



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, February 9, 2021 Via Zoom

Attending: Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Susan Ellis, Maggie Mudd, Zoe Tarrant, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Catherine Lewis, Rev. Alison Patton, Dolores Paoli, Elaine Daignault, Judy Hamer, Candace Banks, Ramin Ganeshram, and Melissa Kane (Third Selectwoman)

Guests: Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Danielle Teplica, Brett Aronow, Jill Nadel, Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police Department), Sara Harris (Operations Manager, Westport), Janine Scotti, Liz Falk (PTA DEI Committee), Sal Licione (RTM), Alex Giannini (Westport Library), Kevin Christie, Pete Ratkiewich (Town Engineer), Pippa Bell Ader (Sustainable Westport), Ngassam Ngnoumen (PTA DEI Committee), Lauren Francese (Westport Public Schools), Amy Kaplan (RTM), Harris Falk (RTM), Danielle Dobin (Chair, P&Z and P&Z Affordable Housing Committee), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police Department), Tom Foran, Trammi Nguyen, Holly Sulzycki (Westport Schools), David Mann (Sustainable Westport), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Shanelle Henry (Greens Farms Academy)

The meeting was called to order at 8:03AM.

Welcome / Approval of Minutes:

Maggie moved that the minutes for December 1, 2020 and January 12, 2021 be approved. Alex seconded the motion. The vote to accept the minutes was unanimous and the minutes will be posted accordingly.

Agenda – There was a lot of activity this month. We celebrated the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. event with several individual events over a number of days: the January 17th conversation with Layla Saad, the January 19th community discussion, the January 21st performances (New Voices, New Works), and the February 1st launch of the 28-day challenge to be followed by weekly discussions during the 28-day challenge by Alison, Jenny, and Harold.

Coming Up: Reviewing what we are doing with our community partners – on February 11th ADL is sponsoring Jerry Craft (who is always tremendous) and on February 16th “United Against Hate” – announced by Jill Nadel. This will be a conversation between a Skinhead and someone who is in the Sikh ministry in Wisconsin.

On February 25th Harold will be conversing with Trey Ellis re: his documentary *King in the Wilderness* that has won a lot of awards including an Emmy. The community will watch the film before the talkback.

Thank you to the Unitarian Church for their EDI initiative hosted by Althea on Sunday.

We shall be continuing with WestportREADS.

First Selectman / Messaging Update – Jim Marpe:

Jim agrees that there is a lot going on.

- Today is ‘Wear Orange Day’ in observance of teen dating violence awareness sponsored by the Domestic Violence Coalition. Domestic violence is a regular challenge in Westport as evidenced by our police reports.
- Sara will talk about progress on signage. It looks like we have received our “Black Lives Matter” sign!
- Danielle Dobin will report on Affordable Housing. We are moving forward.

Sara previewed the newly proposed sign for Town Hall to replace the one that had been outside the building and talked about the design elements. The text has been examined and reexamined. Once this sign is ordered, we’ll work on the signage for 22 ½ Main. This engendered some discussion about the Wedgewood image appearing on the plaque (the symbol used by abolitionists to eliminate slavery) as being too degrading for black men, in particular. It is historically correct since it depicts a black man in a supplicant position. We are not trying to portray a sanitized version of history, but how it really was. The 19th century is not the 21st century with 21st century perceptions. We could show people in muzzles or shackled even worse. The concern is that any imagery will be seen without context and misunderstood. Students would potentially step up their undesirable comments about African Americans. Even with context, the fear is that no one would read what was written and would do what they wanted to anyway given the imagery. Suggestions were to substitute the image with the Amistad, or a galley carrying people stacked during the Middle Passage, or bills of sale for enslaved people, or posters advertising the sale of enslaved people, or a white man depicted with a whip. Think also about visitors to Westport and the message they would come away with.



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Ngassam: To be sensitive, we need to be able to address 3 messages: that 1/8 of people believe slavery “is” the Civil War, that Black History Month is all about slavery, and that all the while we know slavery is not isolated and that it is how Westport was built. How do we resolve all three messages?

The discussion was tabled.

- The Westport Public Arts Commission (WestPAC) has installed a Tracy Sugarman exhibit in Town hall displaying his drawings during the Civil Rights era. A panel describing the artwork will also be installed. The exhibit should be up through the summer. There will be an online presence as well with a QR code to take you to additional information.
- WestPAC has issued a new statement on anti-racism and their objective to obtain more artwork from diverse artists. They are putting together a plan for the Town to acquire art from local artists. One potential artist, Charles Joyner (1964 at Staples), is currently a professor at the North Carolina School of Arts and Design. He takes his inspiration from NC and from Ghana.
- The Black Lives Matter sign has been delivered (20x20 in size); it will be placed on the right-hand wall.
- The budget just came out and new management reports are required from the Town departments. Personnel has added a metric for hiring diverse staff – 72% white, 22% Black. They have been in touch with someone to help with recruitment and are concentrating on more diverse hiring.

Policing – Chief Foti Koskinas:

- The Westport Police Department is in the process of recruiting.
- We are also monitoring issues re: minorities including a recent issue in Rochester where a 9-year-old was hand cuffed and pepper sprayed. Nine officers responded. Why? We are always trying to learn from other peoples’ mistakes. It is lawful, but awful; we keep watching to learn.

Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin:

- We are delighted to report good news. We have talked in earlier meetings about an area of land across from the Sherwood Diner that could accommodate multi-generational housing where families could live. The Selectman’s office has been a great partner. We got the State Department of Transportation’s (DOT) attention (they own the land). They agreed to an in-person meeting. We walked the land area to show how the plans could work. The DOT agreed that they could reorganize the area and they can give 1 and ½ acre (versus the 4 that we requested) to the Westport Housing Authority (WHA). This is a very convenient area. There is something else involved with transferring land, so it’s not a done deal yet. Thank you to the “YIMBE” group.

Alison: If the DOT is continuing to use this land, what is the environmental impact for residents?

Danielle: This strip of land has always been wooded and has never had activities on it. The WHA will make it as pleasant as possible – with soundproofing and a recreational area. A fence and intense landscaping will minimize the noise. The WHA will look into those issues.

- As for inclusionary housing, 20% of the housing has to be affordable to be in compliance with 830G. You’ve seen new buildings on Post Road and in Saugatuck. These are designed to be in the best locations. Greenwich is now looking at their own inclusionary housing as is New Canaan. Also, the Ridgefield P&Z tonight is looking to see what we’ve done with inclusionary zoning. We have pictures of nice housing to show. The results are exciting; we are diversifying housing in a challenging situation. It is good to hear that we are at the forefront. The reason we are is because everyone shows up. We don’t have people coming out to our meetings to say no; the presence from TEAM and Jim and his office has made a real difference.

Maggie: What is the application procedure for candidates seeking these places?

Danielle D: Carol Martin of the WHA can inform you about the process.

Superintendent / Board of Ed / Staples – Superintendent Tom Scarice:

TEAM Staples put together materials to present to Connections. Also, Faith Sweeney has been working on programming for Black History Month at the elementary school level.



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Tom: Rebecca and Stafford and Faith will be sharing the Equity Study process at the Feb 23rd board meeting. It's exciting to see that moving forward. Tom will be communicating with them to get their observations.

Rebecca: The teachers around school (not just the Social Studies teachers) are observing Black History Month.

Harold: We have more work to do to put the DEI teams together in the schools. The Middle School principals can tell us what the DEI committees are doing.

Lauren: Curriculum work is taking place, but difficult. She hopes that after the budget process we'll have funds and time to move forward with regular curricular work. She is working on the State mandated course and on revising the Area Studies program. There is a lot of in-process work on the elementary level as well.

Alison: Question for Tom and John about staff cuts: is there any impact on staff of color?

Tom: We have to see once we have our enrollment request numbers. It depends upon the department that is affected. So, we'll keep an eye on this. We hope we can forestall any cuts.

Susan: Coincidentally our essay topic has been rolled out by Holly Sulzycki, not as an assignment but an announcement. It is also posted and has been announced by Principal Thomas and other teachers. We are in good shape. Judy has agreed to be the "head judge" again. All essays are to be submitted to Town Hall.

Ngassam: In speaking for the PTA DEI Committee, thank you to our educators for celebrating Heritage Month.

Danielle T: At the BOE meeting, we heard that paraprofessionals are being cut as well as certified teachers.

Jill Nadel: How was the training by ADL received on how identify affects the classroom? 180 Staples teachers were trained.

Rebecca: The class was well-received. ADL did a wonderful job. We had great feedback. Some teachers had not thought about it before and want to do more work. We just need the time to discuss and integrate what we learned. Two more sessions for the teachers are set: 1) on LGBTQI+ youth by Seth Wallace from Yale and 2) on gender by the Rowan Center in Norwalk.

