

Longmeadow Coalition for Racial Justice

Meeting Minutes Thursday, February 18, 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, Lauren Rollins, Michelle Tom, Zach Verriden

Others present: Saul Finestone, Paulette Merrill

I. Call to order

Chair Zach Verriden started recording the Zoom. The meeting started at 7:06pm.

II. Roll call

All task force members present.

III. New Zoom format

In response to intruders Zoom bombing our last meeting, Zach explained some new Zoom security features that town manager Lyn Simmons implemented for us for this meeting.

In short, only task members have the ability to turn on our mics and cameras. Members of the public can observe, which satisfies the open meeting requirement. They can also raise their hand to request permission to comment, or write a comment in the chat.

IV. Public comment

As a member of the public, Zach shared that he spoke with Select Board chair Tom Lachiusa, updating him on our Coalition's discussions so far. Lachiusa mentioned that they just submitted the school budget, which included some items committed to DEI efforts earmarked for schools. March 10 will be a public comment session, which could be an opportunity for us to make some budgetary asks of the Select Board and town manager. They also expect to hear comments about the new adult center opening. New staff will need to be hired there, which could also be a good opportunity for us to push our recommendations on the hiring process.

V. 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.

VI. Comment on “if attackers were not from Longmeadow”

After our last meeting, task force members had an email discussion about what to say in our public statement responding to the Zoom bomb. Zach mentioned that school superintendent Marty O’Shea read our statement at the school committee meeting, and wanted to know what we thought should be done if the attackers are from Longmeadow.

Lauren Rollins said that where the attackers are from misses the point, and it was more important to re-center conversation on the act of hate and racism itself.

Ryan McCollum added that focusing on the attackers’ origins deflects from the issues of racism and antisemitism. While it might hurt a little more if they are from Longmeadow, ultimately, hate has no border, so it doesn’t matter where they are from.

VII. Template for report write-up

Because we’re getting close to starting to draft our report, Zach put forth a potential template for section and font formatting for us to react to. Michelle Tom didn’t think we needed to box ourselves into formatting specifics at this point. Charlotte LaForest agreed that we could edit later, but also thought it might help to have a uniform submission format.

VIII. Subcommittees for writing report sections

We’ve been keeping notes from each meeting on the different sections of our final report in a group spreadsheet. We’ve discussed having 2-3 task force members collaborate to draft/revise language for each of our five anticipated sections:

- Intro/data/context
- Alliances/orgs
- Hiring/promotion
- Policies to mitigate
- Discuss/research steps

The MA Open Meeting Law allows us to have up to two people on a subcommittee who can meet together without making it public or recording it, so Zach asked us to each sign up for a section to work on, with each set of section partners forming a subcommittee. The subcommittees will prepare drafts to bring to our March 18 meeting.

IX. BIPOC in Longmeadow Instagram

Ryan brought a relevant Instagram page to our attention, “BIPOC in Longmeadow”. It’s a text-only account where someone posts stories on behalf of mostly anonymous BIPOC submitters on the topic of their experiences of racism in town. As of this writing there are about 35 posts, and most of the stories have taken place in Longmeadow schools within the past 10 years.

Ryan doesn’t know who is running it and cautioned that he couldn’t speak to the accuracy of the stories, but encouraged us all take a look and maybe find out if we could use some of the stories in our report.

X. Discuss/review: Advocate for and draft relevant policies that recognize and seek to mitigate the adverse impacts of racism

Task force members had some difficulty in coming up with specific, achievable ideas for this particular topic, as it is so large in scope and very much speaks to the question of how to deal with systemic racism as a whole, not just in Longmeadow. Mara researched what other municipalities had tried and what worked and didn't, and submitted the lion's share of the following ideas (recommendations are bullet points, discussion is in paragraphs):

- Review policies and practices to identify and address systemic discrimination using an external, neutral, objective agency.
- Review old and new by-laws to make sure they conform to human rights principles.
 - This is both a legal requirement and shows a commitment to anti-racism and anti-discrimination
- Develop, implement, and enforce specific anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies and review existing policies to eliminate implicit discriminatory barriers.
 - For example, a Community and Race Relations Policy, which aims to ensure that municipal facilities will not be used by individuals and groups that may violate or promote the violation of rights
- Create policies that require contractors and businesses who do business with and in the town to address discrimination. For example, when obtaining or renewing a business license, make amendments to policies and/or create new actions with respect to:
 - personnel
 - law enforcement
 - leisure services
 - housing and community services
 - education and training
 - use of municipal facilities
 - planning and zoning
 - Fair Wage Policy that requires organizations that do business with the city pay a "fair wage" and to adopt an anti-discrimination policy.

Here Kathleen Allen wondered if we have the authority to ask businesses that exist in the town to adhere to policies we put in place. Ryan thought that would be a question for town solicitor or lawyer, and noted that other towns and cities do use similar stipulations. Springfield has a Responsible Employer Ordinance (REO) stating that if, for instance, a company wins a bid to build a school, they have to employ x number of Springfield residents, x number of veterans, etc. The government can ask that certain things be adhered to in order to get a contract.

- Create policies related to responding to incidents of racism and discrimination. Accessible reporting systems and support services can help community members deal with the effects of racism and discrimination and prevent future occurrences.
 - Collaborate with community organizations and law enforcement bodies to establish and support ways to identify, monitor, and respond to acts of racism, such as hate crimes.
 - Document incidents and describe actions taken in response
 - Encourage the reporting of incidents

- Connect with local news media such as local radio programs
- Make sure people are held accountable when they perpetrate acts of hate.
- Make this a policy, not just rely on a member of the community with their discretionary effort to do something

Lauren felt strongly that the accountability aspect needs to be emphasized, and that consequences for actions need to be meaningful to the specific perpetrators. Many stories we've heard are about people getting slaps on the wrists in response to their racist behavior, which does nothing to deter future racist behavior. We should include what this accountability should look like, including specific steps the town should take.

- Create tool to assess our progress. Impact metrics should be developed, and a policy made to require data collection. This cuts across all the areas of the report we have covered so far.

At this point we talked broadly about other categories that may fit into this section, in particular surrounding real estate and housing, background checks, policing and law enforcement, and social media, but didn't come up with specific language for these. Bisrat Abebe expressed that overall we need to make sure the policies we recommend creating or changing speak to changing the culture of the town so that it's more welcoming to people of color. Maybe suggest creating a committee to welcome diverse families in town.

Zach concluded this agenda item with the news that Lyn Simmons was providing him with data from the town related to employees and law enforcement, which he will share with us later. He also reminded us to sign up to write a section of the report.

XI. Adjourn

Lauren motioned to adjourn. Michelle and Kathleen seconded. The roll call vote was all ayes. The meeting adjourned at 8:28pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Tom, clerk

Approved as presented, March 4, 2021