

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC RACIAL JUSTICE & COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, January 28, 2021

5:00 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Richard Van Wickler, Co-Chair (lost connection between 5:32 and 5:39 PM)
Dr. Dottie Morris, Co-Chair
Eli Rivera
Gail Somers
Pierre Morton
Catherine Workman, Councilor
Tia Hockett
Aditi Saleh (arrived at 5:32 PM)

Staff Present:

Rebecca Landry, Assistant City Manager

Members Not Present:

Co-Chair Van Wickler read a prepared statement explaining how the Emergency Order #12, pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04 issued by the Governor of New Hampshire, waives certain provisions of RSA 91-A (which regulates the operation of public body meetings) during the declared COVID-19 State of Emergency. He called the meeting to order at 5:04 PM. Roll call was conducted.

1) Minutes of Last Meeting

Co-Chair Morris made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of December 18, 2021. Councilor Workman seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

2) Review First Draft of Committee Report Outline

Co-Chair Van Wickler thanked the minute-taker and Ms. Landry. He continued that he was impressed and encouraged by the first draft of the committee report outline. He asked for discussion on how to turn it into a viable document for the Mayor and the City Council.

Ms. Landry explained how she created the committee report outline by going through the notes from all the meetings and pulling out everything she thought was a recommendation or suggestion. She continued that this outline is not exhaustive; it is the first stab at pulling together

the content they want to be sure to cover. Tonight they can review it, add content, remove content, clarify points, and so on and so forth, and then they build a narrative from this outline. The committee's charge was "to develop recommendations to prevent or correct systemic and cultural inequities in Keene." The committee's charge is not to correct systemic and cultural inequities in Keene; it is to develop recommendations to do so. She asked for feedback.

Co-Chair Van Wickler thanked Ms. Landry for her work. He asked who will be the author of the document. Ms. Landry replied that typically she would be the one to draft it but anyone who has specific sentences for specific parts is welcome to do so. It is open for others to participate in, but she is fully prepared to write out whatever needs to be written out after all feedback is received. Co-Chair Van Wickler asked more questions to clarify the process. He asked if the committee will have the chance to review, add to, and subtract from the 2nd draft that Ms. Landry creates based on tonight's feedback, so that the third draft becomes the final report. Ms. Landry replied yes.

Co-Chair Van Wickler expressed agreement with the outline, and stated that it has reignited him as he looks back at all the work the committee has done.

Co-Chair Morris asked if this outline is available to the public. Ms. Landry replied that anyone who wants a copy can request it or she can post it to the committee's webpage. Co-Chair Van Wickler stated that he has heard from people and organizations in the community who are excited about the final draft but has not heard from them wanting to be involved in the outline or first draft.

Co-Chair Van Wickler stated that when the City Council gets the final draft he knows they will have questions about it. He continued that he wants to make sure the committee is prepared with answers to the questions that they will be responsible for answering. For example: if a recommendation is to have more festivals and events, the City Council might ask what the fiscal impact would be. Is answering such a question part of the committee's charge? Ms. Landry replied that it is definitely not the committee's responsibility to say "This will cost XZY" or "The City should spend XYZ." It is okay for the committee to give a recommendation of, for example, having existing or additional festivals do more to celebrate and welcome diversity. They could give specific recommendations about which festivals, the time of year, and so on and so forth. The Mayor suggested that what he might do with the committee's recommendations is assign them to individuals or groups, maybe City committees or community groups. This committee does not need to get into the level of detail that Co-Chair Van Wickler is asking about.

Co-Chair Morris stated that she thinks some of the recommendations will go to the Human Rights Committee (HRC). She continued that this committee might even want to identify recommendations for the HRC to consider taking on. Other recommendations will require governmental action.

Mr. Rivera stated that he agrees that the outline looks great. He continued that one thing he cannot find is the recommendation for an online community survey. Regarding what Co-Chair Morris said about the HRC, he would like to see the AHRJCS Committee's work continue – can they recommend that the HRC be directed to continue this charge in some way?

