



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

**Attendees:** Harold Bailey, Jr. (Presiding), Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Bernicestine McLeod, Althea Seaborn, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Catherine Lewis, Candace Banks, Elaine Daignault, Dolores Paoli, Maggie Mudd, Judy Hamer, Ramin Ganeshram, Melissa Kane (Third Selectwoman), and Zoe Tarrant

**Guests:** Brett Aronow, Danielle Teplica, Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Ted Gillman, Jennifer Keller (Westport Library), Kevin Christie, Brian McGunagle, Danielle Dobin (Chair, P&Z and Affordable Housing Committee of the P&Z), Elizabeth Falk (PTA DEI Committee Coordinator), Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary), Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police Department), Thomas Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Harris Falk (RTM), Janine Scotti, Jill Nadel, Jonathan Steinberg (Connecticut State Representative), Kristi Law, Lauren Francese (Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, Westport Schools), Pippa Bell Ader (Sustainable Westport), Rebecca Marsick (Literacy, Staples High School), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police Department), Sara Harris (Operations Manager, Town of Westport), Stacie Lewis, Tom Foran, Trammi Nguyen, Ngassam Ngnoumen (PTA DEI Committee Coordinator), Kris Szabo (Principal, Coleytown Middle School), Darcy Hicks, Amy Kaplan (RTM)

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

### **Welcome / Approval of Minutes – Harold Bailey:**

Harold welcomed everyone and stated that we need to finish by 10am because of another meeting. Our meeting was moved to Thursday in order to have both our Superintendent, Tom Scarice, and our First Selectman, Jim Marpe, in attendance at the same time. Tom has a Tuesday meeting with all of the Superintendents in the State that conflicts with our meeting normally held on Tuesday.

The minutes for our February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021, meeting will be presented for approval at our next meeting.

### **Comments / Teen Diversity Essay Contest – Harold Bailey:**

- 1) Our Essay contest has about 20 submissions. The essays will go to Judy and the committee to be judged. The process is rolling.
- 2) In addition, we finished the 28-day Challenge re: Me and White Supremacy and are going to start around March 24th a series of four discussion groups composed of people who journaled during the 28 days. We invite anyone who did the journaling to participate.
- 3) Since 2018, when Dr. Ibram X. Kendi spoke for our Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration, we have been focused on the values of anti-racism. What that means is that in any group there are just as many people who are smart, who are artists, e.g. Therefore, when you start to see disparities, do not say that something is wrong with the person; look instead at our policies and practices to explain the disparities. Here in Fairfield County extra care has to be taken to see the disparities and then evaluate what to do. Data is important to be able to drill down to what is causing any disparities. Now the announcement by the Westport Schools that we are about to implement an important Equity Audit strategy is so important. We thank the attendees today who are involved with our school system for engaging in this work. The administration has the full support of TEAM Westport as an organization and by individual members.

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

We are most concerned with contextualizing the situation here within our District and an Equity Audit has been recommended as a way for us to gauge where we are. We will use this as a basis to be able to improve our District continuously. NYU will be a great partner in leading us through this effort. Harold was the very first person to congratulate me a year ago. I am proud to be part of this. We are looking at disproportionality and will expand our horizon to not look at the person. Public education suffers from deficit education. We spend a lot of time looking at what's wrong with the kid. We rarely look at the



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

system to see what might be wrong or right with it for ALL children. We shall be looking at lots of areas including race, ethnicity, gender, and Special Ed. We don't choose what we are going to address; we'd like to address all of the concerns swirling around as best we can.

Why are we doing this? Questions have come up over the past few weeks. Repeating what was said at the Board meeting:

- It is always good to look in the mirror.
- The primary developmental task for kids is a "sense of belonging". This study will help determine how our students – ALL students – are doing.
- There is a national conversation going on about race, equity, and inclusion. Westport is no exception.
- Locally, we have had documented narratives of experiences from students and parents. We don't choose what we are going to address. We address all issues that we can that are swirling around.

The key focus areas are: policy and access (written and unspoken practices); culture and climate (culture and trust come before performance); and curriculum and instruction (what and how). The curriculum and instruction piece transcends the study. We always have to be looking at how we teach; but doing it through this lens is important and powerful. We'll look at the arts and sports programs and performance data; but we'll also look deeper (into clubs, e.g.) for representation in all areas. We'll cast a wide net to assess ESL, LGBTQIA+, Open Choice, ABC – all different learners.

Next steps: Dr. Anthony Buono is putting together a committee: by the end of summer, we should have an action plan and a strategy. Dr. Maria Hernandez (NYU) thinks this is doable. With the vaccine rollout accelerating, we may be doing much more of the Equity Audit sessions in person in the future.

Judy: How much of the data will be shared?

Mr. Scarice: Most data will be shared at the end of the Equity Audit.

Rebecca: Transparency is important; communication certainly needs to be really clear and intentional.

Harold: We have the Leadership group meeting plus the greater community. Is there any differential?

Faith: The Leadership group will be trained. While I've been here, there is definitely a need. Students are not seen, heard, or valued. I am looking forward to the study. Studies have shown that preschool kids also experience inequity. Is there any communication with the preschool community?

Response: Yes, though separately – not as a part of this Study.

Ngassam: 1) Best practices are that the data should be made available to the community to engender trust. 2) Research shows that high-performing teens have a sense of belonging. We want our students to have that sense. It's what parents are looking for. It's about equity, belonging, and life-time performance. Thank you for starting that journey.

Maggie: What is the plan for communicating with parents about launching this study? We should have a comprehensive training program to consistently keep putting the message out. Being more inclusive should get active genuine support. Repetition is mother of all skill. Excitement is the greatest part.

Ramin: It's important to have everyone especially parents understand that their child benefits not just the "other" and that this empowers their children to operate in the greater world. We might construct the "carrot" of immediate benefits to their own children in order to push that point.

Superintendent Scarice: The sense of belonging matters; however, it is compelling to be able to say that every child will thrive better. Habits are necessary – not optional – to thriving.

Harold: The Sum of Us by Heather McGee gets at that point – i.e., how changes benefit white people more than people of color.



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

Superintendent Scarice: Some of the core ideas will roll out to the marketplace. We just have to keep our eye on this. An analogy: when you jump, you have to be static first and then you launch followed by a descent. We're descending. For some people this is energizing. However, we've been descending for 3 years. This cannot be "my" program. It's an all-in effort. We haven't really started yet. What is inherent is that there is a set of school and Town values that will be meshed.

### First Selectman – Jim Marpe:

- We see the strength of Tom's 25 years in the field based upon what we just heard.
- During his Board of Finance budget presentations last night, Jim delivered the Town's strategic goals. For several years, the Town's goals have been to maintain and improve Westport's brand and to control what attracts one to Westport including quality of life, economic vitality, fiscal stability, and sustainability. Newly added this year were DEI (including Affordable Housing, the Citizens Review Panel for first responders, and the collaboration of TEAM Westport as an amazing and important effort that has shaped the Town dialogue) and our COVID-19 plans as strategic Town goals. DEI has not typically been in budget conversations.
- Town priorities include the recruiting and hiring of new staff – especially people of color. We are looking at what will make us efficient in trying to locate new hires. We post lots of places; but we want to structure it, so people understand that Westport wants 'you to come'. The challenge of mentoring and retaining employees is also important. We have to commit dollars and talent and time to this area. Jim is working with Ralph Chetcuti (Human Resources) and the department heads to address this effort; we are committed to more inclusivity and mentoring and the training and retention that comes with that.

Question: Have you specifically thought about where you want to spend the money?

Response: The Town is looking at consultants who have helped the Police Department. Also, there is another group in the mentoring and retention process space that is being looked at by Ralph. It's as important as hiring. This is a major step forward for the Town that has been too long in coming.

Sara: The new plaque for Town Hall is ready to go!! Also, the Black Lives Matter sign has been mounted in Town Hall. The final draft for the plaque at 22 and ½ Main is in the works.

Janine Scotti asked about the placement of the BLM sign – that perhaps it should be on another wall so it can be seen better. Sara will look more closely and may change it to another wall.

Faith: Why was an enslaved woman chosen for the plaque? Why are we focusing on slavery?

Response: There is more history than that; but in the early days, Africans helped build the Town and helped it thrive. We want to make it clear that slavery was a part of the narrative. The narrative says that they took Native land and used Africans to build on it. This image refers specifically to that portion of the historical record. The Westport Museum had this image created for the time period that is depicted (it features Westport and Connecticut documents, including the *New Haven Register*). People can access additional Town history via a QR code. Two points: consider that the QR code talks about the plaque itself and why the original plaque outside Town Hall had to be changed. It accesses the history as well. The narrative was vetted by the State Historian and the State Librarian from primary sources.

