

Approved 9/14/2020

Town of Chelmsford Board of Selectmen Minutes
Chelmsford, MA 01824

Virtual meeting via Zoom

Diversity Listening Session MINUTES
June 30, 2020

Attending:

Kenneth Lefebvre, Chairman
Virginia Crocker Timmins, Vice Chairman
George Dixon, Clerk
Emily Antul, Selectman
Patricia Wojtas, Selectman

Paul Cohen, Town Manager
Michael McCall, Asst. Town Manager

Please note that all documents referenced in these minutes are on file at the Town Manager’s Office, 50 Billerica Rd., Chelmsford, Mass. The meeting was recorded by Chelmsford Telemedia. Chairman Lefebvre called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM, and read the following announcement:

Pursuant to Governor Baker’s March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, and the Governor’s March 15, 2020 Order imposing strict limitation on the number of people that may gather in one place, this meeting of the Town of Chelmsford Board of Selectmen will be conducted via remote participation to the greatest extent possible. Specific information and the general guidelines for remote participation by members of the public and/or parties with a right and/or requirement to attend this meeting can be found on the Town’s website, at www.chelmsfordma.gov. For this meeting, members of the public who wish to watch the meeting may do so by accessing the Chelmsford Telemedia website www.chelmsfordtv.org.

No in-person attendance of members of the public will be permitted, but every effort will be made to ensure that the public can adequately access the proceedings in real time, via technological means. In the event that we are unable to do so, despite best efforts, we will post on the Town’s website an audio or video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of proceedings as soon as possible after the meeting.

Chairman Lefebvre explained this is an opportunity to be heard regarding diversity and racial equality, and so residents know that Town officials are available to them.

Selectmen Timmins read an e-mail from Diana Hill dated June 19, 2020. She is proud that Chelmsford is having this session. She is white, and she feels if we do nothing, then we are part of part of the problem. She grew up in areas that were mostly white people. People of color have always been the minority, and have been marginalized. She wants to be a good neighbor to everyone.

Jennifer Almeida, Chelmsford resident, noted that if you look at employees at Town Hall, at schools and look at the representatives at Town Meeting, they are mostly white people. The only way to make the Town reflect the population we have is to hire a more diverse work force. It may be beneficial to have more black teachers.

There was a request that speakers not have to give their name and address for this session. Where this is not a public hearing, this will be allowed for this session. Selectman Timmins advised that if more information is needed later, it may be difficult to reach them.

Alison Barnes thanked the Town for having this opportunity. She is concerned that in the Special Education program, she has noted that boys of color are more likely disciplined more than others. There is a need to avoid bias.

Selectman Timmins read an e-mail submitted by Brian Petro-Roy. He is white as are his wife and children. Chelmsford has always been majorly white. He grew up in Chelmsford, and has purchased a home here. He feels education about diversity begins in the schools. There need to be curriculum changes and changes in hiring practices. He thinks the root of the issue is a lack of affordable housing. The Town might be pricing itself out of diversity. He also noted the the use of the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is a positive acknowledgement that should be used instead of POC (People of Color) to the different experiences of black and indigenous people. The term "Selectmen" implies the board is all men, which is not the case currently. Words matter, and affect how we interpret the world around us. This country was created by white people for white people, and many things will need to change so BIPOC feel more accepted, and it is time, and the right thing to do.

Selectman Lefebvre announced that the Board name will change, once approved by the State.

Tatiana Suero, CHS class of 2015, thinks that what has not been addressed is that the town does experience racism. There are racist acts that happen. People have accused her of being accepted into her college because of Affirmative Action, which she does not feel is true, as she has worked hard to get into college. People of color try to fit in with their white friends, and sometimes do not recognize racist acts because of the desire to fit in. Racism drives people away, and micro-aggression is not okay. People of color are censored and not allowed to discuss their experiences, and that needs to stop if Chelmsford truly wants to be diverse. People say racism does not exist in Chelmsford, but it does.

Participants were reminded that all chats are part of the public record.

Devi Venugopal, long term resident. Her sons went to schools in Chelmsford, and did face multiple instances of racial acts against them. She is also an educator in Town, and agrees that change of racial awareness needs to start in the schools. Staff training can be completed and signed off on by the employees. Specific instances are dealt with, but racist incidents need to be not happening in the first place. There needs to be more consequences. We all need to be educated in what racism looks like. She also suggested hiring more BIPOC teachers. She gave additional suggestions on how situations could be handled. BIPOC Families could be asked for help. Adults and children need to look and listen and learn their own biases. We can get better.

Lauren Cochran requested a copy of the letter read earlier, this will be made available.

Debi Siriani, Senior Center Director, advised that the Senior Center is dedicated to be a welcoming place for all. She will address any concerns, and anyone should feel free to contact her with any ideas.

