

Longmeadow Coalition for Racial Justice

Meeting Minutes Thursday, March 4, 2021

Arrangements for remote participation by Coalition for Racial Justice members and members of the public are being made in accordance with Governor Baker's Emergency Order Modifying the State's Open Meeting Law.

Participation in this meeting was done remotely via Zoom.

Task force members present: Bisrat Abebe, Kathleen Allen, Mara De Maio, Neena Grover, Charlotte LaForest, Ryan McCollum, Michelle Tom, Zach Verriden

Others present: Jim Moran, Kara A. Stevens

I. Call to order

Chair Zach Verriden started recording the Zoom. The meeting started at 7:05pm.

II. Roll call

All task force members present except Kathleen Allen and Lauren Rollins. Kathleen arrived during agenda item VII.

III. Public comment

Hearing none, Zach moved on.

IV. Approval of minutes from last meeting

Hearing no comments, *Zach moved to approve the minutes. The roll call vote was all yeas. The minutes were approved as presented.*

V. Template for report write-up

Zach reminded us of the template formatting to follow for our drafts, which will make compiling it all together at the end as easy as possible.

VI. Subcommittees for writing report sections

Similarly, this item was a reminder that we're having working groups outside of these meetings. Bisrat Abebe, Kathleen, and Lauren already sent around a draft of their section.

VII. Discuss and review: Discuss/research/gather data steps town can take to reshape discourse and actively engage all citizens in work necessary to address the scourge of systematic racism

Zach shared his screen showing our group spreadsheet with our ideas in response to the final charge from the Select Board. (The following bullet point items are suggestions from the list. Paragraphs are our discussions.)

- Sustainability of the work (mobilizing resources, building budget, office, FTE?)

- Liaise directly with school committee
- Equity audit
- Look for ways to incorporate multicultural aspects/diversity discussions into already existing public spaces/events/meetings

Mara de Maio noted that there were a few overlapping recommendations across the different report sections/charges and thought we could include a summary section in the report that addressed those so we wouldn't repeat ourselves. Charlotte LaForest, Bistrat, and others thought that was a good idea, but advised keeping the overlapping items in until we assemble the drafts together, at which point we'll be able to see the full picture.

Neena Grover brought up budgeting and wondered how we will be able to know how much each piece would cost. Zach responded that town manager Lyn Simmons was in the process of building the budget with the Select Board. He intends to share our priorities with her before they do that. Our work won't be complete before they finalize their FY22 budget, but hopefully if they know what we want, they can try to protect those resources for us.

- Employ local media to raise the profile of diversity, racism, and discrimination issues

Mara thought it was important to be proactive in contacting the media about positive issues and events as well as negative/discriminatory race issues. Ryan McCollum pointed out that the media is always looking for content and sometimes smaller publishers like having recurring content, such as columns covering certain issues. This might be part of the job for a new town employee who is focused on DEI, especially as there is currently no dedicated town communications person.

- Host cultural events to create awareness of diversity in the community

Neena suggested block parties and getting the community together in a way that involves a lot of people would be a cost effective and efficient way of raising awareness of different cultures. The new adult center will have beautiful premises to possibly use. Kathleen said the town green is also a perfect location for such events. Neena added that Key Club members are always looking for things to volunteer for. We could incorporate anti-bullying, something that unites people.

Bistrat brought up the fact that Longmeadow is highly involved with and invested in kids' sports activities. How could we integrate with these activities and take advantage of that type of event that already has a built-in audience? Charlotte latched on to that and wondered if anyone had connections to any well-known athletes, someone who could draw in kids who might not otherwise attend an event about DEI to have discussions about it. Ryan told us that he has friend who is a former NFL player who he's currently working with on another project.

- Consider athletic event incorporation and other high school events (sub-rec for consideration of school committee liaison)
- Create public education campaigns aimed at educating and providing information to the general population and showing support for underrepresented communities
- Train and educate stakeholders
- Establish committees that organize cross-cultural dialogue or provide access to information on racism

Ryan and Bisrat stressed the importance of facilitating dialogue, to help people have difficult conversations.

Michelle Tom mentioned that, separate from the groups that facilitate dialogue, recommending establishing a committee to continue the work of this task force would overarch across many report sections. Zach said it seems like we'll be recommending a full-time equity position, and thought there could be a considerable time gap between the end of our work and when Select Board takes up any of these recommendations. He wondered how we/they might bridge that gap.