Co-Chair Van Wickler replied that the “Education” section has “Conduct regular, anonymous climate surveys to measure parents’ understanding of their children’s experiences,” and that is the only mention of surveys he saw. Mr. Rivera replied that that is about education; the committee had talked about having a community-wide survey. Ms. Landry stated that she noted that, and also, there is a bullet point under “Public Input” about conducting an annual climate survey. They can go further and suggest having an open forum available at all times, on the web or elsewhere, if they want. Co-Chair Morris replied that they had said they wanted an ongoing portal/place where people could report concerning incidents that might not reach the level of the police or that people do not want to go to the police about. Ms. Landry replied yes, they could expand to say that.

Ms. Somers expressed agreement with Mr. Rivera’s suggestion that the AHRJCS Committee’s goals and initiatives reside in some sort of permanent body going forward, so there is a long-lasting impact.

Co-Chair Morris asked if they want to make a recommendation that some part of this body continue on to implement some of the recommendations or gather more information. For example, they wanted to do a survey but did not have enough time. Co-Chair Van Wickler agreed. Ms. Landry replied that this is an ad hoc committee – the recommendation to City Council could be for the City Council and the Mayor to consider creating a committee or enhancing the charge of an existing committee to take on the charge of this one. She made a note of that in the draft.

Mr. Morton stated that he agrees with all of this, and thinks that it is also important for every recommendation to be solidly and clearly tied to the committee’s charge, which needs to be spelled out. He continued that the climate survey is directly addressing the need for ongoing input from the community regarding matters of racial inequities or injustice. It needs to be very clear to the City Council. Also, they should consider how the areas in the report can be grouped together, to help them show the relationship between their charge and the recommendations. Ms. Landry replied that the draft outline is the first stab, and yes, they should feel free to reorganize it.

Councilor Workman shared her appreciation for Ms. Landry’s work and the draft outline. She spoke about the idea of a pen-pal program, but her words were unintelligible due to technological issues/the phone connection. Ms. Landry asked if Councilor Workman would email her what she just said, and Councilor Workman replied yes.

Mr. Rivera asked about the process after this is submitted. There is a lot of work to be divvied up among City departments. Who will track that? There are some bullet points that will require follow-up. Ms. Landry replied that the Mayor and the City Council will take this and assume responsibility for following up to the extent that that needs to happen. Or, in some cases, departments will share how they are already meeting certain bullet points. She continued that she does not have a specific answer beyond that. Mr. Rivera stated that he just does not want to see them in the same position as the Governor's LEACT recommendations that were just put out and everyone is trying to figure it out. He wants the recommendations to be solid, and maybe what is beyond that is beyond this committee's scope. He just wants it to be accomplishable. Ms. Landry asked if he wants to recommend a 6- or 12-month follow-up, as one of the bullet points, as a measurement. Mr. Rivera replied yes.

Co-Chair Morris stated that she likes that, because regarding this idea of accountability and who is responsible, often a lot of reports are met with good intentions that do not get acted on. But if you know the public will be asking for an update, that might help to motivate some action. She continued that she wonders if they could make some recommendations for who could address the recommendations and have those folks respond, and seek an update from them.

Ms. Landry stated that she likes the idea of a call to action. She continued that in none of the bullets did she say "the City must..." or "the City shall..." or "the City will..." because she thinks there will be a community-wide effort that is important; she heard that from the group as well. Issuing a call to action is, as Co-Chair Morris says, building some accountability. Including a request for follow-up or measuring process is certainly something they can include. This is important subject matter and she thinks the Mayor and City Council will give it the attention it needs.

Mr. Morton stated that this committee is also about safety. He continued that they do not have any recommendations about the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. They should recommend that. He is happy to write a paragraph about it and send it to Ms. Landry. Ms. Landry replied that she is not sure how much local impact there can be on that, but it cannot hurt to identify that as an area where there may be bias that people do not see. Co-Chair Morris replied that she could put Mr. Morton in touch with the State epidemiologist, whose primary focus is equity. She can talk about what they can do on a local level.

At 5:32 PM Co-Chair Morris noted that Co-Chair Van Wickler lost his connection to the meeting. Also at 5:32 PM, Aditi Saleh arrived.

Ms. Landry stated that after this meeting, if anyone has more feedback about the outline and the draft report she will be writing, they can email that to her. She really wants to hear from the group. The conclusion says they are looking for specific challenges and vision for Keene for racial justice and community safety. She would like to hear from each committee member about what they think the challenges are and what the vision should be.

Mr. Rivera asked: how do they make it more comfortable for folks who are not willing to come forward, to come forward? At their last meeting they talked about how if they go by the public input they received at the last few meetings, everything is “great.” Because people are not coming forward. The challenge is making people comfortable enough to have a conversation. Co-Chair Morris agreed.

Ms. Hockett stated that regarding a vision of what they want, she noticed that some comments on Facebook, in response to the notices about the AHRJCS Committee meetings, are almost joke-ish, talking about how Keene does not really have a problem because it is small. She continued that although Keene does not have a bigger problem like big cities do, it is still important to recognize that these issues are still here. The issues are quieter in our town. Most of the people who comment on Facebook and think [racism in Keene] is a joke are white. That is a challenge. She agrees with what Mr. Rivera said. As the minority population grows, things are changing, and it is important to get ahead of things.

Co-Chair Morris stated that it sounds like Ms. Hockett is saying that for the majority of the people there is no idea around the lived experience of people who may not look like them. And like Mr. Rivera said, a lot of people have a hard time coming forward to talk about their lived experiences. They have to find out what the barriers are to people being willing to tell their lived experiences and get those stories out there. Also, things are shifting and people need to take that seriously and be prepared for what is to come.

Ms. Hockett replied yes, they are not trying to point fingers and make up problems, but there are obviously some problems. For example, this year was the first year the company is with acknowledged and celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and only because it merged with a bigger, national company that celebrates diversity. That is an example of how things are changing. All people need to be respected and included. She loves this small town and wants it to be ahead of the curve and setting an example for others. Ms. Landry stated that it sounds like she is talking about the danger of complacency.

Co-Chair Van Wickler returned at 5:39 PM. Ms. Landry asked if anyone had more thoughts about the challenges and vision.

Ms. Somers stated that something to highlight is: if the least of us is affected, then the whole of us is affected. There may not be the number of complaints they received, or the magnitude of complaints based on the numbers, but regardless of that, they do not want the matter to seem minute or irrelevant. That is one of the challenges. This town does not have a lot of diversity to begin with, so the fact that they do not have a larger number of BIPOC people, and she does not want anyone to look at the numbers and consider insignificant or unimportant because the numbers are not large.

Councilor Workman stated that she agrees with Ms. Hockett. She agrees that they need to collect more data. She does not want the committee’s information to look as though there is not

a problem, when there clearly is. Having a survey developed and getting that data will be monumental in pushing forward with any real developed outcomes.

Ms. Landry stated that (former committee member) Julia Atkins had brought up Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man, and one of the points that gentleman made was that people were not talking about the small towns, which are now all over the news, before they had their big problems. It is therefore all the more important to address these issues and places that are not in the news, which are supposedly small towns that may not have these problems, and they need to be proactive. She continued that she understands what Ms. Somers is saying and will make sure to capture that in the report.

Mr. Morton stated that they have discussed a lot of the challenges, and he will take the vision part: what they want to see and how they want to see it. He continued that their vision could be to continue to build a community that is safe, just, and accessible to every member of the community, through ongoing community and governmental commitment that is codified, measurable, and accountable in and through and for every single member of the community. It is about putting forth the values they believe in, and codifying and committing to those values. Ms. Landry replied that she will include Mr. Morton's powerful words in the conclusion.

Mr. Morton stated that in the categories of Public Input, KPD, Education, and Government and Community, he sees a lot of overlapping recommendations. He continued that that is actually a positive thing. Co-Chair Van Wickler stated that he noticed that, too. He continued that when Ms. Landry comes to them with the draft for them to review, as they fine-tune it and tweak it, he thinks it is great because the outline captures the background of what they did and then they can take the buckets and wordsmith/massage the document into exactly what they want it to be. It is an exciting process. Ms. Landry stated that as she was putting this together she recognized that there are two things coming in this report: recommendations, and findings/observations. And yes, sometimes there is value in capturing that in more than one category and having some overlap.

Co-Chair Morris left at 5:48 PM.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked if anyone had anything else. Mr. Morton stated that he is not sure the committee has accurately captured the concerns of youth of color and mixed race youth. He continued that they might not have received enough feedback from younger people. His 19-year-old son has friends of all different races, and he (Mr. Morton) listens to their conversations about things that happen, and they are very different experiences.

Ms. Hockett asked if there are certain things that Mr. Morton wants to know. Mr. Morton replied that he does not know what he does not know. He is having a difficult time piecing things together. He continued that Ms. Hockett is a young, working person. There is a whole community of young people, say ages 18 to 25, who are not working or going to school and are having difficulty finding their way. There is a whole group of very visible young people, out on

the streets of Keene, having very different experiences than those of this committee's members. He wants to know if they are being helped or need certain help.

Ms. Hockett stated that she is older than the people Mr. Morton is talking about, but she grew up here. She continued that going to school here and being in the workforce here has had its challenges. She was born and raised here, and it is a small town, and a lot of people knew her family because they were one of the only Black families in Keene. At her current job she has been in a few situations where people proudly say "I don't see color." Five or ten years ago that would have been acceptable to her, because she did not know any better, but now, that is not an excuse. She heard someone in the cubicle world say "Black people need to get over slavery." As a Black woman in the professional world, with an entire company of white people, she did not feel safe speaking up, so she stayed silent. That was what was best for her in that moment. She worried about her job and did not want to make waves. That has been her experience of being mixed race in Keene: not making waves, and staying quiet, because she is a female and a minority. People say things as if she is not even there. As much as you stand out because of your skin color, you are also invisible. That has been a very weird line to cross. She is a Black woman in a very white world.

Ms. Hockett continued that in school, she was only taught about Black history during [the part of the curriculum about] slavery. And you feel every eye on you, and you are trying not to cry, because the only thing you are learning is that Black people were stolen and they were slaves. People are not born racist; racism is taught by parents. There is also a lot of ignorance. Kids say dumb things. When she was a young girl, insecure, not knowing herself, she laughed it off and smiled because she did not know what else to say, and she was scared. It has taken years to work through all that and she is still working through it. All of her friends are white, and her bosses are white, and her doctor is white. This year, with the death of George Floyd, and participating in this group, it has brought a lot of things up for a lot of people and she finally had conversations with some of her closest friends. She has also lost friends this year, when people did not want to discuss race and were uncomfortable with it. That has been hurtful. The racism is quiet here. She has aunts who remember walking home and having grown men yell the N word to them. They are only 60 years old, and that has been their experience. Her aunts all moved away from Keene because they knew there was no place for them here. Her dad chose to stay, and that is how she came about. It makes her really sad that her aunts moved, feeling there was no place for them here. It pains her to hear that that was their experience, because that was not too long ago. Those kids who said those hurtful things to her family members then grew up and had kids who went to school with her.

Co-Chair Van Wickler stated that Ms. Hockett's story was the best result of this entire committee's work since it began. Ms. Landry stated that they can open the report with "Racism here is quiet, but it is racism." She continued that Ms. Hockett's story was very helpful. Co-Chair Van Wickler added that it was very powerful and he thanks Ms. Hockett, and they need to carry her message forward.

Ms. Somers stated that Mr. Morton's point is very important, because if there is a feeling that the committee has not captured something, it is because they either did not have a way to capture all of the conversations – and she does not know if a survey is the best way to do that. Maybe they could make a recommendation to continue the dialogue or to look to embark on some personal conversations in the community. To get real, tangible feedback and feelings might require more than computers and surveys. They might need one-on-one conversations.

Mr. Rivera thanked Ms. Hockett for sharing her story. He continued that being on this committee, that is what he needed to hear. That she grew up to have this conversation with this group and to be so vulnerable in exposing how she felt makes this so purposeful. He continued that she is not alone. He has his stories as well.

Ms. Landry stated that it is true that people have stories they are not sharing; they can see if they can use that to draw some more input.

3) Next Meeting – Agenda Items and Schedule

Co-Chair Van Wickler thanked everyone for their good work tonight. Ms. Landry asked that they set a date for their next meeting. Brief discussion ensued. The group decided on Thursday, February 11, at 5:00 PM. Co-Chair Van Wickler stated that the only agenda item is the draft report and starting to work on the Executive Summary.

There being no further business, Co-Chair Van Wickler adjourned the meeting at 6:04 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Edits submitted by,
Rebecca Landry, IT Director/ACM