

City of Cambridge Citizens' Committee on Civic Unity Meeting

Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015, 5:30 PM, Cambridge Citywide Senior Center

Summarized meeting notes

Committee members present: Josie Patterson, Susie Flug, Danielle Boudrow, Lewis Bryant, Melissa Castillo, Steven Lee, Kenny Likis, Eva Martin Blythe, Betsy Bard

Staff present: Taha Jennings, Brian Corr

Guest speaker: Cambridge City Councillor Denise Simmons

The group welcomed City Councillor Denise Simmons who provided history and context of the Civic Unity Committee. Councillor Simmons noted that originally created to deal with issues surrounding veterans returning from World War II, the Civic Unity Committee was a City Department until it was disbanded in 1992. It had a part-time director, starting in 1980. Councilor Simmons resigned as Director to serve on the School Committee.

The Committee's primary focus during that time was to advise the City Manager on issues of race and class. In addition to those discussions the group would bring clergy together for an annual seminar to talk about issues of race. Each month there would be a meeting on what kind of issue that they wanted to impact, particularly racism, housing discrimination, and police practices. All of the original members, were civil rights activists. There are only 2 former members of the committee living, Muriel Turk and Faith Chase.

Councillor Simmons stated that the Civic Unity Committee was established before many of the other human rights focused boards and commissions that exist in the City today, including the Women's Commission, Peace Commission, and the Human Rights Commission. The Civic Unity Committee also took on a proactive role in addressing issues.

Some studies of note include a Civic Unity Committee commissioned "Landlady Study" to explore biases in rentals to African Americans; a study on the Cambridge Police Department; and a study of ethnic attitudes in Cambridge. The intention of these was to look at the root of problems in Cambridge and what actions could be taken to address them. The group even had a Race Library where people could come to read and study about related issues and what other cities were doing.

Discussion:

Committee members had several questions which are summarized below:

Where do you feel the Civic Unity Committee made the most impact?

Sometimes work focused on education, and sometimes on police/community relations, and other times it may have been event driven. The group was very good at undertaking studies that then allowed them to propose actions. Many were academics, and they met with groups like the NAACP. For example, the Civic Unity Committee at that time worked to allow black people into the Harvard Club). The work required was a little different at that time because discrimination was very obvious. Civic Unity staff would also take complaints about discrimination. It was a city organization with paid staff, and was willing to do the work to identify problems and work to make the recommendations for change. The Committee served as a safe place where discussions such as these could happen which didn't exist

anywhere else at the time. Some potential guest to explore might include: Congressman John Lewis, Charlotte Golar Ritchie, and Lorraine Woodson.

What are some thoughts regarding paid staff model and budget for the current Committee to conduct activities?

The original Committee wanted to function as agents of change. Having a small budget helped allow the necessary work to implement recommendations, but it wasn't always easy. It's probably important to make a plan and look at what the committee needs. Perhaps by first taking a step back and looking at the mission. For example if it were "the elimination of unfairness", start with elimination of unfairness in City government, then in housing, and then to get more people interested and involved. Maybe produce an organizing event and bring in a speaker, then set up subcommittees to do the work. Ask the Cambridge Police to come in and talk about what they are doing that keeps us from having the race and violence problems. The original Civic Unity Committee had subcommittees on race, housing, education, employment. It may be possible to have a representative from the Police Department come in and talk to the current group about issues such as hiring additional people of color.

Another possibility is an open forum to get more people involved; or have working groups chaired by Civic Unity Committee members and then have reports come out of their work. The original committee had a small budget for mailings and conducted an annual mailing to report back to the community on work done. There was also an annual award to recognize individual efforts, and also helped to remind the community about the work done by the Civic Unity Committee. Events can help bring people into future discussions and involvement.

How does this committee fit with other commissions and with the City Council Civic Unity Committee?

