

Town of Chelmsford Select Board Minutes
50 Billerica Rd., Room 204
Chelmsford, MA 01824

Regular Meeting MINUTES
May 16, 2022

Attending:

Virginia Crocker Timmins, Chair
Ken Lefebvre, Vice Chair
George Dixon, Clerk
Mark Carota, Board Member
Patricia Wojtas, Board Member

Paul Cohen, Town Manager

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee:

Latosha Dixon, Chair
Carly Reim, Co-Chair
Susan Mackinnon, Clerk
Lorena Betts
Rachel Donovan
Trish Dzuris

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.

Chair Timmins called the meeting to order at 6:07PM, welcomed all those in attendance and introduced Board Member Wojtas as Moderator and liaison to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee.

LGBTQIA+ PUBLIC INPUT

Board Member Wojtas introduced members of the Select Board as well as Town Manager Cohen: Chair Timmins, Vice Chair Lefebvre, Board Member Dixon, and Board Member Carota. Also in attendance were members of the Fire and Police Departments, and Community Services.

Latosha Dixon, Director of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee (DEIC), with self-identified pronouns of she and her, asked for a moment of silence for the shooting victims of Buffalo, New York and Laguna Woods, California.

She then introduced members of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee: Co-Chair Reim, Ms. Mackinnon, Ms. Betts, Ms. Donovan and Ms. Dzuris. She said the committee had one open seat and application could be made on the town website.

She read the Town of Chelmsford Land Acknowledgement Proclamation:

“The Town of Chelmsford acknowledges that its land, upon which the government buildings, town common, and libraries are situated, is the traditional and ancestral territory of many diverse Indigenous Nations and we strive to honor these peoples; and the Town acknowledges the painful history of genocide and forced removal from this land, now known as Chelmsford, and we honor the Indigenous peoples still connected to this land on which we live, work, and learn; and whereas this area comprises in part, the homelands of the Pawtucket-Pennacook-Abenaki, and their close neighbors the Massachusetts and Nipmuc peoples; and the Town extends our deep respect to citizens of these Nations who live here and elsewhere today and their ancestors who have lived here for generations.”

Ms. Dixon expressed her appreciation for the Town's positive actions to recognize respect, honor and celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community. Pride Proclamation in 2019 was celebrated by town offices, library, the senior center and many retail outlets distributed rainbow desk flags. During the pandemic these flags and masks were distributed to residents in the CCA parking lot. On June 4th the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee is partnering with Rainbow Chelmsford to have a “Come fly a Kite” day

on the Town Common from 9:00-11:00. Further information can be found on the town website, Facebook and Rainbow Chelmsford website.

Board Member Wojtas read the ground rules of engagement and welcomed speakers to step up to the microphone and Zoom attendees to use the “raise hand” function to participate.

Milo Ransdell of Courtland Drive stepped forward to the microphone. They expressed appreciation for all that the community had done to support the LGBTQIA+ community but suggested there was more to be done. They related the story when they were in a sex education class in middle school where anonymous questions were submitted in a box. A lackluster answer was given to their question if it was okay to be gay, and was told it was not “talked about here.” Only the choice of abstinence was taught. The subject of gender was not taught in sex education class in high school. With seventeen years of age being the age in America when teenagers stop practicing abstinence, the subject of gender identification should be discussed to make children feel more accepted and heard. While parents may be apprehensive about this discussion in school, it is important that “uncomfortable” topics be discussed in school sex education classes.

Jean Reed of Carriage Drive stepped forward to the microphone. As a voter, she expressed her appreciation to the Select Board and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for hosting this listening session. She described herself as an “out-lesbian” since the early 80’s, a mother of three children, a business owner for thirty-eight years and married to a woman who has been a business owner for thirty-years. She is also a grandparent and her oldest child graduated from high school last year. She is excited for the opportunity as she enters her sixties to not have to go to Provincetown or Miami or San Francisco to feel free, go shopping and have dinner and find in these activities relation to her life. She saw full sex education beyond abstinence as vital as children are becoming sexually active at an early age. Although there is a place for abstinence, encouragement can be given to children but not enforcement.

