



Diversity Task Force
Town Hall
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Raquel Majeski, Chair
Michelle Collette, Vice Chair
Gordon Candow
Amy Degen
Joshua Degen
Susan Hughes
Bhaskar Gupta Karpurapu
Deirdre Slavin Mitchell
Fran Stanley

Regular Session Minutes

Date: September 9, 2021

Time: 7 pm

Location: Virtual meeting broadcast via Zoom

Members in attendance: Raquel Majeski, Michelle Collette, Amy Degen, Joshua Degen, Susan Hughes, Fran Stanley, Bhaskar Gupta Karpurapu (not sworn in)

Absent members: Gordon Candow, Deirdre Slavin Mitchell

Others: Peter Cunningham, Craig Bennett, Ann (no last name given), Greg Fishbone, Michael LaTerz, and Rebecca Tabasky

Handouts: Agenda, August 5, 2021 draft minutes

Raquel Majeski called the meeting to order at about 7 pm.

A. Discuss Town Seal Warrant Article and Develop Public Outreach Strategy

Raquel Majeski started the meeting by noting that there was an insensitive comment made at the August 30, 2021 Select Board meeting. She stopped there and left the description of the matter to others on the committee as she said that she does not identify as Jewish.

Joshua Degen, who is Jewish and is also a Select Board member, picked up the discussion from there. Joshua Degen said that at their meeting, Select Board members were talking about putting the Town Seal on the Fall Town Meeting warrant. As matters stood, John Reilly and Peter Cunningham were inclined not to, Becky Pine and Alison Manugian did want the Town Seal to go on the warrant and Joshua Degen himself was inclined to push the matter out to the Spring. In the Select Board discussion, Peter Cunningham said that the Town Seal says "Holy Bible" and it's not like it says *Mein Kampf*. Joshua Degen said that he did not like the comment and to him it showed a lack of sensitivity and so now Joshua Degen would like to move forward with putting the seal on the warrant now. Amy Degen said that is not just one comment as there is the context that there have been many swastikas graffitied around town over the years. Amy Degen added that the Holocaust is increasingly invoked these days and that is inappropriate as the Town Seal has nothing to do with the Holocaust.

Raquel Majeski then introduced Select Board member Peter Cunningham and thanked him for attending. Peter Cunningham apologized to the group and anyone who was offended by his comments. He said that his comment was a clumsy statement in that he was trying to gauge what the threshold should be for making changes. As for the Town Seal, he says that it is historical, and while not being a biblical scholar, in his mind the Town Seal did not rise to this level such that it needs to be changed. As it stands, the Select Board voted and the matter will be on the Fall Town Meeting warrant.

Michelle Collette said that the episode is most unfortunate. She recommends to not have the Town Seal on the warrant for the Fall. Instead, she stated that more education and consensus building is needed and that the Town Seal should wait until the Spring. Fran Stanley said that she herself makes a lot of inartful and clumsy statements, but that she does not think it is horrible to have misstatements. That's what happens when we discuss these issues.

Rebecca Tabasky put the following comment in the Zoom chat:

Beyond the insensitivity around the comment about Mein Kampf, there were comments made about that there are a lot of things in the Bible that are good for people of all religions. In fact, this is exactly the problem - people of all religions do not use the Bible as their book of faith.

The seal has not hurt the community. People who do not respect that the current town shield hurts people in the town hurts the community. This is a deflection of understanding the scope of the issue, Peter.

Raquel Majeski said that last time we made a recommendation to the Select Board and that was that. Now the issue is back and we might recommend to wait. Joshua Degen said that this committee has only had a few recommendations. He believes that the symbol of the Town Seal that contains the words "Holy Bible" should be change as it does not represent all of the religions practiced by Groton residents.

Greg Fishbone put the following comment in the Zoom chat:

Fact check: The 2017 citizens petition was not to change the Town Seal but for ask the Select Board for a committee. No proposal to change the town seal has been put before the town before now.

The minutes where I was told to go to hell and where Native Americans were referred to as "savages"?

