



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes

June 10, 2021

Via Zoom



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

Guests: Tom Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police), Liz Falk (PTA DEI Coordinator), Sara Harris (Operations Manager, Westport), Keri Jockers (Middle School Literature Coordinator, Westport Schools), Trammi Nguyen, Brett Aronow, Jennifer Keller (Westport Library), Sal Liccione (RTM), Pippa Bell Ader (Sustainable Westport), Danielle Teplica (Friends of TEAM Westport Volunteer Coordinator), Lauren Francese (Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator, Westport Schools), Rebecca Marsick (High School Literature Coordinator, Staples High School), Maddison Tirado, Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Kevin Christie, Anabel Sollinger, Kris Szabo (Principal, Coleytown Middle School), Tom Foran, Brian McGunagle (Westport Pride), Faith Sweeney (Elementary School Literature Coordinator, Coleytown Elementary), and Jill Nadel.

The meeting was called to order at 8:05AM.

Welcome – Harold Bailey, Jr.:

1. Tonight, TEAM Westport is co-sponsoring a program with the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in Westport. This will be a Zoom session hosted by the Westport Library. The topic is “What Does It Mean To Be Asian American” in a discussion led by two professors – Erika Lee from the University of Minnesota and Jason Chang from the University of Connecticut – and moderated by Heather Lee of Westport.
2. First Selectman Jim Marpe, Superintendent Tom Scarice, and Harold all made statements in light of the Anti-Semitism displayed in Town and around the nation and the “Standing Together Against Anti-Semitism” rally held on June 2nd at 7PM. When we talk about any of these topics (racism, anti-AAPI hate, Anti-Semitism, etc.), we are talking about the same thing in each case; we are getting at “othering” and at treating everyone with respect. This is not just a general lumping of topics. The same template for othering is at the core of each movement. I mention that because if I’m participating on behalf of a cause, I hear “thank you for coming out to support us”. Understand that we are doing this every day of the week and have been for the last 18 years. Whether we are there physically or not, we are doing this work for every group to feel welcome. We want everyone to understand this fact.
3. Today, we’ll hear about Westport Pride programming during June.
4. We’ve had some breakthroughs to report with respect to Affordable Housing.
5. We’ll also hear about the bus facilities/shelters piece for the Town.

Superintendent / Board of Ed / Staples – Tom Scarice: We’ve done a great deal of work with the Equity Study. We are thankful for the support of the leadership and guidance from the NYU team. It is going forward and is extremely important considering where we need to be as a Town. This is an ongoing process. We are doing the aspirational work now, but we will soon have an action plan. Other successful districts have worked toward their goals over a 3 to 5-year range. As for communication, we’ll have a link on our website showing what we want to accomplish, how to get there, who’s doing what, and who’s working with us. There will be an FAQ section to answer questions since questions are coming up about local and national policies.

Focus groups are being conducted now with 100 parents who asked to participate. More signed up than we had originally anticipated, so we are trying to find a way to accommodate everyone and not leave anyone out. We want to hear as many diverse perspectives as possible.

What our kids see and hear with respect to media can be confusing, so we need to help kids make sense of things including acts and language of hate and to reassure them.



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Judy: How do we get to the website? If we have suggestions around messaging, who should be the point?

Tom: It's on the front page of the Westport Schools' web site. Stafford Thomas, Jen Cirino, and Dr. Anthony Buono put the content together. It is still aspirational, but we do answer specific questions as well about our approach, our philosophy, and how to approach this discourse. We have receptivity around teaching kids HOW to think and NOT WHAT to think.

Action: Harold will send the link to the website out.

If you have recommendations, please contact Tom Scarice, Anthony Buono, or Lauren Francese. If someone who's not a parent wants to talk about anything, we have to evaluate whether we are able to do so. NYU, the facilitators of the study, specified a number of parents for the focus groups and we got 3 times that number. Maybe as we go along, we can speak with additional community members.

Judy: There is someone from a counter movement called Save Our Towns who is running for a BOE seat in the Redding/Easton District. This group is against any teaching of critical race theory and any change in the curriculum. They sent out a mailing to everyone in Redding. It's an LLC.

Tom: The pushback is here among us although we do not know what "critical race theory" is. There are already lots of local definitions for controversial topics. We made progress in discussing this with a member of our community last week, but we need to have an aggressive campaign to define the commonality among us all and to be inclusive. We all want similar things for our kids. There is common ground. We just have to know how to address our commonalities in the classroom.