Melissa: There is an effort in place to put at least 4 bus shelters in the Town to make Westport more equitable and inviting. We finally have all the groups in the room who see it as a priority: a former commissioner and someone who knows about the Transit districts. There is interest from the P&Z to make this happen. Tax amendments are to be written. It is on the agenda for the Economic Growth subcommittee of the P&Z under Neil Cohn's leadership. We'll need funding in the upcoming Town Works budget. We can look to public and private funding as well. We'll look at mass transportation within Westport especially the buses.

Sal is on the RTM Transit Committee. Budget meetings will occur soon. To get the bus shelters, we have to advocate. The only shelter now is near Stop & Shop. Plus, we should consider a "Train to Main" shuttle which would make Westport really accessible. Past efforts to redo Westport's transportation have failed. The Economic Growth subcommittee is addressing lots of issues to help Westport's economic growth. It is important to know that doing things that are equitable will help with economic sustainability and will help the Town.

To attend the meeting, you need to contact Mary Young: MaryYoung@westportct.gov. You can also listen or call in.

TW Parent Updates / Book Clubs – Catherine Lewis and Zoe Tarrant:

The TEAM Westport Parents Work Group will meet tomorrow night from 7-8:30. Taking the lead from Layla Saad's book on "Me and White Supremacy", we will talk about how to have conversations with our own children. We are currently holding off on doing a separate book group. Instead, we are encouraging participation in the 28-day challenge and WestportREADS programming.

Westport Museum – Ramin Ganeshram:

Bernicestine, Jenny, and Ramin were on a panel on WPKN yesterday discussing the events to be conducted during February for Black History Month. There is a lot of great material from several different institutions – including Fairfield University, the Quick Center, the Norwalk Historical Society, the Westport Museum, the Bridgeport Downtown Special Services District, and the Westport Playhouse.



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Black History Month is a struggle since most African American history discussed relates to slavery. We want to show pride and success; yet we have to stick with historic facts. The *Remembered*: exhibit drew us into the 21st century. The Museum is currently posting history virtually including a post yesterday about former Westport resident, Venora Ellis. The Museum will assist anyone who wants to know history. Just ask.

Catherine O. is doing a grant application to present to the Rotary and would appreciate being able to include some of the black history of the Town. ---- Thank you, Catherine, for taking that on again.

Interfaith Clergy / MLK – Rev. Alison Patton:

Harold has already covered the activities we held for Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. We'll start looking at 2022.

Westport Library – Alex Giannini:

- Charles Joyner (artist mentioned by Sara) was just interviewed by Miggs Burroughs.
- The Museum has put together a reprisal debate between Sojourner Truth and Thomas Dew for February 24th.
- March 10-11: *Viral: Antisemitism in Four Mutations*, film by Andrew Goldberg
- April 5th is the date set for the Essay contest awards ceremony.
- April 6th – Dr. Redell Hearn, formerly of the Mississippi Museum of Art, on Tracy Sugarman's art
- Anthony Ray Hinton and Trey Ellis will have a conversation on April 8th at 7.
- Additional Programming: Page Turners book discussion of Caste by Isabel Wilkerson on April 20th at 11AM.

Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:

- Jenny stated that we had a great discussion on the WPKN panel.
- She is proud to be on 28-day challenge. Please register to join the challenge if you haven't.
- The Playhouse has a website location with the 4 monologues that were presented on January 21st. It is 30 minutes of programming, so be sure to watch them.
- The Playhouse is continuing its EDI work via an awareness group of board and staff in reaction to the "Dear White People" theater letter and the BIPOC demands.
- The Playhouse has created an action group to come up with steps to continue our work in EDI.
- We will be continuing virtual education programming into the summer. So, stay tuned for classes in playwriting and acting.
- *Beyond the Barrio: In the Heights* is a 30-minute reflection by the Director along with the artists who put it together. They look at the production they made and what they are going to make in the future.

Harold asked if we know what was raised for our programming during our Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. events. Jenny will check.

Harold announced that our 501(c)3 for Friends of TEAM Westport is now officially back in place.

Sal suggested that we focus on budget needs. If we think we need money, we should reach out to the Board of Finance. More voices are better. We have never done so before and we should.

Teen Essay Contest – Susan Ellis: The contest has been launched and we are waiting to see what we have after the February 26th deadline. We are set on our funding for the prizes for the time being, but we should consider whether we solicit for the future or just rely upon donations. We do have a track record now.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:48 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary