



**TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes**  
**Thursday, February 3, 2022**  
**Via Zoom**



**Attendees:** Harold Bailey, Jr. (Presiding), Jen Tooker (First Selectwoman), Bernicestine McLeod, Zoe Tarrant, Rev. Alison Patton (Saugatuck Congregational Church), Elaine Daignault, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Catherine Lewis, Susan Ellis, Ramin Ganeshram (Executive Director, Westport Museum for History and Culture), Lee Goldstein (Westport Board of Education)

**Guests:** Brett Aronow, Danielle Dobin (Chairwoman, Westport Planning and Zoning Committee and the P&Z Affordable Housing Subcommittee), Kevin Christie (Westport Board of Education), Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Bethany Gugliemino (Westport Playhouse), Andrea Moore (Second Selectwoman), Lynn Scully (Town of Westport), Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police Department), Harris Falk (RTM), Danielle Teplica (Volunteer Director, Friends of TEAM Westport), Liz Falk, Faith Sweeney (Literacy Coach, Coleytown Elementary School), Patra Kanchanagom (AAPI Westport – Asian American and Pacific Islanders), Trammi Nguyen (Co-Chair, Staples PTA DEI), Tom Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Nancy Lewis, Alex Giannini (Westport Library), Rebecca Martin, Kristi Law, Liz Heyer (Westport Board of Education), Deputy Chief Ryan Paulsson (Westport Police Department), Olga Roberts, Joan Gillman, Shanelle Henry (Greens Farms Academy), Bill Harmer (Director, Westport Library), John Schwing (Westport Journal), Irene Syomichev, Patrick Tesoriero, Cheryl Scott Daniels, Candice Savin (Third Selectwoman, Westport), Darcy Hicks, Anne Alcyone, Lauren Francese, Abby Gordon-Tolan, Stacie Lewis

The meeting was called to order at 8:02am.

**Welcome / Comments / Teen Diversity Essay Contest / AAPI Westport – Harold Bailey, Jr.:**

We have had quite a run over the past few weeks.

Harold reminded us about the October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, statement approved by the Board of Selectmen (BOS) that formalizes the Town's commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. He reviewed that statement by the Town and the earlier statement by the Representative Town Meeting (RTM) that says that racism is a public health concern.

There apparently is a group that has decided that equity is a bad word, and are anti- "anti-racism", and state that systemic racism does not exist. Our charter from the beginning has been to make Westport more welcoming. If we have a group now that says we should not be pursuing that goal or saying that systemic racism does not exist, that is the antithesis to why we were put in place and to what we have been doing successfully since 2003. It says that the Town does not want to be welcoming, that we can't tell someone that "othering" exists, and that we (as a Town) don't want to discuss "othering" at all.

A question has been raised about TEAM Westport's whole legitimacy via the threat of a lawsuit saying that TEAM Westport is violating its charter, the Town charter, and the State charter. Read the ordinance. In 2005, we were established by the RTM and have functioned in that manner over the past 19 years. Our work culminated in October with the BOS statement. We were always a multi-Town organization. We worked with Weston on advice for both Towns. From the beginning we had members from Weston. It is not unusual. We are not a Commission, and we are not a Board. Political minority representation has never been a part of the equation. Term limits has never come up; nor any requirement that members be from Westport. To have a letter say that we are in violation is new news. I appreciate that we are now having a legal review. I don't want to see in the newspapers that we have intentionally violated anything. We have to stop and take a look. It's vicious and purposely directed at attacking us. We'll get a view by the public.

Originally, we worked with organizations on a one-by-one basis. We focused on anti-othering. In the past few years, we transformed to having the leaders of our organizations work with us in an adjunct way and



