



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

Attendees: Harold Bailey, Jr. (Presiding), Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Ramin Ganeshram (Westport Museum for History and Culture), Zoe Tarrant, Maggie Mudd, Dolores Paoli, Althea Seaborn, Catherine Lewis, Lee Goldstein (ex officio: Westport Board of Education), Catherine Onyemelukwe, Rev. Alison Buttrick Patton (Saugatuck Congregational Church), and Bernicestine McLeod

Guests: Jennifer Keller (Westport Library), Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Trammi Nguyen, Brett Aronow, Bethany Gugliemino (Westport Playhouse), Liz Falk (PTA DEI Coordinator), Ngassam Ngounmen (PTA DEI Coordinator), Sara Harris (Westport Operations Manager), Ted Gillman, Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police Department), Harris Falk (RTM), Lieutenant Dave Wolf (Westport Police Department), Kristi Law, Danielle Teplica (Friends of TEAM Westport Volunteer Coordinator), Nancy Diamond (Westport Arts Advisory Committee), Jill Nadel, Tom Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Maddison Tirado, and Brian McGunagle (Westport Pride)

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

Welcome / Approval of Minutes / Comments – Harold Bailey:

It is July 15, 2021, and a lot of people are away. We won't meet in August and will start up again in September. However, lots of planning will continue through the summer.

Last year, because of George Floyd's murder, there was an emphasis on systemic racism. Now we are on a national campaign to dismantle that emphasis with an attempt to distract by focusing on Critical Race Theory. Black Lives Matter is being subverted and smeared and historical facts are being debated as political differences. "Let's not teach facts at all because they make our kids feel guilty." Barrages about the Westport Museum of History and Culture being the "Museum of Racial Grievances" are heard and are disgusting. We have to be conscious about not letting this situation metastasize and we have to be conscious about what's going on. We have to stay focused on the humanity of people and not let these individual snipes come in to deter us from having the conversations we have been conducting. We have to take the necessary steps to progress as a Town. We're doing that. We must not get discouraged. We will move forward, but there will be backlash and resistance. We can't let that slow us down. The flap over the Equity Study (Equity Survey) about getting input from parents is pointless. Many dozens of our Alumni from Staples said in their survey that there was toxicity in the school environment. Pressure came back from those who had no buy-in to what they said. We have to stay focused on what Tom and the Board are doing on equity. Thank you for everything everyone is doing. We are proud of what is happening from the leadership and everyone.

- We'll stick with Zoom for the foreseeable future. We don't have a venue for everyone otherwise.
- Non-agenda items:
 - The Planning and Zoning Committee passed an amendment to place bus shelters along a 3.5 mile stretch on the Post Road. We are now looking at designs to be approved by the State. The next bus shelter will be here next summer or in late 2023.
 - Continuing work is being done with Affordable Housing. Danielle Dobin will report in September.

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

1. We are hearing from both sides about the Equity Study which is on a summer pause currently and will resume in the Fall. It is important to call it an Equity Study and not an audit. This should be an ongoing effort. We are a learning organization. We began the work on this Study mid-year, issued an RFP, selected NYU as our partner organization. We met during the Spring several times and are now taking a brief pause. Administrators are tapped out over the summer after this year, in particular. We'll be coming back for a normal period at the end of the summer. It is good to have as much attendance as possible so having our folks reconnect with their families and unwind is very beneficial. Already they are feeling more refreshed.



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

2. Concerns are being raised publicly about the content, process, and transparency of our Study in light of the national talk. This break will exacerbate the concerns. So, we have to get clearer on our messaging. It is a challenge to resolve this during the school year. The divisiveness nationally has not helped. We are trying to get our arms around this locally.

3. Our communications are not great. Anything that is unusual requires brainstorming up front and we did have the pandemic as a factor. We can add substance and resources to the website that is up. The work is iterative. We can add context about our approach, but we will not have immediate answers. We will have, however, better questions when we finish. We are stepping back to be able to communicate in a better way.

4. We've had great interest in the Focus Group related to the Study. Surveys aren't as valuable because we can get answers that are unintended. Focus groups are better for strategic planning input. For this topic, 100 people signed up versus 40-60 that we anticipated. If there is already skepticism, we'd like to include everyone who's interested. We will also do some focus groups internally especially in light of the skepticism.

Comment: We stand by the overarching objectives of this Study and may not accomplish them all, but we will certainly try to do so. We will fold into the Board's strategic planning process all actions and outcomes that dovetail with our climate, our culture, and our desire to instill belonging.

Update: From Lauren Francese, the courses on African American and Latinx history that were mandated and legislated by the State begin this September. Teacher training and leadership training are underway, and we have the content.

Ramin: There is no diversity in the staff. Is there a plan to have visiting or guest lecturers/speakers to provide some diversity especially as you offer these courses?

Tom: We have to look at our overall curriculum to see how we evaluate our K-12 social studies program. It is important to do so with an aspiration driven by national and the State and our local standards. Locally, we have to filter through the resources to make sure there is a balance in perspectives. We are teaching how to think versus what to think. Experts can come into the learning plan to augment what the teacher does.

Alison: Are there resources for the community to have this conversation in addition to what the children are being taught?

Tom: If we blink, the pause will be over. It really doesn't feel like a pause. We keep hearing that we need to increase the size of the tent. This is a tired expression. Misinformation abounds. The true message is complex and gets miscommunicated. The tent will still have people on the outside. From some of the comments, it is important to be accurate in our response with clarity and reassurance. This work we're doing is to benefit ALL kids. When I did many focus groups internally, it was clear that we had a tight curriculum renewal cycle. Let's modernize it for the direction in which we're taking our children. Our resources fit well.

Alison: Knowing the makeup of our community diversity, how do we address those who are uncomfortable or anxious or unfamiliar with this conversation and keep them from being the dominant voices in the conversation? We want to be hearing from black and brown folks and from everyone who has a stake.

Tom: Our obligation is to public school. The interest in focus groups was super – indicating that people are concerned about our direction, and they want to be heard. It's important for them to know what the thinking is. This helps us if people are aware and for us to know and read why they support the work. If folks raise concerns that are rhetoric versus their own concerns, the process is not constructive. It is important to be aware. If we don't include everyone, we send the message that we are handpicking. It is important to hear all voices. Every kid needs to be seen, heard, etc., and needs to have equitable access to programs. We have been saying this forever. We need to give access to a learning plan that provides every kid a way toward modern life.

Lee: I agree with Tom. From the BOE (Board of Education) perspective: what are our core values in supporting this objective? They are irrefutable and unbending. What are the schools going to do to support the effort? We



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

need people on the Board to support this work. We need people banging the streets. It is hard to talk to people who disagree; however, we do find places of overlap and agreement and accord. We are doing the work to bring people into the tent. Our more important work is to talk with people with whom we disagree to get on a common base.

Alison: It is helpful to identify that a starting point IS our core values. We know that we can have 10 voices who benefit from the way things are and 1 voice who does not benefit. How to give space to those who have not benefited from the system is a question. Part of the work is for people to know that listening and giving space to everyone is helpful.

Harold: Our guiding star keeps us heading in the right direction.

Tom: Every kid has a personal narrative. DEI was on the map and was on the schools' agenda in 2012. It is good that we're getting to it.

Catherine L. You are a good communicator. If you say that communications are not good, this is a push back for being uncomfortable. You can listen and hold people accountable about how power is being used. If someone is devaluing anything, the message to give to them is that everything being done is around human rights and dignity. People may have their opinions, but to dehumanize anyone at any time is just not right.

First Selectman / Messaging Update – Jim Marpe:

- Jim is reflecting upon the fact that there was a fair amount of turmoil last year. Jim is proud of Westport and TEAM Westport in the way we've tried to respond in the middle of COVID and the tropical storm (Isaias – the anniversary of which is in 3 weeks). Yet we focused on the issues that Harold recounted. There was a change in awakening and in the awareness of issues that have been here for generations and for years. Yesterday, at the Board of Selectmen meeting, we were approving Town values and policies. I reflected upon them (they ascribe to town and federal regulations) and what these mean in general and to the Town of Westport.
- Danielle Dobin deserves a lot of recognition with affordable housing.
- We are actively recruiting persons of color to work in Town. It is hard to find people to come to work here even though we have stepped up salary offers. It's a hard issue to get people as you know. The importance of the commitments to things that have been in place since the 60s has been brought home to Jim.
- A really exciting announcement is the placement of the plaques in Town Hall and on Main Street that restate Westport history. Thanks to Harold, Ramin, and Sara for their participation in making these plaques happen. On Monday, they were in. It was emotional to read them. I just read them again. These are small but symbolic examples of what TEAM Westport has meant. Thank God for TEAM Westport for the last almost 2 decades and especially for the past year. We don't have a room big enough to accommodate in-person meetings, so the technology helps. I'm excited about more to come. I am glad that the increased attention to social justice greased the wheels to make something happen and that we can see the reality. There is a lot more work to do. With all of the turmoil, the result has been very positive notwithstanding concerns about Critical Race Theory and what Black Lives Matter means and what people are about. I see a real commitment in our community to work with people we deal with on day-to-day basis. Thank you. I am excited by all of you.

