenny is the new Director of Education and Community Outreach. She is co-artistic director of a theatre in New Haven.

- Since arriving at the Playhouse, she has participated in the Playhouse's DEI training.
- A DEI meeting is held every Tuesday to engage in dialog. There is a Playhouse Book Club that is now reading and discussing Begin Again by Eddie Glaude about James Baldwin.
- Every Friday there is a meeting to review a document put together by 300 artists from Broadway and the equity houses containing BIPOC demands for the industry and the white theatre community



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on a national basis. The Playhouse continues to look at the document to address how we are doing. In 3 weeks, we have gone through 2 pages. We are continuing to integrate the recommendations via programming.

Action: Jenny will send the document to Harold to share.

Westport Museum – Ramin Ganeshram: Brett and Serena have been docents for the *Remembered: Walking Tour*. The Museum was just nominated again for an award from the Institute of Library and Museum Services. We shall find out in May. We are working on the signage and plaques for the Town that were mentioned earlier. If anyone wants historical data relating to the Town, the Museum is happy to provide historic contextualization. Harold thanked Ramin for her involvement with the signage.

Westport Library – Harold: Cody Daigle-Orians has left the Library. We are now in transition to see who will be representing the Library in working with us going forward. Cody may be continuing with the Library on a consulting basis. We wish Cody well.

Interfaith Clergy – Rev. Alison Patton: TEAM Westport, the Library, and the Playhouse are in conversation with the Interfaith Council re: our Reverend Martin Luther King event in January 2021. We are looking at how to make it an effective event and how to expand perhaps beyond the one Sunday we usually hold the event into the week following. This depends upon how much we can bite off and accomplish. If any of you have any thoughts, we are glad to hear your insights.

Action: Please give feedback to Jenny, Harold, or Alison.

New Business:

- Thank you to Ngassam and Liz for leading the DEI group of the PTA. We are all working in concert on broad efforts and with a razor focus on race.
- Susan mentioned that it is time to come up with the new topic for our 2021 Essay Contest. She will meet with the Committee to develop a topic.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:19AM.

The next meeting will be determined subject to COVID crisis availability.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary