

MINUTES
Belonging Equity & Inclusion Committee Meeting
Tuesday, Apr 12, 2022
6:30 - 8:00 PM
City Hall, Second Floor Conference Room

Board members present: Clark Sheldon; Mareesa Miles; Preston Fuller; Leah Christopher; Reier Erickson (chair)

Via Zoom: Reese Kelly; Eliana Castro

Board members absent: Keith Longmore

From City Council: Mayor Tim Smith; Alderperson Marie Bessette; City Manager Dominic Cloud

Members of the public present: Kathi Fuller

1. Call to order

Leah Chrostopher called the meeting to order at 6:30 pm.

2. Reier Erickson reviewed land acknowledgement:

“We are guests on this unceded land that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange among indigenous people for thousands of years, and as the home primarily of the western Abenaki people. We honor them, recognize and respect these peoples, especially the Abenaki as the traditional stewards of the lands and waters on which we gather. It’s in that spirit today that we acknowledge that we are here on this land as guests and as such we need to respect and protect the unceded lands within our use.”

3. Agenda introduction and review

Leah Christopher reviewed the agenda.

4. Public comment on non-agenda items

No comments.

5. Consider approval on march 9 minutes

Reier Erickson moved to approve, Mareesa Miles seconded. Passed unanimously.

6. Zoom identification of attendees

Leah Christopher went over the council’s concerns over zoom attendees not identifying themselves.

Dominic Cloud stated that he reached out to lawyers who explained that the committee does not have a right to require attendees to identify themselves.

Kelly asked if anyone within main city buildings to provide ID, as people in zoom do not need to identify themselves.

Cloud explained that it is common practice to request that attendees sign into meetings, and invite people to identify themselves as they speak, but that they don’t require it. He said that no one has refused to identify themselves.

7. Conversation with City of St. Albans Representatives - Mayor Tim Smith, Alderperson Marie Bessette 6:50 & City Manager, Dominic Cloud

Leah Christopher welcomed them to the meeting. She mentioned that the committee was looking to put forward a community agreement, which would be addressed later. She asked everyone to remain respectful and remember that we can disagree but should not be disagreeable.

Reese Kelly asked where this was coming from, and Leah Christopher clarified that she knows we have some difficult questions. Reese Kelly asked to define what it means to stay respectful. Leah Christopher clarified that she wanted the conversation to remain constructive.

• What was the City Council's process for how it filled seats on the BEI Committee, including consideration for inclusivity/diversity, residency stipulation, and assignment of individuals' term lengths and changing the number of seats from 7 to 8? How will this process be done in the future?

Mayor Tim Smith explained that the process was similar to other boards. They advertised for candidates, received applications, then interviewed all applicants. Through this they gained an understanding of who the applicants were, and narrowed it down to who they felt would benefit the committee. They decided to elect people who had experienced an amount of bias throughout their life and could provide valuable perspectives. Upon being questioned about why people outside of St. Albans were not able to join, he clarified that it was a city committee, which would not usually bring in people from outside of St. Albans.

He explained that they chose 8 members because there were 8 good applicants; all of them had something to bring to the table. Term lengths were fairly random. Positions shift when there is a vacancy, in which case applicants are interviewed in small groups, for privacy. Then a recommendation is made to the full board.

Reese Kelly asked how term lengths were randomized. Mayor explained that they thought they'd need 1, 2 and 3 year terms, so they distributed term lengths as they went down the list.

Reese Kelly brought up the bias in this strategy. He also criticized that members were not asked what term lengths would be feasible for them.

Tim Smith and Marie Bessette both said that it was not biased, but that they should have asked what length term everyone would find realistic.

Reese Kelly argued that everyone has bias. Marie Bessette agreed, and said that she and the mayor were here to learn and happy to think about it. The mayor explained that from here on out, each additional term would be 3 years long.

• Why was an individual who has publicly expressed a lack of support for the creation of the BEI Committee and who fundamentally believes the work of this committee is unnecessary appointed to serve on this committee?

Marie Bessette suggested that he may have had good intentions, or changed his mind on his opinion of the committee. She said she wasn't fully aware of his lack of support, and that his interview hadn't raised any red flags.

The mayor said they knew he would have an opposing viewpoint, but that his contrasting opinions might bring something to the table.

Reese Kelly asked for their followup now that they knew about his op-ed. He asked the city hall members to rethink their decision to admit him to the board.

The mayor clarified that, in his interview, he had said he no longer agreed with the contents of his letter. He suggested the importance of having opposing viewpoints in a committee.

Kelly argued that this member's opinions were not opposing in a helpful way. He said that this member's view points were actually counterintuitive to the committee's mission. He requested to hear Marie's viewpoint.

Marie said that in the interview, a question was asked as to how the interviewee would resolve arguments within the committee. She believed that this gentleman may have had a change of heart and become more open to learning. She suggested giving him a chance.

Eliana Castro jumped in to say that she took issue with his appointment because of how strongly, vocally, and publicly as Keith Longmore (the board member in question), she did not think he would be truly interested in changing and helping with the committee. She found it hard to believe that he could have changed so quickly and so fully.

Reeir Erickson brought up that the things he had said were meant to be too personal and explicitly harmful, and that he seemed to be present only to throw a wrench in things. Erickson suggested just moving on, since no discussion of Keith had been at all helpful. Leah agreed with him that the committee should move on until Keith was present to answer for himself.

Reese Kelly asked where any follow up had been done as to removing Keith from the board. Dominic Cloud again suggested moving forward with the meeting. He explained that the city council was looking to bring in people who were uneducated in the board's mission. He mentioned that the council tended to try and remain open to different people and did not like to exclude.

Clark Sheldon wanted to acknowledge the request to move on, but also wanted to make a note that it may be important for the committee to address what will happen in the future in a similar situation. He explained that it's important to recognize both intent and impact behind actions like those mentioned.

Erickson asked Dominic Cloud to request Keith's presence. He reiterated the importance of all board members taking their work seriously and being invested.

• What are the City Council's/City's:

o Expectations of the BEI Committee?

Reier Erickson wanted to clarify that this question is more about preferred outcomes the council has for the BEI committee.

The mayor explained that his goal was to create an environment that was welcoming and respectful, and that the committee could work towards the education of community members and the creation of more inclusive spaces. He said he believed community events would be a great opportunity for education, and he suggested using those. Marie wanted to come up with new ideas for community engagement as well. She explained that she wanted to

allow more perspectives to speak for themselves, and that she thought there was a lot of education to be had in the community.

o BEI's policy and operational latitude – while objectives are outlined, some are considered to be quite broad?

The mayor said none of it is cast in stone, but that this is just the starting point. Dominic Cloud said that the spark for the committee's creation was pride month, and a realization that the city was falling behind, so to speak. He said that the primary goal is community engagement and realizing where biases lie. The city doesn't like to micromanage, so advisory boards are given fairly broad reach. The only walls the committee is likely to encounter are when interceding into other boards and their projects.

Leah Christopher summarized this as a lack of desire to micromanage, and a desire to gain the depth and expertise that this committee will bring to the table.

Mareesa Miles asked if the board can give suggestions to the city council. Dominic Cloud told her he encouraged this.

o What is the process for resolution if/when a committee policy and/or action desired is not what the City Council/City wants?

Dominic Cloud explained that it would involve a conversation between the BEI board and the council. The committee was appointed because of their blindspots and the advice they needed in certain areas, but the council is still the council, and is still able to overturn what they deem fit.

o What is the Committee's accountability?

Leah Christopher felt that this had been addressed already during the meeting.

o How regularly will the BEI Committee report out to the City Council?

Dominic Cloud explained that most boards have an opportunity to engage with the council directly about once a year. The council's time is their most precious commodity, so purpose is of the essence.

The mayor suggested that the council hears from Leah Christopher in regards to committee issues.

Clark Sheldon asked if there were any projects or tasks to know about, and how to stay updated.

Dominic explained the basics of how the council works. He said it would be difficult to have a set member delegated to BEI goings-on, but that it was possible to make sure the council and committee were in touch. Leah Christopher suggested having someone from the council who could act as a liaison to the committee. Dominic agreed that this was a good idea.

• What are the committee's expectations of the City Council and staff?

Leah Christopher opened the floor to anything any committee members would like to communicate.

Mareesa Miles wanted to briefly go back to Marie's statement about having things to learn, and wanted to remind everyone to ask questions and be open, because we're all learning.

• **What is the history and vision for the statement “All are Welcome Here!”?**

The need for an anti-hate message arose when antisemitic speech was becoming more prevalent in the community. Dominic said there was a desire to counteract speech with speech, and that they wanted a campaign to express the values of the city, so they met to discuss slogans. The slogan came from a book, with the intention of capturing the city's feelings on issues of racism and hate speech. He was disappointed that the campaign wasn't embraced more.

Leah added that there was a desire for a banner with a short, to the point slogan for purposes of legibility. She admitted that it would probably seem lackluster, and like too little too late. The thinking was that it's a starting point.

Preston Fuller agreed, and mentioned that the goal was to avoid provoking more hate speech and would add to public spirit rather than create negativity.

The mayor said he had heard that peers had received the message well.

Leah Christopher mentioned the nebulous nature of the slogan being both helpful and unhelpful.

Reier Erickson called the slogan a little uncreative. He suggested a newer, more creative slogan.

Reese Kelly called to attention the lack of representation of the people who were most affected by the slogan's goals. Jewish and Black people were not asked their ideas and opinions for the slogan, which reflects in the effects of the message. He suggested consulting affected groups in the future.

8. Community Agreement (D&V) 7:35

Leah Christopher asked for this to be top consideration for May, when everyone could be present. Board was unanimously in favor of this.

9. Hate Material Postings – Preston Fuller 7:51

Preston Fuller explained that he was more than willing to summarize what hate speech has been seen in town every month and make a report.

Reese Kelly mentioned a website called *Neighbors vt- no hate* that relays sites where hate speech has been found so it may be taken down.

Preston Fuller asked if the committee wants a specific itemized report down on record so there would be a full report of incidents of hate speech.

Leah Christopher agreed that this report would be helpful.

10. Public Comment on Agenda Items (limit 2 minutes per person) 7:52

Leah Christopher opened the floor for public comment. No comment was made.

11. Other Business 8:00

Leah Christopher asked if the committee would like formal name plates to be made.

Mareesa Miles and Reier Erickson said they weren't opposed, but believed time and resources could be better spent on more useful things.

Leah Christopher mentioned a municipal grant opportunity for equitable and inclusive communities. She said that this could be a point of interest for the committee.

12. Adjourn 8:12