Harold: Do you think it's worth having a ceremony to celebrate the plaques?

Jim: Absolutely. In September when people are back and are interested. People have returned more or less to normal activity based on the numbers attending sports, etc.

Policing – Deputy Chief Sam Arciola:

Sam: There will be a food drive on July 31st at Stop and Shop for the benefit of Homes with Hope. We are looking for volunteers.

- We need to fill 3 vacancies. 4 or 5 officers have applied for lateral transfers. We'll vet and work with the Civilian Review Panel to see if they are a good fit. This is a drawn-out process. One sergeant is leaving in August.



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

- On July 1st, recertification of police officers (that takes place every 3 years) requires training in implicit bias and cultural competency as a result of the police accountability act. Westport has always met and exceeded the standards. Training days are held every year. Who does the training? Throughout the state, people are trained who become certified instructors. In-house, we have people who are trained. We do share resources.

Harold: Is there anyone in our department who does the bias training?

Sam: I'll get back to you.

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

- We encourage letter writing to support the Superintendent and the BOE. Please take a look at the TEAM Westport student essays and the alumni study from last year. We have a lot of information as to how the environment feels.
- We are having a little gathering tonight. If you are available to come, email Zoe or Catherine. Some people aren't sure of what we're doing. Make sure we aren't putting this on our schools. This benefits all of us. It opens up for others to come. Building community is better in person. Want more people engaged. Want to reach out to more and more people. Recommend anyone else to join us.

Harold: We will try to set up social gatherings or committee meetings, so we aren't locked into Zoom all the time. It is important to physically meet if we can.

Westport Museum for History and Culture – Ramin Ganeshram:

The walking tours are back. We are continuing to build our online content. We are traveling now and visiting historic sites in other parts of the country. Pete Ratkiewich (Director of Public Works) was great from the beginning on the plaques.

Harold: Thank you for the behind the scenes work to get the signs done. This was driven by the seminal work by the Museum – the *Remembered*: exhibit.

Catherine L. The walking tours are amazing.

Zoe is doing the walking tour again with her kids.

Jill Nadel. Yes.

Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:

- We are excited to be back in our home and are now conducting our Social Justice camp in the Barn. The kids are great with acting and playwriting exploring the theme – What Home Means to Me. We are excited to see the work. Incentive programs and everything they are doing will go to a selected organization.
- We just held our last story hour out of a series of four. Social justice books were shared and given to each child who participated. Each child did art projects during each session.
- Our first In-person event will be on July 24 – Ali Stroker will appear at the Playhouse. She just did an Instagram live with one of our interns. Buy your tickets now.

Harold. Jenny conducted the Social Justice camp and the book reading series. The Playhouse has DEI initiatives. Some of them are behind the scenes. There are goals in the strategic plan to transform the people who work in the Playhouse as well as the audience. The Board and the workers are now being educated on DEI. There is a lot of good stuff that we can be proud of. Ali Stroker is the first performer in a wheelchair to receive a Tony. She is a real force of nature. We highly recommend that you go to see her.

Jenny: In this year of pause, we are proud that we are doing the work. We're moving now. Our future programming and current programming are still staying with that commitment, and we are moving forward.

Westport Arts Advisory Committee – Nancy Diamond:

- We examined our collection of 1500 pieces and found that we had no works by anyone of color. In May, we accepted 6 artists of color into our collection. 1) We have drawings from Richard Hunt that are vibrant works on paper; 2) Charles Joyner (a Staples High School graduate) donated a piece called *Village @ Ntonso*; 3) Jerri



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

Graham (Westporter) contributed photographs; 4) from Christa Forrest (Stamford), we have *Don't Judge Me*, mixed media on canvas; 5) we have *Three Shadows* an original silver gelatin print by the most esteemed Adger Cowans, a photographer who lives in Bridgeport; and also 6) we added Larry Silver's (Westport Town photographer) gelatin silver prints of China. We diversified our committee. We are making sure the pieces are moving forward and are curated properly.

- We are planning to paint the history of Westport in murals on the 5 floodgates downtown based on the historical plaques that just went up. For this project, we called on 16 artists (Norwalk, Westport, and Bridgeport). They will depict our early history illustrating the Paugussetts, the British, and enslaved African Americans. Also Included are murals with history about Communities: 22 1/2 Main Street and Immigrant (Italian and Irish) stories; Farming and Commerce; Westport as a Suburban Town; and imagining Westport's future.

Ramin: The Museum is willing to help in processing the historical pieces. We have plenty of materials and we can do charrettes – whatever is needed – to make sure our history is portrayed and is accurately reflected.

Nancy: We drew directly from the historical plaques in proposing the murals for Main Street. They are on private property, so we don't have to get special permission. We have heard from 6 artists. They will be compensated. We will make sure it's appropriate. They will submit 6 images of their work, and content. They are people who do murals and each one will pick the one they'd be most interested in doing.

Zoe: Do you have student involvement?

Nancy: We want professionals to do this.

Danielle: Is there a way to have the students give their input beforehand? I feel nervous about how the history will be treated. I want the Town to see diverse art so that a diverse group of kids could feel comfortable and heartened. With the plaques, there was a lot of discussion about what was appropriate to make people of color not feel oppressed. We should look to the kids to see what they feel versus coming up with something and then having them look at it after the fact. Danielle is putting together groups of students to give input.

Lee: It's going to be nuanced or complicated. We need to realize that this is hard in a world that has no diversity. We need to be careful since everything does not represent everybody. We need to trust the professional artist in the same way we trust the Police and the schools. Panels will include enslaved people.

Harold: Whatever is done needs to be respectful of the skilled labor that built the Town.

Nancy: We're planning a Tea Talk at the Library about art in our neighborhood from Stamford to Bridgeport including the Norwalk Art Space.

Where will all of the art be seen? There is an exhibit coming in the winter of 40 pieces. All of the art is online at westportarts.org. We are introducing them as part of our collection and not saying "look at what we have".

Interfaith Clergy – Rev. Alison Patton:

Harold: Thank you for working on Me and White Supremacy for months.

Several people participated and it was a challenge to sustain over months. So many things took precedence along the way. We have run the course and will get together for an in-person conversation in September. That will be the stepping off point for whatever comes next. It was fruitful in that a core group showed up regularly.

- During the rally against anti-Semitism in June, the Christian clergy were very supportive although most had conflicts and could not attend. Alison presented a powerful voice from the Christian community that resonated.

Jill: We still have a group of 5 women, and we keep going back to the book Me and White Supremacy.

Alison: In 2022, we would like to host Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a marine biologist and coastal conservationist, to talk about climate justice and intersection of climate degradation in diverse communities. The Library and Sustainable Westport are collaborating. If someone wants to join the committee, let us know.



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Thursday, July 15, 2021 Via Zoom

Westport Pride – Brian McGunagle:

We had a phenomenal June. We thank Alison for her participation in our rally of almost 500 people. She uplifted the feeling and people were excited to be there. We held Westport's Pride Day at the schools. Thirty (30) merchants in the downtown area drove more programming. National Coming Out Day is in October. The Library, on July 22nd at 7PM, will host Elon Green discussing *LAST CALL: A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York* about a serial killer who preyed upon gay men in the 90s.

Someone vandalized our lighting on the Ruth Steinkraut Cohen bridge. A suspect was identified. The case is with the State's Attorney. There has been no movement and there may not be any action. Westport handled it well – Chief Koskinas and Harris Falk were there and had it fixed by noon. However, charges beyond that went by the wayside. This sends a poor message about reactions in general to our youth.

Althea: Can anything be done?

Brian: Communication is good, but I am not familiar with the process. The States Attorney can bring charges or not and decides what the charges should be. Locally, we can make the case. It is similar to when someone put up misinformation that black people were going to attack the town. A problem is that there is a suburban way and an urban way. The "sentence" could be community service or an apology. We'll see if anything can be done.

Danielle: Brian was heard. I find it unacceptable. I don't know the age of the person or the legal ramifications. Maybe something should be written and treated more seriously.

Catherine L. We do have a pattern of minimizing the crime if it's a white youth. The consequences are different. Doing nothing sends a powerful message.

Westport Library – Jennifer Keller:

Elon Green – with Westport Pride on July 22nd at 7p.

July 23rd at 5p – The Westport Museum is hosting *Chats on the Past* with Van Gosse about his book, The First Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War.

We hope to see everyone at the Library since we are opening up more although our hours are still limited. We are not open on Sunday. Our conference rooms are open now for reservations. We have some in-person audiences attending our programming now while we are still conducting online sessions.

Maggie: Why can't we (TEAM Westport) meet at the Library and use their video resources for our meetings?

Harold: Twenty in person won't do it; we need more room for more attendees. The room in the back of the building doesn't have online capability yet. We don't want to lose momentum. Perhaps, we can do it now and then, depending upon the size of our group. Jennifer will look into it.

Closing – Harold Bailey:

Also, we announce that Sustainable CT conducted sessions on DEI. The Town is going to pursue certification for BDEI (Belonging, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) by the State under Sustainable CT. By Fall, we hope to have updates. Sustainability was the farthest from incorporating DEI and now they are staples of that message.

Maggie moved that the meeting be adjourned. Alison seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary