



CITY OF HENDERSONVILLE DIVERSITY & INCLUSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Operations Center - Assembly Room | 305 Williams St. | Hendersonville NC 28792
Tuesday, May 9, 2023 – 5:30 PM

MINUTES

Present: Jayne Jennings, Chair, Josh Williams-Vice Chair, Laura Bannister, Nancy Diaz, Eric Gash and Melinda Lowrance

Absent: Florence Allbaugh & Jill Murray, City Clerk

Liaisons Present: Mayor Barbara G. Volk, and Mayor Pro Tem Lyndsey Simpson

Staff Present: City Manager John Connet and Communications Manager Allison Justus

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Jayne Jennings called the meeting to order at 5:32 p.m. with a quorum of members in attendance.

City Manager Connet asked that Public Comment be added to the agenda. A unanimous vote of the Committee followed. Motion carried.

2. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Committee Member Melinda Lowrance moved to approve the agenda as presented. A unanimous vote of the Committee followed. Motion carried.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Melinda Lowrance said she would like to set the record straight about the DEI Board. The City was approached by the Henderson County NAACP about the possibility of hiring a DEI manager. Having someone from the outside looking at the whole picture, seemed to be a way of not being biased. This decision is working and I see a brighter future for my hometown. If you can't be a part of the solution, don't be a part of the problem.

Christy Ellenburg spoke in favor of the DEI Committee and making Hendersonville a more open and accepting community.

Jeff Groh spoke against DEI.

Kate Sevone spoke against DEI and said this is nothing new and learning how people are and how we live together. We need to understand each other and everyone needs a seat at the table. We all need equal rights and DEI is splitting us apart.

Lee Lockton spoke against DEI and said that she's not fond of equity but is fond of equality. Its not safe for my mom where she is.

Dave Bass said he supports quality treatment of other and sexual orientation etc. I don't think we need DEI to fix the problems of today and I am not happy about the cost of the program.

Jayne Jennings then read the terms of the charter aloud to explain why the committee was formed.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. Approval of March 14, 2023 Minutes- *Jill Murray, City Clerk*

Committee Member Melinda Lowrance moved to approve the minutes of the March 14, 2023 as presented. A unanimous vote of the Committee followed. Motion carried.

5. OLD BUSINESS - None

6. NEW BUSINESS

A. Review and Discussion Regarding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan – *John Connet, City Manager*

City Manager Connet gave a brief overview of the strategic plan and said I think it's important for you to know why we're doing this. I have previously submitted a copy of the strategic plan that was written by Akhirah, it's in your agenda packet. I thought I would take a different approach as we go over the plan itself. The plan originally came from a small group of community members, the Mayor, and a former Council member following the George Floyd murder. The conversation was about how can we bring the community together. This plan, while I feel it's gotten caught up in national rhetoric on both sides of the aisle, my plan tonight is to offend everybody in the room. I think it's important that I do that as the leader of this organization, its an opportunity to take this plan a little deeper and to show how we got here.

I think it's important for you to know my background. I am the son of two public servants. My mother taught in the community college system and focused on adult education. Her parents were middle class blue collar workers that grew up in Black Mountain North Carolina. My grandfather's ancestors are buried in this county. He was an alcoholic and was known from time to time to use a racial slur and my mother quickly told us that is not correct and took us out of that environment. My father was a city manager and began his career in urban renewal. His parents worked at Warren Wilson College. My grandfather was on the original fundraising committee to build Mission Hospital and served in the Red Cross during WWII and my grandmother was a Girl Scout leader. So I came from a diverse background and grew up in Eastern North Carolina in a very diverse community where we had a high minority population, not only of African American, but Latinos who were, as I was growing up, migrant workers who would come on buses in the summer and live in migrant camps and there was lots of racism in that community. My mother decided that at 13 we would move out of that community. So, that is my background and its important for you to know that as we're doing this, I think it's important for folks to know why I'm doing this. We work for everybody in our community. That is why we're here and that is why we began this process.

Let me tell you a couple of stories that I have learned during this process:

I attended several of the focus groups as we were putting this strategic plan together and I have been here ten years this month, and over the years, I've heard about communities such as Black Bottom,

Peacock Town, West End, Brooklyn and Green Meadows and as a 6'2" white guy, I didn't know what those meant and those were people I and my staff were trying to serve. As we went through this process, I heard stories.

The first story: I heard a story about Black Bottom, which was an African American neighborhood off of Kanuga Road, a community that I didn't know about when I got here. What's important about Black Bottom, is that folks that lived in that area, up until the 1960's, the main public sewer outfall of the entire City of Hendersonville, dumped into Mud Creek in Black Bottom. This was before there was a wastewater treatment plant. Folks in our community remember that and they remember that it was the city that was doing that.