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in partnership. One of those efforts is the Essay contest. We have been a leader nationally and people have been excited about it. We have gotten positive national recognition. To then have an anonymous group say that by way of the Essay contest we're trying to inculcate some ideology into young people demonizes us to get people to talk about it. For the past 8 years, the essays have given an idea as to what kids are thinking. Kids who have won are white, are gay, and are from different cultures. Some of that has led us to talk with the Board of Education (BOE) to get a clear look at what has been done to improve conditions within our schools (with respect to ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, race, and religion). The Idea that if you are not in the majority, you can be othered is exposed. We are exploring to find out how we serve ALL of our students well. It's not something just for "those" students, it's for ALL students. We hear that microaggressions are not conscious and so that they are not a problem. How do we help alleviate some of those problems? We now have some work around this environment to see how to serve everyone better. That's why a tactic is to make equity a bad word and to demonize it and to demonize the students. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is now a Marxist plot. There's a lot here that we need to step back and look at. If you don't believe in equity or systemic racism, where are you? -- not just this group, but the Town. What do we want to pull back or move forward in helping to understand each other and the narratives of our history and how off-handed comments affect people?

We are proud that we have moved the Town forward. Conversations, lectures, contests, and other work with all of the folks has been groundbreaking. There is not another such committee structured like we are in the State of CT and maybe nationally that we can find. Please think about what we want to be and what we stand for. TEAM will continue to be an advisory committee.

Essay Contest: Harold read the prompt for this year's Essay contest. February 25<sup>th</sup> at 11:59:59p is the deadline. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, the awards ceremony will be held at the Library.

There are facts about the TEAM Diversity Essay contest that need to be clear. The contest was maligned in the press by people who stated alternative facts about it.

AAPI Westport: Asian American Pacific Islander Westport is hosting a function at the Y this weekend. The public is invited. You are asked to register if you are attending, but registration is not required.

**First Selectwoman / Messaging Update – Jen Tooker:**

To clarify some items: I have received a letter from Vincent Marino on January 31<sup>st</sup> alleging that the composition of TEAM Westport is structurally in violation with respect to the following: members should be citizens of the Town, members are not adhering to "term limits", and members are not in conformity with the minority representation rule as Harold mentioned. Our Town Attorney will address and respond to the allegations posed by Atty. Marino. We expect a response within the next week. At that point we'll share the response publicly. I have had some questions. We are following our attorney's process.

For the record, I am fully committed to preserving the mission of TEAM Westport. TEAM Westport is established. When I read the TEAM Westport writeup, the original mission of the committee remains as important as when it was put together by ordinance and I think everyone should know that.

Harold: I am certainly looking forward to continuing.

Jen: I want to shout out to Joan Gillman about her suggestion to conduct community conversations on difficult topics. We need to do more of it. I have an idea in my mind as to how we can create more conversations on difficult topics. We have room to do more. I want to pursue this idea going forward.

Harold: I agree. We have had town conversations about race and other topics but may not have had conversations in 10 years. There are things that are rock bottom values (we can't bring in the Klan or



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American Nazis). We have to establish our envelope of values and work on the things that work best for Westport.

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

Brief updates: There was a public inquiry as to whether students in the school system could participate in the TEAM Westport Diversity Essay Contest. The attorney for the Board and for the system has read the complaint and has stated that participation by students does not violate Board policies. The essay is externally administered and is not sponsored by the school system. A discussion about race – this year’s topic asks participants to discuss why it is difficult to talk about race — is not ideological. We want to make sure that this is clearly understood since it has become part of the discourse in Town.

2) There was a long, comprehensive BOE meeting on Monday evening. We have requested that we take a pause in the process of developing our strategic plan. We wanted to craft a plan based on two principles. We recommended that we go deeper, using a systems approach, into social and emotional learning (SEL) and collaborative problem solving and to get these established in our curriculum. We have received a lot of feedback and input. Our approach incorporates design thinking and iterative thinking. We are not familiar with other districts, so our question is how we start with social and emotional development. There is a primary need for and emphasis on mental health that existed even before the pandemic. We have pockets of good work. 100% of social and emotional learning is linked with academic learning. We are taking a future look on it to determine what are the specific things kids need to thrive. This is exciting! You can review the slide deck from the BOE meeting the other night. We have additional work to do on collaborative problem solving.

3) The elective course on Black and Puerto Rican history has been very much mischaracterized. The course was NOT developed locally; nor is it a local mandate. The course was developed by the State of Connecticut’s Educational Resource Center (SERC) and there is a State mandate in place for the course to be taught in each public school district. Lauren has cogent comments about this. We are not a part of SERC. We are currently piloting the class successfully.

4) We are engaging in an iterative process to finalize the Equity Study report so that it is comprehensive and captures the work we did as a group. It’ll be released when ready and we will discuss at a BOE meeting.

Lauren: Reiterating the facts about the course on African American and Latinx history –

1. We are piloting it this year, it is an elective course that must be requested by students (not mandated), and we are required by the State to offer the course effective next year.

2. Students are not required to take the course.

3. The history taught in the course aligns with history standards facilitated by SERC along with 100 educators and staff members from museums. SERC rolled the class out and facilitated it – just like any of our other history courses.

4. SERC had a major role in developing the course, but our local team implemented the course a little bit differently. It is a packed curriculum. We used what aligned with our standards – also aligning around industry standards. Some things did not fit for us, so we made sure we adhered to our pedagogical standards and our priorities based on the rest of our curriculum. There is flexibility in the implementation of our curriculum locally. Our goal is to give our students what they need to take out into the world.

I am always happy to answer questions.



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**Policing – Chief Foti Koskinas:** The last three officers we interviewed during our hiring process will be offered positions. We have another ten candidates for entry level position(s) – including female, African American, and Latinx candidates. Westport is a town where people want to apply.

1. On the topics discussed, TEAM Westport has played a very important advisory role with the Police Department.
2. The CRP will be reviewed. Chief Koskinas looks forward to continuing to work with TEAM Westport.

**Jen:** Applications have been received for the last two positions on the CRP. Candidates will be interviewed next week by the RTM. We should have the two people by next month.

**Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin:** I requested the opportunity to start meeting in partnership with TEAM Westport willingly. The support has been tremendous.

We postponed our conversation on affordable housing from January 26<sup>th</sup>, but we are setting a new date. The State requires towns to create affordable housing, otherwise developers can do it for us. We are at 3.6% now. Whatever we can do to improve our affordable housing stock assists us in maintaining control. Any affordable housing must address the latent racism that drove housing development. Only white Christian men who were not divorced could buy here. When houses were affordable, people who did not fit a certain profile could not buy here. It's important to share this information. This is a conversation rooted in facts. We can talk about the facts about diversifying our housing and make sure everyone knows them. There will be a lot going on with respect to the P&Z and, so, lots of opportunity to weigh in. Thanks for this opportunity to report here. I am grateful and glad to have this group with whom I can bounce these ideas. It is hard to be disgraced and you have handled this with grace. This is a team effort. I appreciate the inroads we've made especially since the ProPublica article about Westport and housing.

**Elaine:** I will be going before the Board of Finance (BOF) for the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funds for an investment in affordable housing for West Parrish Road. We have been working to get that land and want to inject money to move forward. This will help us with respect to the moratorium and will help folks live and work in our community. We are requesting \$150K for predevelopment costs and welcome questions. We are anticipating 20-25 units – all affordable for families. They have to do the environmental review. The State Department of Transportation will do an evaluation and then transfer the land to the State Department of Housing (DOH) who will issue an RFP for a developer. The developer would get the 150K to do a feasibility study. DOH will determine who that is, not the Town.

**Question:** Do you need anything in terms of support?

**Elaine:** I will share the proposal and welcome everyone's attendance and your speaking out. The BOF briefly discussed this in October. The conversation is ongoing.

**Danielle:** Thank you to Elaine. Because of where it is and who will be running the project, no other person from a staff point of view could present this request. Elaine is doing it on behalf of the Town. It is important to the Town to move this forward. We are not being compelled to do this. We are choosing to do this opportunity to expand the housing. Left to the private sector, affordable 3 bedrooms are never available. If private, out of 100 units, 80 would be at market rate. We can limit density, and we can create family units for people who can participate as members of our community and not just work in this community. This is what we can achieve when we work together and are not siphoned off. Everyone working together helped versus where we were when the scathing ProPublica article was written.

**TEAM Westport Parent Updates / Community / Book Clubs – Zoe Tarrant and Catherine Lewis:**

**Catherine:** We met on Tuesday. The topic was: how to converse with our children about race and about what is happening in our community. As adults, we need to have conversations and lean into hard topics



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and be in a community as we do it. We have not set our meeting for next time. Pay attention to the BOE meetings and show support for our educators to make sure schools are a place of belonging for all kids.

Zoe: We have extended our reach and more parents are coming. We need to have conversations about color blindness, for example, so that we all have a common understanding of the implications and why we should not use the term. A real hard conversation about our history and the American narrative – why different people have come to where we are – is essential. Critical Race Theory talk is a reckoning as to how we as adults process our narrative as we incorporate groups that haven't been a part of the history before.

**Westport Museum of History and Culture – Ramin Ganeshram:**

- That's exactly right. We talk about national and regional history using narratives that took place over 7500 years of human habitation. We use examples from the times. If you use primary sources, the effort to erase people is not good.
- Our walking tours are from spring to the end of fall. We will do special tours upon request.
- With respect to affordable housing, we are constantly doing research. Exhibits take a couple of years to research. One relevant story here in Westport is about the Adair family. Mr. Adair, who worked for Morris Ketcham as a groomsman, and his wife lived in Westport and held on to their land near Exit 42. The Town of Westport used leverage via the tax system to deprive the family of their land years ago.
- Come into the Museum to see our exhibits. If you were in the story, you are in the story.

**Westport Library – Alex Giannini:**

- We are in the process of rescheduling Heather McGhee. The current tentative date is May 12<sup>th</sup>.
- On March 8<sup>th</sup>, the Charles Joyner exhibit will be going up at the Sheffer gallery.
- On February 27<sup>th</sup>, Barbara Backlar Reis is bringing songs from *My Millionaire*, a musical based on Mark Twain's The Million Pound Bank Note. Jan Bassin will lead the talk-back discussion after the performance.
- We have a hard time linking on our site now, but it should be fixed soon.

Harold: Thank Bill and Alex for the support and logistics with the Teen Diversity Contest.

**Bus Shelter Taskforce – Melissa Kane:** The bus shelter project for the Town is moving forward.

**Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:** The Playhouse is moving forward with a Mobile Unit for Fairfield County that is a traveling children's tour. It is a show encompassing social emotional wellness. We'll be at schools, at outside areas, and community centers. We are excited and trying to get it up and running.

- During Black History Month, we'll do a social post every Friday about an emerging black playwright.
- We are searching for someone to work with Jenny in education and community engagement. We are extending the deadline to Feb 25<sup>th</sup>. Whoever applies needs to love working with kids.
- The EDI committee still meets every other week. Please check out our updates on our website.

Harold: Have you identified Towns and places?

Jenny: All towns in Fairfield County have grants so we can offer the Mobile Unit free of charge or on a sliding scale. Our goal is to get into places that have not had theater. Then when it's successful we would go to New Haven and beyond and present scenes from the season. We want to visit connecting points such as schools, boys and girls clubs, places where people gather and feel comfortable. Theater can happen anywhere.

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

- Our annual celebration for Dr. King has been rescheduled.
- The Interfaith Clergy will have a conversation about how to support TEAM Westport and will be engaged to support and facilitate.



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- We are one step along the road to having a speaker about climate crisis. Climate negatively impacts people of color so we want to know what we can be doing regionally. Sustainable Westport, the Library, TEAM Westport, Saugatuck Church, and other institutions are currently working on this for later this year.
- Our congregation at Saugatuck is welcoming Tom Scarice, our Superintendent of Schools, this Sunday, February 6<sup>th</sup> at 10am in our *Faith in Action* series that asks local leaders about how they connect their core values with what works in the community. Our own Ramin Ganeshram, Executive Director of the Westport Museum for History and Culture, will be with us on March 6<sup>th</sup> and Peter Boyd from Sustainable Westport on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Please join us via live stream or in person.
- As a witness, partner, and participant, this TEAM Westport space is the one space where we have leadership, public institutions, and clergy engaged in one space. This is astonishing. I appreciate this convergence of voices. Whatever else happens, this is remarkable. We have been able to have this space. I share as much as I can remember with others. I appreciate the dedication of everyone and thank you.

**Public Comments.**

Catherine Lewis moved to adjourn the meeting. Susan Ellis seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned at 9:35am.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod  
Secretary