We have very good approaches. Private schools are also being challenged on this topic. We think we can get around this by addressing issues directly. We need to be ready to support a movement to do so. We need individuals who can come to fore as we work to address these things. It can be demoralizing. Every kid is ours so how do we serve all of these kids and do good work? We're having open discussions about it. Not doing so may not lead to our desired result. This can spiral out of control because of the national tension, as well, around the topic of Equity. This is tactical and operational work, and it is being done publicly. It is harder to engage when the work is public. To those who are not engaging in the study, we appear not to be transparent. It's a challenge. It is not right or wrong. It is just what it is.

Jill Nade! While I agree that this issue is not a bad one in and of itself, complete misunderstanding of the issue is being pushed in the national news. People locally also misunderstand. We need to educate as to what the study and equity are and what they are not. We have neighbors talking rhetoric to neighbors. TEAM needs to clarify.

Tom: The national scene is getting more hostile; we need to look at our curriculum locally. We need to refresh and think about this work. We need resources to support our learning goals. If we define our learning outcomes here, how do we get there? When a text is used, we interrogate that text and do not dictate that this is what you must learn. Offering diverse texts is the value for kids. This does not mean we can't do as well as we can. We want to have different voices. It's a good way to set the environment. It is important to have a big tent. TEAM Westport covers our community. The schools cover our kids.

Ramin: To comment on the pushback on "critical race theory", the *Remembered*: exhibit looked at the structure of the Town. There was pushback quietly from people you would not expect. People faced with primary sources said the information was not true. Just keep in mind that all pushback is not active and seen. We agree that sources are important since they are legitimate examples to demonstrate the teaching. We have the materials to support the "critical race theory" examinations, since we use real stuff in addition to textual documents. People have to confront the truth.

Tom: We are all students – why are we learning this, why does this matter? It is a hallmark to take something that is theoretical and show that it is real especially for our students.



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First Selectman / Messaging Update – Jim Marpe: There was an article recently that being mayor has become the worst job in politics. In the context of social justice, we are concentrating on just the things we have been thinking about for the last 30 minutes. In the last year, I've had an epiphany and have been energized to talk about these issues – whether it is anti-Semitism, anti-AAPI hate, BLM, the Pride movement, etc. Every time I have the opportunity, I have considered the issues TEAM Westport has focused upon. TEAM meetings 7 or years ago were more sparsely attended. TEAM is making more of an impact on the thinking of the broader community, but we'll never be finished. Our neighbors will not totally change. Things have changed a lot since I was educated. I am heartened that we are aware of issues that are not in the forefront – or that we have already addressed them.

I have been energized around the social contract that we should have to respect each other. I read Harold's proclamation presented during the rally against Anti-Semitism and have thought a lot about "othering" as a descriptor of what we are trying to understand. This reinforces the importance of the work that this group does. This is a place where these issues can be brought forward, and we don't have to scramble to get something going when the need arises. Also, the breadth of the issues can be covered.

Sara: The plaques for 22 ½ Main Street are finished but there are shipment delays. Public Works will install them as soon as they come in. Town Hall is open to walk-ins so that you can see the interior plaques and the Sugarman exhibit. It may take another 2 weeks, but we are close to having them up. We don't have the exterior plaques, but a new page on the website will have the value statement and our DEI message. Harold has sent digital images of the two plaques. We have gone over the text several times. They all look good. Jim would like for us to have an event when they are installed.

- We are now working on a hiring campaign for the Town and private organizations. We are talking about making videos as to why people like working in Westport. Also, we'd like to highlight the amenities of working here and being employed by our municipal government. It's a good place to work. It is great to work with TEAM Westport. Harold wants to see different versions of videos on the website.

Jim: When are we going to have live meetings? The legislature has extended the ability to do electronic meetings. We are working on the way we use Town Hall and need to determine how to shift back to in-person meetings with the public involved. The Board of Selectman held the last two meetings with having the public come in; however, people could not send in electronic comments. The Board of Finance is in person. Some meetings seem more efficient online. The Board of Education may consider meeting in the auditorium at the school. TEAM Westport meetings, in person, are dynamic and more creative and easier to see. Emotions are better displayed in person, though. We are willing to see how to work out hybrid meetings, but they do get complicated with the cable channels. We do want to make sure everyone who wants to has the ability to participate. We will work with each group to see how to proceed. TEAM Westport is a large group, but we still would like to facilitate communication. We will work with Sara as the point person.

Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin's statement (read by Harold Bailey): The RTM upheld the settlement to permit a housing complex on Hiawatha Lane. There will be 19 three-bedroom units and 48 one-bedroom units.

Sal: Thank you for reading Danielle's comments. She deserves the lion's share of the credit and had to deal with some pushback. Our moral obligation is to address this issue. As a member of the RTM, I voted to approve the settlement. The Board of Selectman worked with P&Z to continue to accomplish this project in a way that makes sense and controls how we move forward. The project had been around for 10 years before Jim Marpe came in. There were lots of discussions about Town involvement over the years. The RTM vote was to not overturn their decision. We still have some court stuff to deal with and

then we will be able to resolve some other issues with respect to sidewalks and amenities and then we can discuss the issue with the Fire Department about getting a truck with a longer ladder.

