

City of Cambridge Citizens' Committee on Civic Unity Meeting

Tuesday, November 10, 2015, 5:30 PM, Cambridge Citywide Senior Center

Summarized meeting notes

Committee members present: Chanta Bhan, Danielle Boudrow, Susie Flug, Priscilla Lopes, Eva Martin Blythe, Steven Lee

Staff present: Taha Jennings, Brian Corr

Updates and Current Events

It was pointed out the YWCA Family Shelter on Bigelow Street is currently being rehabbed. An update was provided on a council order regarding Syrian refugees. This included information on the how settlement programs for refugees generally work, and the status of the Syrian refugees in Massachusetts.

A member provided thoughts on a talk that took place the previous Friday featuring Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza at the Philip Brooks House Association. The Committee also briefly discussed the City Council candidate that had recently dropped out of the race after revelations about previous posts on a controversial website. It was thought that this could also be an opening to a discussion about changing individual attitudes and views.

Also discussed was the situation at the University of Missouri, where the University President, as well as the Chancellor, were pressured to resign in the wake of a number of racial incidents that students felt were not responded to effectively. It was noted that the University President had been criticized for some time over several issues, however it was also recognized that significant pressure was added when members of the football team stated that they wouldn't play in their next game in support of a student who was conducting a hunger strike. It was also interesting to note how quickly changes seemed to happen once there was the threat of losing money as a result of the football team potentially not playing. Further, the scale of results that are possible when there is a systematic approach and unity around an issue.

There has been recent press regarding the Cambridge Police Department approach to "Procedural Justice" and the SafetyNet program. It was mentioned that the Cambridge Police Department actively works to get its message out to the community so that people know what's going on. The importance of young people understanding the potential long term consequences of their actions was noted. For example, the lasting impact of a criminal record even after incarceration ends. A program called Inner City Weightlifting in Kendall Sq. was noted which focuses on young men with records and provides mentoring from some of the local tech employees, to help make connections and help participants remake their lives.

Committee Action Plan

It was suggested that the Civic Unity Committee might be able to help get the word out about many of the good things that the City of Cambridge is doing related to civic unity. Taha and Brian mentioned that there are many things that the Committee can do, and will have the support of the City. But it is also important to consider some initial actions that the committee might take on. This might involve organizing subcommittees to work on specific tasks related to those actions.

Some of the ideas that have been mentioned by committee members to date include:

- Proactively communicate with the wider community about civic unity issues in Cambridge and some of the positive things happening already, while also leaving room for the more difficult discussions about challenges, with opportunities for honest dialogue and engagement.
- Create a reading list.
- Develop an “elevator pitch” about the Committee and its mission.
- A calendar of local events and resources in Cambridge – perhaps done through a Google Doc.
- Collaborate with other boards, commissions, and committees, e.g. Peace Commission, Employees’ Committee on Diversity.
- Cosponsor events in the community.
- Some kind of demographics presentation.
- Establish Civic Unity office hours.

It was suggested that members visit other boards and commissions and ask for 5 minutes on the agenda to introduce this committee as well as learn about what other groups are doing. It was pointed out that while things can be shared widely online we need to remember that the internet isn’t equally accessible to all residents.

There was an idea for a Cambridge version of the “Humans of New York” project. This might include one-pagers about the “People of Cambridge” identified by neighborhood or area in order to uniformly reflect what is happening across the city. It would likely require some thought about an effective way for people to nominate others or themselves and or have people do it online. It was also thought that highlighting people doing positive work in the community, could create an opportunity for larger ideas to emerge.

Another idea was for a larger meeting with some of the other boards and commissions that deal with similar issues and topics. The format could be an informal mixer, or a setting in which each commission presents for 5 minutes, with time at the end to talk about work. The Civic Unity committee could also have representatives from other commissions come to meetings as a guest speakers.

There is interest as well for a big event that the Committee can attach its name to. It should be of interest to the general population, and serve to knit together people from different ages, neighborhoods, and populations. A budget would help to plan for space and potential costs. This would help the Committee to get its name out there and possibly attract local politicians to be involved. It was pointed out that it’s also important to remember that achieving some of the small things can build up to a big event.

A member reminded the group that one of the reasons this committee came about was because of the problems that employees have had at the City, and to create a place for them to have a voice. This group could potentially play a more influential role in those issues. It was commented that the group could invite the City Manager to come in and talk about some of the issues on the employee side and share what is being done to try and address them. It was noted that part of the idea behind the committee was to be able to look at issues beyond simply right or wrong, and use what we hear to help make changes that can benefit everybody.

Leadership

The group was encouraged to think about someone or a team of individuals from amongst themselves to take on more of a leadership role in the Committee. Brian and Taha mentioned that they are happy to continue to support the group, but ideally the direction and focus should eventually come from within the committee. Discussions regarding leadership will continue at a future meeting(s).

Next Steps

Committee member Susie Flug volunteered to draft notes on what a demographics in Cambridge presentation might include and look like as well as for “meet and greet” type of functions to introduce the Committee and its mission to other city boards and commissions. Committee member Priscilla Lopes offered to look into alternate ways of reaching out to communities and residents without internet access. Taha Jennings stated that he will send out a list of the ideas discussed to the wider group for further discussion at the next meeting. The next two meetings are scheduled for December 1st 2015 and January 5th 2016 and the first Tuesday of every month moving forward.