Danielle Koutsoufis, Fire Prevention Captain for the Town, stepped forward to the microphone and self-identified she/her pronouns. She stated that she has been with the Fire Department since 2003 and the Fire Prevention Captain since 2015. She graduated from Chelmsford High School. She described a “journey of joy” that has not been without its struggles and challenges with regard to gender identity. She was born and socialized as a male but always knew deep down something was not “quite right within me.” After therapy, soul searching and prayer and talking with family, she developed an inward calm as she knew what she had to do and figured it was okay to do that. She was married with five children when in 2016 at thirty-four years of age she started to come out to family and friends and church members, but was not ready to come out to the world at large. Being in a position of responsibility as a town employee and fearing backlash added to her conflict on how to do that.

She relayed a story that had happened fifteen years ago when a transgender woman came to the fire station asking for directions. After she left, there was derisive talk and laughter amongst the crew about the “dude in the dress.” In 2017 she described “all hell breaking loose” when a coworker found one of her postings on social media and outed her to the department and Town. After a conversation with Chief Ryan and HR Director Parziale, they provided guidance to her and let her know that things would be alright. Most importantly, she was embraced by her colleagues in the fire department and town hall. She gave special thanks to Jen Melanson and Trish Dzuris for their support during that difficult time.

She has endeavored to be a resource to her brothers and sisters “at the kitchen table” in the fire department on LGBTQIA+ issues. Although the Town has been very responsive, she stated that she still has issues with some people she serves in the Town not using proper pronouns and citing first amendment issues or religious bigotry as a reason not to respect her “existence as a person.” She stated how important

it was to use proper pronouns to affirm one's existence and how much that recognition matters to LGBTQIA+ persons.

She asked that the Board revisit the Pride Flag issue. She said that when the decision was made to not fly the flag, she displayed a pride flag on her desk and has continued to do so. She stated that she thought the Board could have done more when it was publicly known that Sue Gates, who distributed flags around Town and received hateful emails and correspondence, to publicly denounce that "bigotry, that hate, that bile" against her. She thanked the Board and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for sponsoring the listening session and encouraged further efforts to make this Town "more accepting than it already is."

Cheryl Wilson of Main Street stepped forward to the microphone. She stated that she was a life-long resident of Chelmsford and graduated from the high school in 1981. Forty-one years ago, she came out of the closet. It was right after that that, on the stage she is facing tonight at this session, she worked with the crew to set up the high school play "Li'l Abner." She described what being in the closet looked like with made up boyfriends and nods to other couples in public. She lived in fear that she would be "found out" and what the consequences would be of telling everyone that secretly harbored hateful thoughts of you. They could either show up at your house, "beat the shit out of you or kill you." Everyone was a potential threat...family members, cousins, uncles, friends. You were a perversion, an anomaly.

A fellow and brave lesbian had the courage to go to the guidance counselor and open a conversation. She learned that there were six "of us gay people." The high school counselor, Ms. Hahn, recognized the need for the six of us to talk with each and be in a safe place. She went to the administration to have us convene as a group to discuss what being gay meant to us. Not unusual in that day and time, the administration gave a firm no, and it would have been very progressive for the administration to say yes. Several years ago, the gay group associations became the norm thanks to many more "Ms. Hahns" in the world.

Ms. Wilson is a married mother of two children. There was a time when marriage for her to a woman was not even a remote possibility. She stated that we have come so far but we cannot become complacent. There are still children shamed at home...children kicked out of their homes. She proudly displayed the logo on her t-shirt that said "Free Mom hugs" in support of those children. She stated that still more needs to be done so that LGBTQIA+ "are able to be ourselves."

Frances Killam of Courtland Drive stepped forward to the microphone. She wanted to hear more about the mission of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and offered her support and assistance. As a parent of an LGBTQIA+ person, she suggested a Pride flag organization group. Founded as a volunteer group without assistance from the Town, it could offer encouragement and support. She stated that her church has gender-neutral bathrooms and asked that they be made available in public buildings. She also suggested a Pride Celebration in Town in the month of June, not to be celebrated on the first weekend since that is the day of Lowell's celebration.

Alison Barnes of Garrison Road stepped up to the microphone. She stated that she is a wife, mother, business owner, teacher and member of the LGBTQIA+ community. She attended high school in Mississippi and has firsthand knowledge of the extreme hate that can predominate in a community that results in exclusion of certain persons. She stated that is not the norm in Chelmsford, but she nevertheless desires to take steps to ensure that does not ever happen. She backs sex education classes, other than abstinence only venues, that teach safe sex practices to both men and women,

She relayed a personal story of hate crime that she and her family experienced where bricks were thrown at her home. To ensure the safety of her children, she took down the pride flag on her property. She

expressed disappointment that pride flags were not allowed to be flown on public property and asked that public officials take a hard stand against obvious hate crimes in this community. She stated that the human rights campaign 2022 report showed an increase in most violent actions against transgender and gender-non-conforming since 2013. Overall crimes against gay men are up 51.3% over the last two years.