Policing – Deputy Chief Sam Arciola: We have been busy but not notably so. We are continuing to recruit to fill two vacancies. There is nothing much to add otherwise; but we can do Q&A now.

Maggie: Were there 6 positions vacant a few months ago?

Deputy Chief Arciola: We have filled 1 position; we have 2 more to fill since we'll have another vacancy in August. Recruitment is tougher now.

Harold: We always continue to look for diversity among our candidates. Candidates we interviewed earlier either went to another department or did not work out.

Jim Marpe: Recruiting is a process. Jim met with the new concessionaires at the Inn at Longshore who have had problems staffing. If you know of anyone, this would be a great opportunity with an organization that is a first-class hospitality operator (the Delamar group of Southport and Greenwich).

Althea: Where is recruitment taking place; where are you reaching out for candidates – colleges, organizations? Westport is not viewed as a place where people of color want to work. It's going to take the police to communicate with different groups, so they understand how the Chief runs the department. Often these individuals don't see themselves as being welcomed. A few years ago, we worked with someone in Norwalk. We went to the colleges and reworked our messaging. That did not work. I'll reach out, though, some more.

TW Parent Updates / Community / Book Clubs – Catherine Lewis and Zoe Tarrant: We had a great session on Tuesday, June 8th, with Faith Sweeney, parents, and their children during which we read and discussed the book Desmond and the Very Mean Word by Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams. Faith and Kimberly Kassay at Coleytown Elementary have developed a series that uses literature to talk about identity, difference, and empathy. We are figuring out the next steps whereby we can focus on the schools and encourage parents to have conversations around identity and race, so our kids can be literate about the global world. We're feeling the pushback from parents in the community who are afraid that something will be taken away if we talk about race. How do we get people comfortable talking about race and identity? This is not a losing point. It is a win-win. There will be less fear, and everyone will feel better once we all talk. Our next group meeting is yet to be scheduled.

Harold: It is tricky stuff, but it was important for the children to engage in this "courageous conversation". Having a dynamic session with the children as well as going through the process about how to talk with children might give us an indication of how we're trying to help respect each other.

Westport Museum of History – Ramin Ganeshram: Walking tours have begun again.

Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:

- The Playhouse is trying to resume in-person performances.
- Story Hour with Jenny for grades K-3 is being held at the Barn at the Playhouse. She just read Lubaya's Quiet Roar. The next book on July 11th is Wings that talks about empathy. Sign up.
- A virtual production of *Tiny House* by Mark Lamos (Playhouse Artistic Director) starts June 29th. This is a special show at a price of \$25. There will be more to come about this in a future announcement.
- We are conducting a 4-week Social Justice camp this summer for middle schoolers and are still looking for kids (2 more spots). The theme is "What Does Home Mean to You?" The students will be creating work that they will perform at the Playhouse in July. The camp lasts 4 weeks from 10a to 3p daily for \$750. We want to remove any economic barriers.
- Our Joanne Woodward interns have started. Three (3) were accepted out of 120 submissions. We removed barriers. We used life experience as a possible criterion in addition to schooling.

Harold. If you know of anyone (6-8 grades), please let them know about the camp. Also, a cabaret series (3 in-person fundraising events) begins in a few weeks with Tonya Pinkins and Brad Simmons.

Interfaith Council – Rev. Alison Patton: We took the 28-day challenge offered by Layla Saad in Me and White Supremacy and then in February created a space for small group conversations with a modest turnout (about 8 folks at a time). Time elapsed. We postponed our final session in June because of the event against Anti-Semitism as well as Westport Pride programming. So, we need to have one or more opportunity for our group to meet. We wanted this to be a test for rolling out small groups that meet in an ongoing way to work on ferreting out racism. We have heard there is a group that's on their own doing this work, so we are also trying to get feedback from them as to how it's going.

- We'll start preparing for our Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration in January 2022.
- We are also starting to look at hosting an event in 2022 with Sustainable Westport that will explore climate justice and its intersection with racism. We are putting together a small planning team and will include anyone who's interested.

Harold: These sessions were deep dive discussions facilitated by Alison and Jenny that required participants to open up and trust each other with troubling issues. As recommended, there was a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) group discussion convened by Harold and Bernicestine.

Judy: What have you learned?

Rev. Patton: We were back and forth about whether to do small groups vs. private discussions. The feedback is that we are all co-learners as members of the white community. Having some facilitation is helpful. We are blind to our own behavior and assumptions, so it is good to have people as facilitators who have done a deeper dive.