Rebecca: We need to change the way we teach history and texts.

Darcy is happy to see this advancement. How big is the plaque?

Response = (20x20).

Danielle T: Is there any sort of reckoning and apology from the Town of Westport being planned to recognize the fact that land was taken from indigenous people and that slavery existed here in Town?



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

Response: Nothing has been planned yet. If the Town wants to make a statement, that has to go through the RTM. First of all, we do want to celebrate the plaque and the signs especially in this time where public appearances are limited. In the foreseeable future, we will have the opportunity to celebrate.

Ramin: The Museum has a native land acknowledgement on our website for the museum property and the Town. We are on unceded land from the Paugussetts.

Janine Scotti attended a meeting where this was acknowledged such as areas at Sherwood Island.

Maggie: We need to commend Jim for committing money in the budget to DEI. Also, versus just lots of talk, he has committed himself and the Town to equity and inclusion.

Jim: This will benefit the Town and it will feed upon itself. This increases the reputation of the Town and will attract people who will want to come. I need all of your help; we'll outsource the search for people to come here to work. Westport is not on everyone's list as a place to apply for a job.

Catherine O. Are any of the firms hired of color?

Response. Yes.

**Westport Police – Chief Foti Koskinas:** Recruitment and retention of officers are the key concerns. Community input is important to us. Harold and Melissa (along with John Bayers and a member of the RTM) were at the police station recently during the interviewing process to replace 4 officers. We thought we'd have 64 officers on the force. Now, 2 others are leaving due in large part to changes in benefits or to pursue other opportunities. Most are not retiring – just walking away. So, we now have the opportunity to fill 10% of the force. We have usually been able to recruit highly educated officers. It is costly to train new officers meaning it can be \$200K and 13 months before an officer is ready. So, it is best to try to get transfers to come.

As we navigate whether there will be a Civilian Review Panel or a Review Board, we'd like to hear from the community how you feel about the two proposals (one is a panel appointed by the First Selectman versus a board under the auspices of the RTM – either elected or appointed). We are now looking at how to evaluate and what the actual goals are.

As for police reform, the Westport Police Department had discussions with State Rep. Steinberg and State Senator Haskell before the passage of the Accountability Bill last year. We realized that we had to work together. We were 5 years ahead with respect to choke holds, body cams, recruitment, and officer conduct. Qualified immunity gives the police the authority and the confidence to act, but it also offers a defense that should not be afforded in all situations. How can it be that an officer can cop out by saying that "I feared for my life"? This issue is being addressed in the State and the country. It needs to be refined; otherwise, you will see that an officer will not act when they need to. The chiefs of police are trying to find the balance. Lots of officers abide by it. However, we do have the 'bad apples'.

These are the hot topics. Any questions? We can address in a separate session if desired.

Maggie: What about the 6 who are leaving?

Response: Some are going to other forces. Some moved to other States that look at police accountability differently. The bill here turned off some officers. Some are leaving law enforcement. Some left because of the employee benefits compared to other departments. It is uncommon to leave pensions behind; but it is a sign of the times.

**Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin:** That was a great segue.

- People may leave Westport because of the high costs of living here. So, we need to have lower cost housing. On Monday at noon is the next P&Z Affordable Housing Subcommittee meeting where we will



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

finalize the language on Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). Now Westport won't allow more than 2 plumbing sources in a dwelling and some dwellings cannot be rented out. A good example is a pool house on a property that can become livable space with the proposed changes. If the state adopts the changes, Westport will come along. We want support. Please write [Maryyoung@westportct.gov](mailto:Maryyoung@westportct.gov) if you'd like to join the meeting.

- Thanks to Jim, Harold, and Melissa for their involvement with the Dept Of Transportation (DOT) property in Town. We've set the tone and we are making progress. Our approach of being collaborative is different from what's going on in other towns. So, we have made more progress. The Westport Housing Authority will be negotiating with the DOT to work out the details. So, it should move forward; and we should see a designed community that will be walkable.
- On the State level, statewide zoning reforms are taking place in the Housing Committee and the P&Z Committee. We don't know much yet, so until it goes through, we are waiting. It looks like it calls for expansion of the Housing Authority's jurisdiction which now only exists within the towns where they are located. Housing Authorities can have their own police forces and a limited right to eminent domain. What the state decides will impact more affordable opportunities for people. We need to host an informational session with Jonathan Steinberg to get opinions about how to vote on this based upon facts and the impact on Westport. We look forward to meeting to determine what's what.

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

The TW Parents Workgroup continues to meet. Doing the work personally is what comes up when we engage in cross cultural conversations. This shows up in town and in our personal interactions. We try to be more fluid about race discussions. We are having discussions with the Board of Education (BOE) and are resoundingly developing parent support for the Equity Study. We shall be ready to support any policy that comes out of the study. We are so excited that it is moving along and that we all have buy-in. We have to expect push back; so, the more that we can support one another, the better. We are trying to build community. The standard reaction is "let's wait". We heard the same during the BOE meeting – recalcitrance. Danielle D., Candi, Lee, and Youn Su have been supportive. We would like to reach out to members of the BOE personally, referencing the video of our session with Staples alumnae/i. Danielle D. indicated that people contacted her after the *Why is Westport so White* event. We know there is push-back; let's approach by educating. Students are educating their parents as to why things are so important. Students can help influence policy recommendations. The video, to which we referred above, is primarily by white alumnae/i not those of color. It is on the website (now we have our own YouTube channel). It is riveting stuff.

Catherine: When people do have the info and choose to do something different, it's disheartening. We still hear members of the community say there is no problem in the schools, especially members of the BOE. There will be people who don't want to make any change. Is this the kind of environment that should be perpetuated?

Judy: Their answer might be 'yes'.

Danielle T. had the benefit of you having me help educate myself. When I watched the BOE meeting, I felt prepared but disappointed and could see what was at play; so, I addressed it with them after the fact. Some can be brought along further, so just keep trying. There are people who have not been hitting their heads against the walls as long and so are not as frustrated.

**Westport Museum for History and Culture – Ramin Ganeshram (reported by Harold):** We are doing our usual work with our DE&I initiative:





## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021 Via Zoom

- Our walking tours will resume as soon as it warms up.
- We'll have more tours related to black history (not slavery) coming all the way up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- We have tours relating to women, immigrants, etc.
- We'll have a driving tour (including the history of indigenous people).
- Come to our online programs as well! There are lots of interesting topics.

**Westport Library – Jennifer Keller:** There are several events coming up to celebrate WestportREADS – Towards a More Perfect Union: Confronting Racism. Sign up for our e-news; also visit the website.

**March 22<sup>nd</sup> at 7P:** BaseBall's Leading Lady and the Negro Leagues with its author, Andrea Williams, being interviewed by Ramin and introduced by Bernicestine. This is a book for Jr. High to High School students.

**April 8<sup>th</sup> at 7P:** Anthony Ray Hinton is being interviewed by award-winning filmmaker, Trey Ellis.

**May 4<sup>th</sup> at 7P:** Maggie converses with Ty Seidule, author of Robert E. Lee & Me.

**Question:** What are the primary books for WestportREADS? What is the plan?

**Response:** The 4 books can be read at any time. PageTurners (the Library Book Club Group) will discuss Caste on April 20<sup>th</sup> at 11AM. They have already discussed Underground Railroad.

**Reaction:** We would prefer to do a book at a time and build programming around that book. Otherwise, everything is diffused, and it is not book specific. We would love to be able to focus on each book.

**Zoe:** Multiple books are creating a problem. It is hard to read 4 books on your own without support. We need another planning meeting. The TW Book Club was postponed because we thought there would be WestportREADS sessions. We need to get support for the discussion of Class Act by Jerry Craft and to get the schools involved. The committee should reconvene to discuss.

**Jill Nadel:** ADL just hosted Jerry Craft in February. We can lend support for organizing an event here. We would encourage the whole town to read. Our WestportREADS choices are different and important. We may have missed an opportunity, but we'll work on publicizing so the Town will focus more on the books.

**Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:** Jenny is a teammate on the video downloads that we've done every week for the 28-day Challenge re: Me and White Supremacy. We're now planning on moving into the next phase with small groups beginning on March 24<sup>th</sup> that will review and discuss a week at a time over 4 weeks.

- We are close to making announcements for our season and are still doing digital programming.
- We are continuing to do our EDI work with a book group, an awareness group, and an action group.
- Our Youth Council of 13 young people is in progress. Mark Lamos will meet with them this month.

**Judy:** Me and White Supremacy discussion groups are meeting, but we want to nail down some other groups. We have not determined the dates yet. The recordings of Jenny, Alison, and Harold that give guidance are on the library YouTube channel. We are preparing for the upcoming discussion groups through the Library.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod  
Secretary