



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, May 6, 2021 Via Zoom

### **Attendees:**

Harold Bailey, Jr. (Presiding), Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Melissa Kane (Third Selectwoman), Bernicestine McLeod, Lee Goldstein, Althea Seaborn, Judith Hamer, Catherine Lewis, Ramin Ganeshram (Westport Museum), Dolores Paoli, Lee Goldstein (Board of Education), Rev. Alison Patton (Saugatuck Church), Zoe Tarrant, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Susan Ellis, and Elaine Daignault

**Guests:** Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police Department), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police Department), Captain David Farrell (Westport Police Department), Lieutenant David Wolf (Westport Police Department), Tom Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Candace Banks (RTM), Sal Liccione (RTM), Ted Gillman, Liz Falk (PTA DEI), Trammi Nyugen, Carolyn Karwoski, Ngassam Ngnoumen (PTA DEI), Harris Falk (RTM), Kristi Law, Brian McGunagle, Adam Rosen (Principal, Bedford Middle School), Maddison Tirado, Janine Scotti, Danielle Teplica, Kevin Christie, Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary), David Bibbey, Jill Nadel, Patra Kanchanagom, Rebecca Marsick (Literacy Coordinator, Staples High School), Alex Giannini, Danielle Dobin (Chair, P&Z and P&Z Affordable Housing Committee), Tom Foran, Pippa Bell Ader (Sustainable Westport), Cyma Banatwala, and Brett Aronow

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

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

Harold stated that there is a lot going on as usual.

Judy moved that our minutes from April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, be approved. Ramin seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously. Our minutes for April 8<sup>th</sup> will be posted accordingly.

- At the top of the list is our work in concert with Sustainable Westport with respect to DEI training being held over several weeks – sponsored by the Sustainable Connecticut organization. Maggie and Bernicestine are representing TEAM Westport. Ralph Checuti (Town Human Resources) is also in the session as well as Pippa Bell Ader. TEAM Westport is working strategically with Sustainable Westport during the training and will continue to meet to see what Westport's status is in terms of future efforts.

- In terms of setting up the Friends of TEAM Westport organization (recently re-approved), Danielle Teplica has been working to create a database of skillsets so we can leverage that for programs in the future. For example, if various partners want to have people help with a TEAM Westport focused mission – Library, Museum, Interfaith, Police, Playhouse, etc. – we can go to this resource to identify people who want to get involved. We now have the names of about 11 people and will include members of TEAM Staples. We shall see how it works out and make it a larger initiative for students especially. There is no guarantee that there will be a need; but we will have available resources ready to get involved.

Maggie has been involved also with Friends of TEAM Westport from another aspect.

- The bus shelter initiative is underway. A text amendment has moved to the P&Z that will address it and then it will be scheduled for the public to vote and comment upon. Public input will be very helpful. This initiative is in concert with the effort to reach out to the State to coordinate with State projects along the Post Road. Now we want to include bus shelters near Stop and Shop and one near Roseville/Hillspoint and the Post Road. The committee is working with the Town Engineer and the State to locate specific places for the bus shelters. It is heartening that individuals and organizations are interested in funding the project. People are excited. Hopefully, there will be different bus shelters funded in different parts of Town. There are now 6 proposed including two near Fresh Market.



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- The Equity Study for Westport Schools is also underway. To be clear, we are conducting this study to achieve equity and to eliminate any toxicity within the system. This work is to benefit **every** child and citizen of Westport-not some selected segment. Students have documented and are documenting what is happening. We are working toward making Westport stronger by being welcoming and exercising our mission toward equity. During our last meeting we talked about Kool to Be Kind, PTA videos, ADL allyship, and Upstander training. We are now working to make equity sustainable. Our Superintendent is very much behind this; and we are behind what he is doing to benefit the whole system and all of our students. He is getting pushback. We shall wait for the result of the study to plan a strategy for the school system, so that we're all in concert. We want that strategy to be long-term and to lead to our objective. All we are trying to achieve is for our students to become better people and to look at each other with the same level of humanity and respect.

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

- As professionals, we know that belonging, being seen, and being heard play a large part in school performance. After talking to a few folks, we have collected local narratives. Yet, it is also a national conversation that we need to join and be a part of. We are in the process of trying to find out the extent to which there is not equity or a feeling of “not-belonging” here. Also, we want to know whether we are properly preparing our kids for a diverse world.
- We are halfway through the study (40 folks participating). Yesterday we met in person. We want to bring our Westport group together. Then we can determine what we need to move forward including an action plan. By looking at our data, we've exposed our data collection process and realize that it's not great. We've been playing defense and now want to play offense. Dr. Buono, Rebecca Marsick, Lauren Francese, and Faith Sweeney have pulled together the communications message for the website to make it clear as to what we're doing. We have some pillars (culture and climate) for an overall plan that will impact children, parents, and faculty and we hope to develop an action plan before September.
- There are a lot of efforts now. I believe that problems emerge when people get way ahead of the system and vice versa. Trying to keep them in sync is a problem; so, we have a number of projects. We want to be cautious, finish studying, and then do an action plan. We want everyone pointed in the same direction in unison. We are making progress. We are adamant about starting to meet in person. The conversation is going beyond the two dimensions we experience in Zoom; sidebars and connections should be made possible for us to be able to move on.

Catherine L: Zoe and I meet with a parent workgroup. How might the parents help to build the culture and community from the bottom up for the equity study? People here are excited; but others are not.

Tom: Any way to lower the temperature is helpful. The system will help with the communications piece. Private schools are going through challenges as well. It's all about the kids and what they value. We're going to be advancing messaging and are doing a lot in that arena. We're focused on a lot of things not just this. We are engaging to prevent this from being a polarizing effort. Some folks are hostile. We have to reframe and communicate to them. For some we are not doing enough. We just need to move at a pace that's not so fast that we won't be able to deliver results.

Catherine L: There is an internal DEI group in each school. My question is how do they function when events occur in the schools and students need assistance? Are the people who have been named been trained and will they support the students in the schools? We know things are happening. The kids just hold during incidents and swallow them.



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Tom: Right now we have administrators who are championing the work. Some can resolve issues. We also have a number of support staff. We have trained our staff. We are problem solving in the meantime. We have crisis response teams that address issues such as self-harm and building breaches. They react and include a nurse, a counselor, a teacher, and a psychologist. This is a model composed of a multidisciplinary team. Additional conversations are happening and there is promise. As of now we do have an incredible team that can make a child feel heard and responded to.

Harold: Is that in place in every building? It can be a problem wherever children do not feel as if they belong.

Tom: A big part of our function is to support the parents and children. The building administrator should be the one to help. They are trained in mental health and in how to support kids.

Catherine L.: As a mental health person, there is never training about racism. So, we want to know if someone has been trained in racialized trauma and microaggressions. Kids are not believed; or they are minimized and denied. Who has been providing training that's different from anxiety about a test?

Tom: We are in listening and validation mode and our administrators have training about this initial equity work. We are committed to developing an action plan and some of the steps may be in place right now. We can't promise that we'll reach everyone – there are 5500 kids and 8 schools at the moment. This equity work is new to some folks. It is hard to believe that they would miss a child. However, we will go to the next level.

Lee: We are getting pushback, but it is not an impediment. You can say the sky is blue and people will still pushback. The systemic response to pushback should be more people in support.

Harold: We want to get the organizations behind the work that is going on. I'm concerned how things get twisted over time. People promote "wokeness". We look at things as having "this side and that side". There is no side to humanity. We are to treat people equitably. We cannot wait until tomorrow. We need to support the equity study and our Superintendent and can't ignore that we're trying to get stuff done.

### **First Selectman / Messaging Update – Jim Marpe:**

- We are moving toward more in-person meetings and are now figuring out the rules as to how to proceed. People still feel uncomfortable. However, although Zoom meetings are efficient, in-person meetings add to effectiveness. Zoom meetings stand up under the scrutiny of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). On May 19<sup>th</sup>, the Governor's executive orders will be modified with respect to gatherings. As a first step, next week we'll will try to hold the Board of Selectmen's meeting in person.
- We are excited to report (per Sara Harris) that the Town Hall historic plaque discussed over the past few months is here and will be installed in the next few weeks in a prominent location. It is metal and encased. It will be easily seen when entering through the front door.
- Also, per Sara, the 22 ½ Main Street plaque design has been completed. It is on order and will be installed on Elm Street across from Serena & Lily. Another plaque will be installed on Main Street near an entrance to Anthropologie. David Waldman is working with the Westport Arts Advisory Committee on artwork to be displayed on the floodgate structure. We discovered an aerial photo from the Westport Museum that shows 22 ½ Main Street. This will be displayed to help people remember and understand that a structure was there as a home for black people until disturbing circumstances occurred. It reminds us of our history and how that evolved.
- We are working together to produce a third plaque for Town Hall or Main Street with the Town's value statement reworked to address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
- We are evaluating diversity in our hiring. We have chosen Black Belonging Matters to assess employee relations and hiring. The analysis starts in June. Ralph has been outreaching to private companies including



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Charter Communications to understand diversity considerations. We now have links where we can put job listings. We are putting together a digital marketing campaign to create testimonials and the advantages of working in Westport as an inclusive, welcoming place.

- Brian will be talking about the Pride effort here in Town as we work to facilitate the Pride Rally on June 5<sup>th</sup> at Jesup Green. It is long overdue.

Ramin: Thank you. This is exciting. We met with The Arts Advisory Committee and Nancy Diamond. We are actively seeking African American, Indigenous, and Immigrant artists for art on display in Town Hall.

Lee: I affirm the discussion about the muralists – that we'll add the art of non-white people.

Sal: The RTM has put back money into the Wheels2U effort.

Jim: The best way to link Westport to the Coastal Link is to make sure people can connect along the Post Road with the opportunity to get to Riverside Avenue. It is important to change the thinking to get those connected. It is great to work with you on moving something forward. Thank you.

### **Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin:**

- The P&Z successfully adopted the Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) text amendment. There is an explosion of interest. Many people reached out. This measure will have a profound impact especially with people in financial distress. People can carve off part of their property and can create a duplex without adding too much density. A lot of people were positive and helped to get to this point.
- Tonight, at the meeting (you can still write a letter), we're reviewing an application permitting micro units for adults with special needs. 136 Riverside is one of those properties. There is overwhelming interest. It was difficult since the text amendment was overturned in the past by the RTM. We found a way to do it.
- The commissioners are pro the P&Z text amendment for bus shelters in Town.
- The State has been working on zoning changes about 830G affordability plans. People want denser housing but not in their neighborhoods. Want to hear from people with fresh ideas about their own street. Doing a lot. Lots been accomplished. Thanks.

Jim: Thank you to P&Z. A FAQ is being worked on to give the guidelines about ADU.

Tom Foran: What is the update on West Parrish Road and whether we can get some of that property to use for affordable housing? Carol Martin (Westport Housing Authority) is working on it. Jim is supportive. It will take time for the transfer to be agreed upon. The heartening fact is that more neighbors are supportive including the Greens Farms Association. Any action will require a text amendment. Part of the negotiation is how much land to determine how many units we can provide.

### **Policing – Chief Foti Koskinas:**

- Retention and recruitment are still challenging. We'll hire at least 1 officer from the group we interviewed.
- The Police Department is in full compliance with accountability. We will do steroid testing. We have had body cams for 4-5 years. We need in-car cams; they are expensive. We are one of the few departments with random drug testing.
- With respect to the incident in Weston where a resident called in a report that a black man was going into a mailbox (HIS OWN), we don't have any input. We don't want to say what was right or wrong. However, as a department, we have addressed four areas in handling complaints based upon our experience in Westport: 1) We determine if there is a crime and how we should be involved. 2) We look at how the call was taken and how it was dispatched. 3) We look at the officer's attitude – how they perceive the person and treat them. 4) Once the complainant comes forward, what do we do and how to handle it? The right thing to do



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is to hear the person out. We are always one call away from making a mistake no matter how much we try to avoid doing so. It is important to keep learning and to keep communication open.

- Chief Koskinas is taking classes at Harvard and is now attending a “promoting racial equity in the workplace” session. He is looking forward to putting administrators through the course.

Alison: What about the response to the Weston situation? Does the 911 dispatcher have the option of not calling in or not sending out an officer? Do they have the training?

Chief Koskinas: It’s tricky, but you never avoid the call. You can dispatch an officer who makes the decision and checks their own attitude. They can diffuse versus escalate. We never assume that the call is wrong.

Harold: What about the “Karen” call itself? He was getting his mail and waiting for his children. Is that a nuisance call?

Chief Koskinas: We do deal with calls about mail and package theft. It’s not uncommon. We get calls when door-to-door magazine sales take place. It’s not the police, it’s our neighbors.

Alison: Perhaps the dispatcher would not dispatch unless you can say there is a crime. Perhaps they can talk someone out of the complaint.

Danielle D: Often Police Departments can be an obstruction. However, we are grateful for our Police Department. We always look to them for comments, and we get no negativity from them.

Sal: We need more community policing. We have not really stopped supporting this as much as we could. There is an effort now in place with the Downtown Merchants in promoting what’s downtown.

Ngassam: Often these calls are called in by community members. They really are microaggressions that show up in everything. We need to raise this as an issue in order to chip away at it and address it at a community level. People don’t realize they are committing microaggressions. Individuals have to handle these situations now. The conversation needs to be broader. People need to want to get involved. We can’t make change by forcing people. We need to get the police to act and to filter and to determine their reactions. It goes to go back to why they wear the uniforms and their expectations as police officers.

Althea: We reach the community through police policy. The Fairfield chief looked at his department. His message to the public is that we will no longer respond to ‘suspicious people’. The dispatchers will act accordingly. We look at department policies to educate the police. It’s like teaching about slavery. A black Uber driver won’t generate a response (people often report this “incident”). While we cannot change behavior, culture changes can change behavior. There should be some probing when someone’s calling in. that’s how the public will learn. How you hold people accountable is what changes behavior.

Harold: This is an opportunity to launch communication in Town.

Chief Koskinas: We have situations where the dispatcher is complained about. The dispatcher may ask what is suspicious, what time of the day. Their supervisors are held accountable. It is not uncommon to hear that the supervisor will question before responding. We are doing more because of awareness.

Janine: How do we make a call, which phone number do we use? Police are a resource to help navigate a situation. For example, when the magazine subscription people are being treated rudely by our neighbors, as a resident, you may need help navigating the situations to help them out. Police have the training.

Harold: This gets into the complexity of the calls coming in. We’d prefer not calling to help people navigate such situations. Calling the police is an opportunity for escalation which can be a danger and a confrontation, for example, to the magazine subscription folks. I trust our police to decide when they should be involved.



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Chief Koskinas: When you change the call to “person may need help”, this changes the police variable. We don’t have the option of working out a few days later. The same officer has to be an enforcer in some cases, an EMT in others. The response is on the spot – not days later with a staff to address what’s happening.

Harris: Merging our dispatch with dispatch in other towns would provide unified dispatch response.

Chief Koskinas: There may be back fill from other dispatchers, but it is still up to the supervisors and what their actions are.

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

Zoe: Going off of what Althea said, we are in need of a list of what would be considered suspicious behavior. We need a guideline for students of color. Normal activities for white kids such as skateboarding or walking home at night are not so normal for children of color. What are the parameters for a child of color to not be suspicious? There is a differential. It’s there – no matter what. There’s lots of work to do.

- We are working with a group of parents and community members on several topics including how to talk to children about equity issues. We are behind the Equity Study. In the meantime, we are gathering the growing support of parents who want to be involved. They are talking to their children. Also, they are aware of the resistance that is often presented by members of the community that they don’t want to break the innocence of children by telling them the historical truth. Schools can’t do this work. We want to grow our community support to be a proactive force. We encourage as many as possible to join us.