The second story: My father believed in urban renewal and I believe to this day that my father was a good man. I know he was, but he was involved in urban renewal. Urban renewal came out of the great society. Urban renewal was well intended but what we found out, fast forward 50-60 years, is that it destroyed low income minority communities. In North Carolina, it was predominately African Americans. In other parts of our country, it may have been Latino. It was a well-intended program and the program was that we were going to take an area, the Government was coming into a community and we were going to make it better. We were going to take property through eminent domain, remove structures that the government thought were substandard, we were going to add water and sewer but then we were also going to displace people and we displaced people into public housing. We took property away from folks and moved them away from their community. Now growing up with my dad being city manager, I thought that was a great thing, that my dad was doing a great thing. There are people in this community that remember urban renewal.

The third story: Up until two or three years ago, we had a city attorney and she wouldn't mind me telling this story. When I came to Hendersonville, our city attorney's name was Sam and when Sam left the City of Hendersonville, he was Sophia. Sam had been struggling with his identity for most of his life. As a city manager, as a 6'2" white man, Christian, when that transition started to happen, I didn't know what to do. My staff didn't know what to do. They don't teach you that in graduate school or Human Resources class but as a city manager and head of the organization, Sam was doing a great job. Sophia was doing a great job. I had to lead our organization and make sure that our organization was respectful to Sophia. Sophia retired and moved out of the community.

The fourth story: Hiring of a police chief. Prior to my arrival, Hendersonville for almost 28-30 years, had an African American police chief and the community was proud of that. Both of them still live in the community, Donny Parks & Herbert Blake. When Herbert chose to move to another position in Buncombe County, we sat down and we looked at the standards for a police chief. We looked at who we wanted to hire and the skills and many folks in our community wanted us to make sure that we had a diverse group of candidates. Some members of this committee came to me and said we've had two African American police chiefs, but we want you to get the best candidate and we want to have a diverse pool. So we did that. We went out and recruited a diverse pool of applicants. Some African American, some Hispanic, some white. Members of this committee and members of this community sat down and we had a panel and we interviewed our candidates and because we had two African American chiefs, that did not set the standard. You all asked us to hire the best person and we hired a white male. His name is Blair Myhand and he's doing a great job in my opinion. He has created community groups but he also understands that we have to work for our community.

So I say all that to say, everything I've talked about is in this plan in one way or another. Stories are imbedded in this plan. This plan is about how our organization interacts with our community. This plan does not talk about lowering standards. This plan does not talk about reparations. This plan does not lay blame on anyone. This plan has not identified any significant issues in our community. What it has done is established a set of guidelines that our organization will follow and that we work for our community. We work for our citizens. We don't get to choose who our citizens are. We don't get to choose who our customers are. This plan will say "hey, our website needs some pictures or some things that will help people get the services they need." From an HR perspective we're recruiting from a diverse applicant pool for every position. It is going to provide guidelines of our HR department as it relates to folks that may be transforming/transgender so they get treated equally throughout our organization despite our different perspectives. It will provide guidance and teaching in our organization for folks that are devout Christians, can function and perform in our organization. We will respect it. We have to work together. If there's conflict, we will deal with it. That's what this plan is about. This plan is not about hate. It is not about national rhetoric. Its about what is best for our community. I could go on and on but I am here to answer any questions but I felt it was important to give you my opinion.

One more story. We have a piece of property in our community that is owned by an African American couple and the property sustained a pretty significant fire and the damage was pretty significant. Its not livable and unfortunately under our code enforcement, we sent letters to either remove the structure or repair it. That couple never responded after multiple approaches and we had to send one final letter saying that we were going to condemn the property. They hired a local attorney and that property is going to be sold now. We asked them why did you not contact us or come forward and talk to us and it was because they couldn't trust the government. So that puts a fine point on why this organization believes in this program. This is what this program is about. So, going forward, this is about having conversations and this is what is in this plan.

Nancy Diaz, Eric Gash and Jayne Jennings thanked Mr. Connet for his honesty and for being so forthcoming.

B. Community Focus Groups – *John Connet, City Manager*

City Manager Connet said that we are going to go out in the community into places of worship and we're still looking for other places and we just want the community to come out and to have a dialogue in June, July and August. For the record, for those of you who missed why we hired Akhirah, we chose them because they have a diverse group of staff members that work with us including a white southern Christian man. So, that's the next step.

7. OTHER BUSINESS

Melinda Lowrance said on behalf of the DEI Board, we would like to thank Mrs. Jennings for her chairmanship. I remembered when we were organizing and I nominated you to be the chair. You were reluctant and said "I shouldn't be the chair because I'm a white woman". My reply was "the more reason you should be because you are a white woman and of the Jewish faith." It has been a pleasure working with you and getting to know you. We wish you all the best and pray that you and your family will find peace and happiness. Once again, thank you.

8. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Chair Jayne Jennings adjourned the meeting at 6:14 p.m.

Jayne Jennings, Chair

ATTEST:

Jill Murray, City Clerk