Kathleen mentioned that we had previously talked about using a regional approach to some of this, especially to address the budget aspect. Ryan said that there are probably many towns who are doing similar work but who don't have the budget to pay for their own position. He suggested talking to institutions like Bay Path that have FT DEI positions and asking whether they could give us guidance with this role.

Kara A. Stevens, a member of the public attending the meeting, wrote in the chat that she's a Bay Path faculty member who is interested in helping us.

- Consider regional or institutional approach to DEI capacity
- Coordinate with Longmeadow Interfaith Clergy Network to host conversations in a variety of houses of worship, joint book reads

Bisrat also suggested that religious institutions may be of assistance, with respect to a regional approach. Charlotte agreed that in her work with interfaith clergy in town, she believed it would be very doable to host dialogues, etc. across these communities, and thought that houses of worship would be effective places to get conversations on these concepts into the population.

Zach liked the scalability of the regional approach idea, and thought it could be replicable for other small communities. We could address racism in our backyards, but we could help other towns look to us as a model, and be leaders in this area.

- Racial equity trainings for employees at all levels create a shared understanding and increased skill to advance racial equity
- Assess form of town government with respect to DEI. Research other forms of government that might be more inclusive.

Michelle suggested the latter point, and said it was mostly in reference to the town meetings (not the town manager/Select Board roles), where legislation is voted upon. She wondered if having this forum where you have to show up in person at a specific time for hours and vote publicly in front of hundreds of your neighbors deters some people from participating (and therefore from being represented), and does it deter some demographics more than others. She acknowledged that making this change would be difficult given that it would require changing the town bylaws.

- "No Room for Racism" signs in prominent locations like under the "Welcome to Longmeadow" signs

The town Michelle grew up in had these in such spaces and elsewhere, and they made an impression on her. The group liked that it was an uncontroversial but still bold statement that could start

conversations, and if so prominently placed at entrances to the town, could be an inviting first impression for people of color.

- Provide resources for people facing discrimination on town website
- Make a page on town website explicitly showing the town's commitment to DEI. Could be a place to publicize the work of this task force, put equity statement, list/promote any steps the town takes towards DEI, etc.

Michelle thought these would be low-hanging-fruit-type suggestions that would be relatively simple and inexpensive to implement. Zach said that the Longmeadow Public Schools has a page like this. Kathleen noticed that current Longmeadow job postings have “AA/EOE” at the bottom, which is the minimal amount to have to include by law. There are much more purposeful ways of doing that. Mara commented that the listing for the new Wolf Swamp principal is a big improvement over previous postings.

- Make Longmeadow a sanctuary city

Michelle wasn't sure if that was still relevant, but thought it would be another minimal effort statement to make. Ryan thought it was still relevant but maybe using different language. We're already almost a sanctuary area because police don't ask questions related to immigration.

- Encouraging our local library to carry various cultural books. Also the library can do a book drive to collect books from the community.
- Long Meddowe Days; make special efforts to bring in various cultures with food and entertainment
- Reinvent Long Meddowe Days (recently canceled) to focus on the future we'd like to see in Longmeadow

Neena and Charlotte both had suggestions for our annual town festival. Charlotte proposed using this existing popular event to pivot from history towards a future more representative of who we would like to be. Neena expressed that she would love to see an “International Day”-type of large event in the town. She also thought that the library would be another low-cost area where we could get young people involved in and exposed to different cultures.

- Youth/young adult racial justice leadership program

Charlotte submitted that we use the passion and energy in young people and create leadership opportunities to lead these conversations.

- Emphasis on promotion/retention/hiring at senior levels of town government

Charlotte noted that senior levels of leadership in town have no POC. There needs to be more than just a general emphasis on diversity, that we need to make sure that senior leadership positions emphasize that diversity.

VIII. Deadline for draft submission

Zach wants us to be able to look at a complete draft at our next meeting so we can edit it together. We are to send to him our subcommittee submissions on March 16. After the next meeting we'll have to send drafts around back and forth after that to get it finalized ASAP.

IX. Adjourn

Ryan then took a bit of time to state that Zach is doing an amazing job, to which everyone wholeheartedly agreed.

Ryan motioned to adjourn. Charlotte seconded. The roll call vote was all yeas. The meeting adjourned at 8:16pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Tom, clerk

Approved as presented, March 18, 2021