Taeshawn McKinney, explained that he moved here three years ago from California. It is different here. Other students have made racist comments about him, especially gang related comments. Teachers should teach more about slavery and why racism is wrong. Stereotypes and the "N" word are not cool.

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Selectman Antul announced that the School Committee will also continue to have these types of sessions. Adults also need to learn how not be racist. She would love to hear ideas about how to do this. It goes beyond the schools. She would like to help educate the broader community to work toward a more diverse Town. Chelmsford should be truly welcoming to everyone.

Cassandra West, Class of 2018, relayed her personal experiences while at Chelmsford High School. She has been a lifelong resident in Chelmsford. She felt she was made to know she was different even in kindergarten. She feels she was targeted throughout her entire school career. Racism was not discussed in school. She felt unaccepted and harassed through many and various micro-aggressions. She feels the administration in Town has done its part in upholding systemic racism. This year is the first year the Town recognized Juneteenth. However, it was a student effort, not a town effort. She believes Juneteenth should be celebrated as much as the July 4th holiday. When the country gained its independence, her ancestors were still slaves. She has learned a lot while attending Howard University about black history. People need to be aware of social injustice. Being aware of this will bring forward ideas on how to fix it.

Vishant Raajkumar, calls on the Town to defund the police. He asked why the police budget should be fully funded when the school budget is being cut. The funding needs to address the needs of the people.

Police Chief James Spinney explained he and his department is here to listen, and move forward. People are encouraged to email or meet or telephone anyone who has concerns.

Sydney Baron appreciates all the adults and Town officials for hosting this session. As an organizer of the Juneteenth and other rallies, they have received a lot of negative feedback and harassment. It's hard to confront people. This work is necessary, and she hopes the conversations continue. Everyone's voice matters.

Bella Enos feels there needs to be more diversified people looking at curriculum. School assignments come off as racist, particularly in Social Studies, where there was an assignment promoting immigration. Questions seem to anticipate white answers. Her child is bi-racial, so this was a difficult assignment for her. There is work to do at all levels.

Lauren Cochran explained that she has been called out for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. She attended a Chelmsford Alumni meeting last evening on anti-racism issues. Professional development is being discussed. The Town should be proud of what is being done.

Maria Santos explained she is an immigrant, and has faced racism. She suggested that all elected officials may want to consider taking anti-racism training as soon as they are elected. She will recommend such training to the School Committee as well. She thanked everyone speaking tonight for their participation. She wants her kids to appreciate everyone's differences.

Lexi Lattimore, resident and Class of 2010. She has advocated for more diversity in curriculum since she was in third grade. She supports all black and brown students, and she offers solidarity and support. She is proud of Chelmsford, and feels these discussions should have happened a long time ago. She is getting her masters in social work, and she would like to help develop curriculum for the public schools.

Taeshawn McKinney asked to speak again. He stated people need to be able to feel safe. We should ask the police department to assist in helping people feel safe in calling them. Many people do not feel safe around police. People should be able to trust police.

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Chairman Lefebvre advised that lists will be made and more discussion will happen. Departments in Town will be asked how to address the issues raised tonight, and they will come back with a plan.

Selectman Timmins thanked everyone who spoke and was candid in this session.

Adithya Raajkumar, resident and graduate of Chelmsford Public Schools. He has been accused of terrorism and other instances of racism while in school; he feels most people in Chelmsford don't consider themselves racist. Curriculum reform is needed. He explained there were 2 books in his entire curriculum written by people of color, and he feels this is not acceptable. He learned much more in college about marginalized people. He encourages more people to sign the petition for curriculum reform.

Cherrice Lattimore thanked the Town for hosting this session. Their pastor in Haverhill has been trying to have these conversations and has had difficulties. They are from Ohio, and her husband's employer suggested moving to Chelmsford, as the Town was seen as diversified. She described an incident her daughter Lexi experienced while at the high school during her campaign for Class President. Their kids do try to adapt, and as parents she and her husband were very involved with the schools. It is time to move forward, and this is a good step. She would like to do whatever she can to keep moving forward. Chelmsford is ahead of the curve. She is very optimistic.

Selectman Antul thanked all participants in tonight's session. She has already been contacted about racist acts in Town, and has talked to the Police Chief and the Town Manager. Don't take the bullying.

Chairman Lefebvre thanked the Police Chief, School Committee, Mrs. Siriani, and Town Manager Cohen. Residents were encouraged to reach out to the Board with additional comments. There will be a report coming. Anyone is welcome to help be part of the solution.

ADJOURN

Motion: by Selectman Timmins to adjourn the session at 8:23PM. Seconded by Selectman Dixon.

Roll Call Vote:

Selectman Wojtas: Aye

Selectman Antul: Aye

Selectman Timmins: Aye

Selectman Dixon: Aye

Chairman Lefebvre: Aye

Motion carries, unanimous, 5-0.

Respectfully Submitted,
Vivian W. Merrill,
Recording Secretary