Some groups serve more of a reactive role, while the Civic Unity Committee could have a more proactive role in the community. Currently, the City Council Civic Unity Committee is working on a report on lessons learned from the Malvina Monteiro case, and what could have been done to prevent that case in the first place. What does the City need to do to keep cases from going that far (to MCAD)? Also, just because a claim is denied by MCAD, it doesn't mean that it wasn't legitimate. Perhaps proposing an ordinance that could be introduced to the Council Civic Unity committee that can then go to the Ordinance Committee. It is sometimes a challenge trying to think about the City employees and then also thinking of the broader community and larger efforts and goals of civic unity engagement, in part because there aren't many resources to look at the internal City staff. There is a tug between trying to promote unity and trying to investigate what is going on.

What were the Race and Class forums?

At the time the group brought in other City departments (e.g. Women's Commission, Peace Commission). One featured a woman who spoke on "Walk in My Shoes" and the next forum was with Charles Ogletree. After the speakers, people broke into small groups and talked about the issues they saw. Issues came up on hiring fairness in the City, education and the achievement gap, and the school to prison pipeline. They had over 100 people at this event through the Chronicle, and through other groups. However we can't undo centuries of racism and sexism with a few trainings. These need to be exercised, and trainings have to be done on an annual basis.

One of the biggest obstacles to creating civic unity is the gentrification in the City. How do we address that?

Right now the Council is working on "Linkage" and adjustments to the Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance.

Inclusionary Zoning requires a certain percentage of units in any housing development need to be affordable. It's important to ensure everyone within these units is treated equitably and fairly. At one time the original Civic Unity Committee conducted a flyer campaign, with messages such as "We all belong here" to help change the way people behave. There could be a recommendation that any developer who builds will put similar messages in the lobby. Worth thinking about how we make an impact on these buildings. We are now seeing more class clashes in Cambridge, while it used to be primarily black and white issue, it has now become more of an issue of haves and have nots. Problem is not new, we need to humanize each other and get to know each other.

Is there a tension between celebrating and uplifting efforts versus working on prevention and being more policy oriented?

I think both can be done: celebratory things help keep things going, brings people to the table, and they may get involved even if they aren't appointed and if they get active get them appointed. Once you start to do that, you'll then get people coming to you. Show and tells also allow you to show your work and tell your story. A listening tour might be helpful. It might be possible to do a training/tutorial for 2 or 3 meetings.

How did the original Civic Unity Committee go about determining what they wanted to work on?

We would try to help the committee focus on what the most important issues were; sometimes it was based on the Chairperson's experience as the staff person out in the city. The group sponsored a forum on "Cambridge: City of Harmony and Unity".

The opportunity gap in Cambridge is real, and even with affordable housing, what about access to affordable childcare, and job training. What can the City do to increase opportunity for all residents of Cambridge?

This is true. If you develop the housing, are there the jobs to go with them? MIT, for example, made a big commitment to job training. You also have to get the big companies to make a commitment to hiring the people who get the training in Cambridge.

What are some of the most significant things that have changed because of the work of the Civic Unity Committee?

I think we can now come to the table and have discussions. One remaining challenge seems to be working better with the churches. In the aftermath of the arrest of Professor Gates, we held a strategy session called "Moving Cambridge Forward: Taking Action on Race & Class in America's Classroom" and brought in America Speaks to facilitate, and it was amazing. But then we didn't get the grant money that had looked likely and would have allowed us to bring it to the entire city. Cambridge prides itself on what it has done and what it is, but doesn't have the ability to say we can do better and do the hard work and address it in ourselves. We can, if we want to, educate all children whose education is important to us, if we have the will.

Committee Updates:

Staff shared several membership updates with the Committee. Member Jwahir Sundai recently began her first semester at Bryn Mawr College and will not be able to actively participate on the Committee. Melissa Gonzalez resigned from the Committee due to time conflicts. Roxie Coicou was recently appointed as the pastor of Saint Luke's Christian AME Zion Church in Dorchester and also resigned as a

member of the Committee. Kwame Dance has returned to the area, and is excited about continuing to participate on the Committee.

Next Steps:

For the next meeting it was proposed that each member come with up to three proposed actions that the committee could potentially undertake. Sometime in the future the group can also revisit the question about what the size of the Committee should be, as well as possibly set a goal of next spring or next summer for an event that Committee could be responsible for.