Catherine L. We are looking at ourselves and where we hold our biases – where do we get uncomfortable. Our biases can lead to traumatic impacts like calls to the police. Our next meeting is Wednesday, May 12<sup>th</sup>. We learn about ourselves and our community on an ongoing basis.

### **Westport Museum for History and Culture – Ramin Ganeshram:**

- The Museum is conducting Black History, Saugatuck History, and Women’s History Walking Tours to rectify the history about Westport and this area. Docents go through extensive training. Please refer to resources at the Museum. Danielle T. is working with us to sign up student volunteers to conduct tours.
- We have been working with the Town on the historical plaques that Jim talked about. The Museum stands ready to help anyone who wants to know the History.
- One thing with respect to the previous conversation, when people try to make excuses for history that that was the time and things were different. This is not accurate. It was history. Would this be OK if this were done to a white person. Let’s create legitimacy on the part of the person of color. We want to make people think about things differently, in order to change minds.
- Our building will be closed until Fall.

### **Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:**

- We are excited about our summer camp for middle schoolers that starts in July. The topic is “What does Home mean to you?”. It’s an in-person camp on social justice. Reach out or register online.
- The Playhouse will have single ticket sales for programming such as Script in Hand and New Voices.
- Me and White Supremacy discussions have been great.

### **Interfaith Clergy – Rev. Alison Patton:**

We’ve been talking with Brian about Westport Pride and are pioneering discussion groups of potentially 5 or 6 people who get to know each other well.

We are continuing to talk about Me and White Supremacy by Layla Saad. Jenny and Alison are facilitating the ongoing discussion with small groups to talk about anything – incidents and other topics. It is great to open up without fear. Participants can be themselves and be comfortable.



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Jill Nadel: Five women have started our own group. It has worked as you described. We continue to use Me and White Supremacy. It's amazing how we've brought other issues to light. It's very fortifying.

Alison: If you have insights as to how your sessions have been effective, please share.

**Westport Pride – Brian McGunagle**: Activities are planned for June (Pride Month) including:

Dan Woog will participate in Staples Pride Day; Pride Day with speakers and performers is on June 5<sup>th</sup> at Jesup Green; a Pride Eucharist is on the 6<sup>th</sup>; Spirit Day with the Elementary Schools is on the 15<sup>th</sup>; a Pride Exhibit with MoCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) opens on June 25<sup>th</sup> through the summer. Poppy Livingston will be painting a mural; the Downtown Merchants Association with a Pride banner and lights on the bridge on the Ruth Steinkraus Cohen bridge; there will be a 'Summer of Love' pride series featuring merchandise and being observed in the restaurants. Beyond June, we are working with the Book Club Elon Green – Last Call book about NYC. Also, lawn signs with the Pride logo are available for display. A Fall panel series will center on faith, spirituality, and sexuality.

Tom Foran: Pride in Community and pride in togetherness.

Sal is a source for restaurant contacts.

Brian: We are looking forward to moving forward. We need help to publicize. We can share our slides and it would be super helpful if you share our dates. Jesup Green will be full and socially distanced.

**Westport Library – Alex Giannini**:

- On May 6<sup>th</sup> at 7PM we will have a talk back with the Director (Keith Beauchamp) and the Producer of the documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Till*. Thus far, zero have signed up for the Talk Back. You should watch the documentary before watching the Talk Back.
- On May 8 at 7PM, Amplify Festival artists will be live at the Library (50 people can attend in person) and via Live Stream. Free tickets are available. There are a few seats left. Available to watch for about a week. Teaser: speaker for June 1<sup>st</sup>. we'll get the info.
- WestportREADS officially comes to an end this month, but the programming continues. We've had a zillion programs over the past few months. Most have been videotaped. We want to put the full list together with information as to how to access all of the very compelling pieces. We will be in person next year.

Daniele T: The Library needs to blast more. Things get lost. Communication should say Library instead of from individual staff members.

- On June 1<sup>st</sup> at Noon, Catherine Lewis is interviewing Nesrine Malik, the author of We Need New Stories: The Myths that Subvert Freedom.

Catherine O. moved that the meeting be adjourned. Alex seconded the motion. Approval was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned at 10:12 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod  
Secretary