She concluded by quoting the words of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California:

“Let my tax money go for my protection and not for my prosecution. Let my tax money go for the protection of me, my life, my property. Worry about becoming a human being and not about how you can prevent others from enjoying their lives because of your own inability to adjust to life.”

Maura Snow of Old Stage Road stepped forward to the microphone. She has been a resident of Chelmsford for twenty-five years. She thanked the Board and Committee for sponsoring this listening session. Last June she travelled to Salt Lake City, Utah and Boise, Idaho. The streets leading up to the capitols of both states were decorated with rainbow bunting and banners. She opined that the citizens of these states would be more opposed to pride celebration than the citizens of Chelmsford. She urged public officials move beyond a simple acknowledgement of the LGBTQIA+ community and openly show support and celebration in sponsoring gay pride month in June.

Gwen Meins stepped up to the microphone. She is a parent of an LGBTQIA+ child and proud member of the PFLAG group and contact for the schools. She suggested that the PFLAG group of Greater Boston provides resources and information for all persons. She asked the Board to consider putting pronouns on nametags for all publicly held meetings as a common everyday thing.

Maya Aggarwal of Edgewood Street stepped forward to the microphone. She stated she is the president of the gay club at the high school. It is a safe space for queer people and resource for the gay-straight alliance. She stated that this listening session was not posted or advertised at the high school. She stressed the importance of reaching out to gay students and talking to them about their experiences. She stated that hope is being lost amongst the LGBTQIA+ community that their voices are being heard by the administration and teachers. Students need to know that actions are being taken to help gay students.

Milo Ransdell of Courtland Drive returned to the microphone to tell another part of their story. They went to Nashoba Tech for the first two years of high school and it was not an accepting place. There were no accommodations made for them. They then transferred to the high school and thought things would be the same. They were not to a certain extent...people were more accepting and loving. They could be themselves. In some places, however, they felt they were not being heard by the adults in their life. They acknowledged that teachers’ “hands were being tied” at some level. Although things have improved, more can be done for children’s voices to be heard.

They came out at the age of seventeen. At twenty-one now, they feel they can speak for the transgender persons growing up in town where they experienced bigotry. They related a story where a pride flag at his church had to be taken down. Someone had posted a picture of the daycare operated out of the church with a pride flag flying. The operator of the daycare received death threats. A black lives matter flag was also gashed with a knife.

They acknowledged feeling “utter despair” at the bigotry in town, and feels that there is not enough done by public officials to dissuade it.

Kim Briand of Garrison Road and a teacher at Parker Middle School stepped forward to the microphone. She supports families in the community raising LGBTQIA+ children. Small things like pronouns on

nametags from teachers through town officials helps support the community. She also in favor of non-gender bathrooms. Teachers also need more tools to feel supported and backed for their outreach to students. LGQBIA+ students need support to be themselves and feel recognized. Flying pride flags in every school would be a good place to start. Also books in the library need to reflect children of all ages and gender identity in the literature.

Trish Dzuris, Town Clerk, stepped forward to the microphone and thanked the Select Board for sponsoring this listening session. She added that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee members make life better for everyone in town by sharing their passions. She recognized everyone who had the courage to speak tonight in an intimidating environment. “It took guts to get up here and tell your stories.” She asked the Board be as courageous by standing up against bullying practices, hate and racism to let them know there is no place for that behavior in our Town. Every step is important to celebrate the LGQBIA+ community.

Jen Melanson, Coordinator of Community Services, stepped forward to the microphone. She stated she has been in her position since 2019. She applauded those who had spoken tonight as well as everyone in attendance. Her office was created to be an advocate for everyone in the community, and the door in town hall is always open as a safe and accepting place. She encouraged all to call her office to make an appointment to come in and talk with her. She is committed to offer herself in the best interests of the entire community.

Board Member Wojtas thanked all in attendance who had courageously spoken their minds and shared their stories. She assured that the Board had heard them. She noted that every person in the Town of Chelmsford personally knows someone in the LGBTQIA+ community.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: by Chair Timmins to adjourn at 6:56PM. Seconded by Vice Chair Lefebvre.

Motion carries 5-0, unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Martin Barraford
Recording Secretary