

Longmeadow Coalition for Racial Justice

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, October 29, 2020

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 DeMaio, Neena Grover, Martin Hernandez, Rev. Charlotte LaForest, Ryan McCollum, Lauren Rollins, Michelle Tom, Zach Verriden

Also present: Saul Finestone, "BERST Academy"

Chair Zach Verriden called the meeting to order at 7:02pm

After a roll call of attendance, including noting members of the public present, Zach started recording the Zoom.

Approval of minutes from last meeting

Clerk Michelle Tom informed the group that she may include direct quotes in the minutes. *Martin Hernandez made a motion to approve the minutes. Vice Chair Charlotte LaForest seconded. Roll call: all yeas, except Neena Grover, who temporarily dropped out of the Zoom.*

Discussion of group norms and communications

Kathleen Allen led us in a discussion to establish a list of group "norms", or areas of shared understanding relating to how we intend to manage our task force communications and behaviors with each other. She explained why this would be beneficial for the group, in that especially with this sensitive topic of race, we want to make sure we all trust each other when delving into dialogue. Some of us already know each other, some don't, and so discussing these norms up front will help us get to that place of trust sooner. Norms presented included:

- Assuming good intent
- Seeking to understand
- Listening, listening, listening – listen to what's being said and not.
- Being comfortable with "clunky" attempts of expression – realize that "we're working on a sensitive topic. I may say something that may offend something, but I'm trying to work my way through my thoughts."
- Being courageous – Don't let things that concern you leave the meeting and fester. This is beneficial for both open meetings and for the integrity of the group.
- Being comfortable asking "are we still on topic?"

Kathleen then opened the discussion on the items in the list. Charlotte wanted to add under the "seeking to understand" area, that we should seek to understand not just content, but also the

perspectives of others. We should have “generosity of spirit to listen to others who have different experiences...issues, and perspectives that are not our own.” She also wanted us to listen for those voices that aren’t in the room/Zoom. “While we do have a lot of breadth of people within the community on this committee, we don’t have everyone.”

Martin offered another norm, “Take space, make space,” meaning “be cognizant of how much we are speaking and allow other people to speak in the group so there is a fair exchange of ideas. Anti-racism work can quickly become uncomfortable. We should be kind to each other. We’re here to learn together.”

Mara deMaio had a list of suggested norms, including:

- Demonstrate openness and respect. Listen to learn others’ experiences to learn new and varied perspectives.
- Challenge ourselves by examining our own assumptions and beliefs.
- Respect and leverage separate realities (being able to look at different sides of the situation).
- Be curious and non-judgmental.

Lauren Rollins thought our group norms should also be inclusive of people in the community not on the task force that we are trying to represent.

Neena reiterated that we all come from different backgrounds, and encouraged listening to each other with open minds.

Michelle suggested that, as much as possible, we make our own assumptions known and try to be aware of when people are making generalizations.

Kathleen said she would incorporate these suggestions and come back to next meeting with a more finished list for the group to review and decide on.

Primer on Robert's Rules of Order

Select Board Chair Tom Lachiusa mentioned in our last meeting that the Select Board follows Robert’s Rules during their meetings, and because not everyone on this committee was familiar with them, Vice Chair Charlotte LaForest gave the group an overview of the most pertinent Robert’s Rules guidelines. She also said that she would help keep us on track as we go along.

Ryan McCollum noted that there might be times where we disagree on the rules, but specified that the Chair ultimately decides how to proceed. So Zach would rule if there’s a question on the rules, with input from Charlotte.

Potential scope of report for Select Board

Zach opened up discussion on the scope of our final report to the Select Board, as dictated by this task force’s founding document. He put forth a draft of possible sections to include:

- A. Executive summary
- B. Context
- C. Glossary of terms
- D. Research (national, state, local racial inequities across different metrics)

- E. Impact in Longmeadow
- F. Survey data
- G. Synthesis
- H. Recommendations to Select Board

In reaction to the proposed glossary section, Martin thought the committee could benefit from establishing a glossary of terms and concepts for ourselves early on, so as to be better prepared for our work, instead of waiting to compile it only for the later report writing stages.

Ryan suggested including our mission (as written in the Select Board document) in an early section of the report.

Lauren proposed having a place in the report, perhaps as part of the survey section, to include space for people in town to share their own stories and experiences. We could present the narratives both qualitatively and quantitatively, doing the latter perhaps by aggregating common themes. She also noted that surveys and gathering stories will require resources, to which Martin added that we will need to get support from the town to be able to send out a survey to residents and to market it.

Many in the group agreed that personal narratives are going to be a vital addition, and we considered whose narratives to include, in addition to those of people of color who live in Longmeadow. A few members emphasized that there are lots of people who don't live in town but who work or have experiences here, and listening to their voices is just as important to our mission as listening to experiences of residents. If our goal is to make Longmeadow an inclusive place where many different people want to live, then we need to know what people who don't live here and/or don't want to live here think of the town and why.

Bisrat Abebe offered the example of how he learned about this task force, which was only through his mother-in-law, a personal connection. He said the ways that the town is reaching out to people are not necessarily effective if we want to specifically reach people of color.

We discussed the procedural logistics and ramifications of including the voices of non-Longmeadow residents, and whether we would need to formally expand the scope of the committee to do so. While our charge doesn't specifically limit who we can include, it does say the task force will "actively engage all citizens". However, we also might want to talk to undocumented people or folks in the process of becoming citizens, as they too may well have relevant experiences to share.

We concluded that we are not expanding our own charge, but instead are clarifying it and being more explicit about how we plan on doing the work. To be intentional and deliberate about what we believe our own charge to be, Lauren wrote a motion in the Zoom chat, which Martin vocalized. *Lauren and Martin made a motion to adopt a policy that the task force will accept feedback from nonresidents with experience in Longmeadow. Kathleen and Michelle seconded.*

Neena expressed concern about losing focus and giving nonresidents too much of a voice in the report, when we should be concentrating our efforts on what the town of Longmeadow needs to do for ourselves. Martin and Lauren explained that at this point we're just voting to listen to and accept feedback from nonresidents, because there are many in town who might not know about them. How these experiences work their way into the report will be a different discussion. Satisfied by this, Charlotte called the question to a vote. *A roll call vote produced all yeas, and the policy was adopted.*

Given the hour, *Zach motioned to table the conversation about report scope for the next meeting. Ryan seconded. A roll call vote produced all yeas.*

Public comments

Zach moved to open the meeting to public comment. Longmeadow resident Saul Finestone stated that we have a solid foundation, and he looks forward to seeing the group fulfilling its mission.

The group then discussed the placement of public comments within the meeting agenda, with some thinking they should be moved to the beginning of the agenda, and others wondering if the public will want to react to our deliberations throughout the meeting. Ryan argued that “the public isn’t technically part of the body. Their job is to advocate for agenda items they see...If they want to comment [on deliberations], they have the space in between meetings to do that.” Martin added that during other town meetings he had contributed live comments via the Zoom chat, and members were able to address those in real time. Zach decided that we would include public comments towards the beginning of the next meeting.

Future meeting date

Zach set the next meeting for Thursday, November 12, 2020 at 7pm.

Adjourn

Martin motioned to adjourn the meeting at 8:50pm. Charlotte seconded. A roll call vote produced all yeas.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Tom, clerk

Approved as presented, 11/12/2020