Michael LaTerz addressed the group and read the following statement:

I commend Peter Cunningham for his prompt response to the concerns raised regarding his inappropriate comments about proposed changes to the Groton town seal, Select Board Meeting, 8/30.

As a concerned citizen, I would strongly advise Mr. Cunningham (and all town leaders) to regard the recommendation made by the Diversity Task Force (to remove the words "Holy Bible" from the town seal, while leaving all else intact) as the perfect compromise.

When the previous campaign to change the town seal was initiated, I (along with many others in town) were under the impression that meant a complete redesign of the seal. I opposed that, then; and, I would oppose that, now.

The removal of two words, in the interest of greater inclusion, broader representation, and fidelity to the separation of church and state, is exactly the type of recommendation one would expect from the Diversity Task Force.

Let's remind ourselves the Task Force was set up, one year ago, in response to incidences of hate speech and anti-semitism in the form of bold and blatant graffiti across various locations in town. We cannot address such attacks on a civil society without recognizing the under-currents from which they well.

I applaud the Diversity Task Force for their thoughtful, considered, and measured recommendation; honoring both the best of the past and making it the best of the present. Let us move forward, Toward Better Things.

Raquel Majeski said that she agrees with Michelle Collette that this is the next best step. Amy Degen said that she is torn on the question. Susan Hughes said that she was torn but wonders would putting off the matter be viewed as a point of weakness. Raquel Majeski noted that this is a hot button topic. Fran Stanley likes Mike LaTerz's statement. She said that it is great statement that puts the best foot forward for the change. However, Town Meeting always favors well understood known articles. If a subject is not well understood, then the meeting will vote 'no'.

Michelle Collette said that the Diversity Task Force has discussed this issue for more than a year but the recommendation to the Select Board has only been out there and on the public's radar for about a month. Susan Hughes said that she does not want to have the committee run away from controversial subjects. She

said that the Diversity Task Force should not shy away from presenting it. Joshua Degen said that we could strike while the iron is hot. This is a proposal to remove two words and not a wholesale re-design. People would be asked to be sensitive to diversity in the community.

Raquel Majeski asked what is the harm in delay and continuing the conversation. Structuring the spaces and places as the Diversity Task Force has been doing. We will be advertising continuously. Many people are unclear about the 'ask'. Susan Hughes worries whether a retreat from the Fall sends the wrong message.

Peter Cunningham said do not use me as a foil -- what is the core message. Peter Cunningham then raised Michael LaTerz's idea to discuss the matter at the Fall Town Meeting and then postpone indefinitely with the thought that a vote could be taken at the Spring Town Meeting. Several people wondered whether the question could be moved and seconded and a vote taken in the Fall and so choosing that route could constitute a risk to the proposal. The group agreed that the moderator as the parliamentarian could be consulted for his input.

Michelle Collette cautioned that if the matter loses at Town Meeting, then it will be hard to bring it back. She said that sometimes it is better to be patient. Bhaskar Karpurapu asked for clarification of the background of the issue at Town Meeting. He said that he is thinking of the issue and mindful that he is approaching from his perspective as a Hindu. Joshua Degen said that he will change his vote at the Select Board in favor of waiting until the Spring.

Michelle Collette moved that the Diversity Task Force recommend to the Select Board that it consider the Town Seal change at the 2022 Spring Town Meeting rather than the 2021 Fall Town Meeting. Joshua Degen seconded and the motion carried unanimously with a roll call vote of Majeski – aye, Collette – aye, Amy Degen – aye, Joshua Degen – aye, and Susan Hughes – aye (Slavin-Mitchell and Candow absent; Karpurapu not sworn in).

Susan Hughes thanked the commenters who spoke up from the public and hopes that they will continue to work with our committee. She said that the Diversity Task Force may want to revisit sensitivity and diversity training for Town leaders. Raquel Majeski added that the Diversity Task Force might also do some of our own growth work as a committee.

B. Working Group Updates

Working group updates were deferred to a later meeting.

C. Approve Minutes

Minutes were not reviewed.

Meeting adjourned at 8:17 pm.

Notes by Fran Stanley

Next meeting: Thursday, September 16, 2021 at 7 pm