Harold. It is a one-up since the BIPOC group discussions are being held separately from those by the white participants. How do we involve BIPOC going forward? We will experiment.

Danielle: I'm in a couple of groups. These facilitators were really well-suited. They helped bring us to a place where we can see personal growth. We are all there because we want to be there, and we challenge each other. Facilitators are valuable. The work is always rewarding.

Maggie: Thanks to Jenny and Alison for the way they set up this conversation and their sensitivity. It was extremely valuable to see how everyone let down their guard to have real conversations. It's a huge hurdle to try to have sincere conversations. We need to get more people upfront to see that this process won't hurt them. Our low number of participants was not indicative of our community's desire to learn; but people are afraid. We would love to try to get others involved.

Trammi: Was this launched with WestportREADS? How about calling it Westport Talks?

Harold: Me and White Supremacy launched WestportREADS for 2021. It is a foundational book. According to the Library's schedule, WestportREADS officially ended at the end of May. The next book to be discussed is Caste by Isabel Wilkerson.

Trammi: Some of the books that are being read are not necessarily books that people may want to read because they are like homework. The House in the Cerulean Sea by T. J. Klune is beautifully done while mentioning things we should be aware of. It is an easier read. We can lose people when the material is not enjoyable.

Jill Nadel. You can find literature in books by Toni Morrison, for example. A lot of people are not coming to discuss Caste. We should talk about how to market these discussions and explain what they are. People want to talk. Sessions may be more accessible than they think. The Vanishing Half: A Novel, by Brit Bennett, should be a book that people can get into. We should distinguish between anti-racist book groups versus regular book groups in Westport. Discussing anti-racism is different from talking about a story and its characters. We are trying to create spaces for fiction and theatre. How do we get there?



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Harold: Get suggestions to us to see how to put them together for discussion.

Westport Pride – Brian McGunagle: On June 5th, we had an amazing turnout (about 500). Jim Marpe presented a proclamation for Pride Month in Westport. The Pride flag is flying on the pole. Speakers including students and the Staples Players were present. It was a very moving day. Thank you to Alison for her beautiful words of inspiration. This was the first such celebration in Westport. We hope it's an annual tradition. We are holding discussions at the Library, as well. The Ruth Steinkrautz Cohen Bridge is lit up in rainbow colors at night. Several events are being supported by 30 merchants. The Remarkable Theater is showing *The Bird Cage. Dolls and Guys* by the Musical Theatre of CT on the Westport/Norwalk border will be held on June 26th @ 8. Pride Day was held at Staples last Friday and in the elementary schools. We are happy about the inclusivity and receptivity having just started in January. We will hold a dozen different events this month. We were in the CT Post, on News 12, and in Dan Woog's blog.

Sal: Brian did a wonderful job.

Westport Library – Jennifer Keller:

- We have posted amazing conversations up on the new video and podcast page.
- Catherine Lewis interviewed Nesrine Malik, author of We Need New Stories on June 1st.
- We give a big shout out to Dereje Tarrant who interviewed author Kwame Alexander on May 27th.
- There are more programs coming down the pike. Read our e-News to get the information.
- We are hosting Craig Melvin and his wife on stage next Thursday (launching his book Fatherhood). You can be inside the Library for that program.
- Elon Green on July 22nd looks at a serial killer targeting gay men in NY in the 80's.

Zoe: The session with Kwame Alexander is the first time an author talk went into the schools. We have not received the feedback. Those watching really enjoyed it. We usually see attrition, but no one left. We'll try to do it again at some point.

Harold. We may want to talk to the schools about scheduling future events.

Liz Falk: There should be more events in the future. We received great feedback from the principals that the kids loved it. Not everyone could participate. It would help to have someone involved from other than Greens Farms Academy. 800 7th and 8th graders viewed the session. Some were familiar with him; others were not. The overall reaction was very positive. Alex Giannini (Library), Holly Sulzycki (Staples), and Greens Farms Academy worked out the arrangements. The PTA is interested in continuing to do events like this. During the weekend of Halloween (October 28th – October 30th), we'll have authors for all ages. We have great opportunities for our kids and should pursue them.

Trammi: It was great that this program targeted Middle Schoolers. There is a program for the Elementary school already. Programming should continue with the Middle School and the High school. The Elementary school librarian is looking at bringing in a diverse author (in-person is better) for Kindergarten and 1st grade. There can be three groups split with different discussions per age group.

Danielle: Is the line-up for StoryFest set?

Jennifer: 90% of the program is set. We are just filling in a few holes now.

Harold asked for a motion to adjourn. Althea moved and Catherine Onyemelukwe seconded. The vote was unanimous.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:58AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary