

Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes
December 8, 2021

Meeting opened at 7:08 pm by John Coelho (Chair) inviting the Committee to stand, as able, for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: John Coelho (Chair), Ana Duarte-McCarthy, Joan Bannan (Township Committee Representative), Patrice Whitehouse, Sofia Fernandez, Goutham Puppala Via Zoom: Sophia Chadda, Jane Conklin, Deborah Ablordeppey, Nancy Cook

Absent: Stacey Irvine

Opening Remarks:

Chairperson thanked the Committee members for their volunteerism, focus and many contributions throughout the year citing the Work-Plan despite all the limitations for meeting in person. In particular, he complimented the efforts to draw over 30 attendees to the recent **Meet-the-Diversity Committee** on Oct 28 at Bernards Township Library. This event and the forthcoming reflection would support important insight and learning. He then invited Committee members to share their observations about the event.

A question was posed if the Committee was intended to continue in 2022. The Chair noted that he had submitted all the requisite documentation for continuation and had not received or heard anything otherwise.

Three Committee members indicated they would not be continuing and so he reinforced inviting residents to submit **Tap-the-Talent** forms to fill the vacant seats.

Committee-member Bannan noted that as the Committee was established by Resolution, it had a one-year span that could be renewed annually, unlike the Municipal Alliance that was created by Ordinance. She had inquired from other Township Committee members and reported that no decision had been taken as of yet.

The members of the Committee asked John to inquire with Mayor Janice Fields about the continuity of the committee in advance of the Tuesday, December 14th township committee and he agreed to do so. The Committee members also discussed our year end recommendations and John indicated he could prepare and submit to the Committee before the next meeting. Joan advised it was too late to do so as but suggested the recommendations be submitted prior to the end of the year. The Committee agreed.

Meet the Diversity Committee Event.

Sofia Fernandez noted the session went well and helped establish a network bridging a gap between needs and support. She cited the potential of “neighbor helping neighbor” facilitating engagement.

Patrice was pleased that organizations actually began to work together and reinforced the **One Community Database** tool could be a catalyst for deeper interaction. Committee members Puppala and Cook had previously volunteered to make the Groups sector more prominent on the landing page which would enable easy access for all.

She also proposed similar networking events be planned once or twice a year (pandemic conditions permitting). She made a point that if there were concerns that Bernards and surrounding areas did not have enough diversity, the U.S. Census clearly reported an increase in mixed race demographics and events throughout the year revealed most residents seemed happy with the town.

Ana observed that she appreciated that the Committee hosted the forum, and that even if there were attendees who made what were perceived by some to be disparaging remarks or were oppositional, it was the opinion of these individuals based on their experiences. Ana also commented that the event helped “open a dialogue with the community”; and if time permitted, deeper probing may have led to clustering of potential opportunities and an action plan referencing her experience with the YMCA and the remit of their work on diversity and inclusion.

Deborah reported she appreciated the diverse representation of attendees from the township and that there is a need for this platform to connect people to Groups and organizations.

Nancy added she would have ideally liked a format for residents to circulate and meet groups but under the circumstances and time constraints this was not possible. The attendance indicated the need for another forum to bring like-minded residents together drawing many out of isolation. She questioned if “forum” was the appropriate descriptor.

Sophia Chadda indicated she was “inspired, energized” and learnt about the issues from a fantastic meeting and the take-home message was that residents were not alone.

Goutham was pleased to see the number of attendees, noting it did not represent the full cross-section of the township and there was a need for additional events to allow for further exchange.

Joan remarked that the meeting verbalized the need even though it was short on time to indulge in a dialogue. A survey would have been another approach to gather feedback, although response rate was typically low and, in retrospect, she would have considered more forums earlier in the year to go further and gather information which would inform the Committee’s recommendations.

She felt for Groups to continue to work together, few Committee members could facilitate outreach to different groups in town engagement instead of the whole Committee.

Ana added she felt the descriptor “forums” was suitable and future sessions should focus on dialogue across residents and Groups.

John summarized his own observations that the forum had met three aspects of the Committee’s charter and was aligned with its Purpose: It had enabled **deeper community engagement** beyond prior events throughout the year*

The Committee had created the right listening atmosphere that diverse groups and residents could openly articulate their views in their sessions. Qualitatively, responses to survey queries originally planned by the Committee were received and noted. Finally, a community spirit was fostered to share a problem and for others to offer concrete solutions through their Group organizations and work. He cited a few examples from the session.

Ana commented, relative to the John’s comments on the forum meeting aspects of the committee’s charter and the survey, that there were two questions from the survey that had been embedded within the talking points for the Forum, including what is working well relative to Diversity and Inclusion in the

community, and what are opportunities/ideas for the township to consider. While the forum was helpful to get input on these points from those present, it's an action that can be continued in future forums to understand community sentiment.

John supported future community forums be convened and sponsored if residents did not individually approach respective Groups for guidance to encourage goodwill, cooperation, and unity.

Committee Volunteer events over holiday season

With there being no recommendation to attend a service event collectively, a nomination was made by Jane to attend the Board of Education (BOE) meeting on Monday, Dec 20th. She raised concerns from a prior BOE meeting related to Diversity and Inclusion matters, including a narrative that questioned diversity and inclusion within curriculum, and singling out a teacher who had circulated a teachers education course.

Ana agreed with Jane, noting the concern of the tone of the discourse, and that unfortunately information is being misinterpreted and communicated through sound-bytes.

Patrice questioned the role of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee relative to the matters of the Board of Education role. She felt it was up to the Board of Education to better educate parents on curriculum updates emerging from the State Board.

Jane advising from her teaching experience, noted that student curriculum was public knowledge and parents could access it from a Google Docs class page as well as assignments from Genesis.

Sofia noted that the Board of Education missed some of the key issues it was presented with and gave a single person in Public Comment too much attention and energy.

On a different BOE subject, Patrice raised concerns that regrettably the Board of Education had not contacted parents related to an alleged predator (fencing coach) formerly on staff and despite the appeal of parents had not received a letter advising of the actions being taken or counseling offered to children at the time of the meeting.

Jane shared that there were meetings with parents, and that generally what occurs in matters like this is confidential.

Joan responded that the person who raised the issue of the former fencing coach had likewise raised this issue at the D&I meet and greet. She (Joan) and a member of the BOE specifically informed the woman of resources within RHS that were available to students. Joan also mentioned there was much more of a back story to this and other issues raised at the last BOE meeting which could not be gleaned from watching one meeting. She suggested attending the BOE to observe might be valuable for the committee. John expressed his view the Chair of the BOE did not maintain control of the meeting. Joan stated the Chair could not have stopped "Mark from Gladstone's" remarks. No matter how offensive a speaker's remarks may be, offensive remarks are protected by the First Amendment. She commented on the lack of civil discourse. Sophia noted that it was an opportunity for an educational refresher in civil discourse.

Goutham commented he was planning on attending the BOE meeting as he found the public comments were representative of a small number of residents and did not reflect the majority of the community

A decision was taken for Committee members to attend the next meeting.

Public Comment was invited by the Chair:

Mr. Cody Smith related to specific Public Comment at the BOE meeting, opined that “equal outcome was not equal opportunity.” Given the deliberate strive for diversity in organizations, there was favoritism in appointments and promotions and that he was expressing a commonly shared view among some white men.

Further, he shared that it still wasn’t clear what the purpose of the Diversity Committee was citing that he noted he’s attended several meetings and that it appeared from the comments that a few Committee members also were not clear about scope and what the Committee was formed to solve, i.e. that it’s not an activity based committee, rather was formed to advise the community

Janice Corrado offered her opinion that the Committee had served a useful purpose and should be considered for the following year.

There being no further residents, the Chair closed Public Comment. In closing, he wished the Committee a happy holiday season and good health with their families and loved ones.

The meeting ended, with no unfinished business and a motion for adjournment.

**Submitted by: John Coelho
on behalf of the Diversity & Inclusion Committee**