

**Town of Needham**  
**Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group**  
**Minutes for February 8, 2021**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2alTCReQZc>

6:00 PM

A meeting of the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group was convened by chair Marianne Cooley. Ms. Cooley announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. She noted all public gatherings have been suspended as advised and directed by the Commonwealth. And, as such, suspending the requirement of the open meeting law to have all meetings in a public, accessible, physical location while encouraging and allowing members of all public bodies to participate remotely. Ms. Cooley stated the meeting will not include public comment and the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group and all attendees are convening by Zoom, as posted on the Town's website identifying how the public may join. All supporting documents used at this meeting are available on the Town's website [www.needhamma.gov](http://www.needhamma.gov) Present were Marianne Cooley, Ramin Abrishamian, Matt Borrelli, Natasha Espada, Toyin Fayemi, Vivian Hsu, Sue Neckes, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder, Jay Spencer, Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick, Assistant Town Manager Katie King, and Support Services Manager Sandy Cincotta.

Ms. Cooley noted that the working group has received public feedback and comments for specific wording at the prior meeting's public hearing, and through comments emailed to the group or submitted through the Town website. Some comments related to the work that is ahead. The working group's task relates to vision, so Ms. Cooley suggests those comments be placed in the "parking lot" and reviewed for recommendations for how to address and acknowledge.

The work at tonight's meeting revolves around the reviews of the vision draft and to find consensus. The final draft will then be forwarded to the Select Board for adoption. The Select Board will be asked to forward to other boards for adoption, and the Select Board will be asked to host a summit for boards to come to share how goals are being met, demonstrating accountability. The recommendation will also be brought to Town Meeting as a resolution. Mr. Nelson asked if it is anticipated that the summit would be held once or annually. Ms. Cooley suggested that it be an annual meeting, but that all boards regularly discuss the goals throughout the year.

Ms. Cooley welcomed back Lisa Smith-McQueenie, a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to guide the discussion on the draft vision statement, goals and guiding principles. Ms. Smith-McQueenie discussed the public comments in relation to the task of the working group which is "The NUARI working group has been formed to recommend a vision for racial equality in Needham and determine

guiding principles for future actions. Members will make recommendations to the Select Board.” She suggested that the community be notified of the task but that other ideas have not been dropped but will be forwarded for future action.

Ms. Smith-McQueenie presented the draft vision statement: “Needham will be a community free of racism, racial bias, prejudice and discrimination. Our residents, schools, businesses, organizations and government will work together to identify barriers to racial equity and create solutions, opportunities, resources and support for removing them.”

Mr. Borrelli asked if there was a way to incorporate workers or people in Town into the wording or were they assumed in the current categories. Mr. Spencer suggested that workers were included in the business category, and Ms. Smith-McQueenie noted that people in Town were included in all categories. Ms. Hsu noted the public comments that stated that a community completely free of racism wasn’t realistic, so should the wording indicate that the community “will strive” be considered? Ms. Smith-McQueenie stated that the definition of a vision statement is stating what you want the community to be. Dr. Fayemi noted that Needham should strive for the best and recommended keeping the current wording.

**Mr. Spencer made a motion to recommend adoption to the Select Board of the vision statement: “Needham will be a community free of racism, racial bias, prejudice and discrimination. Our residents, schools, businesses, organizations and government will work together to identify barriers to racial equity and create solutions, opportunities, resources and support for removing them.” Mr. Nelson seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.**

Ms. Smith-McQueenie presented that draft bullet points that accompany the vision statement. Not many changes have been made since the prior draft, and there were no public comments related to the points. Ms. Cooley suggested that each bullet point be read and members comment on the specific point. A vote will be taken at the conclusion of the review of the six points.

“We will work collaboratively and democratically toward a just, equitable, anti-racist community.” There were no working group comments.

“We will work to identify and change current policies, procedures, practices, and cultural norms in Needham that prevent meaningful access to opportunities because of race.” There were no working group comments.

“We will create opportunities for the community to confront unpleasant truths and seek solutions that always amplify values of racial equity.” There were no working group comments.

“We will intentionally create spaces for respectful dialogue and difficult conversations toward racial amity.” Ms. Espada asked if the word “amity” was understood by all. Ms. Smith-McQueenie noted that many words will need to be defined and Ms. Cooley suggested “amity” be added to the glossary of terms. There were no additional comments.

“We will actively engage with those who feel the impact of racism most directly, seeking their input, guidance, and honoring the wisdom of their experience.” There were no working group comments.

“We will commit as individuals to be intentional in our efforts to learn and practice anti-bias and antiracism, transforming our thinking, attitudes and behaviors.” Mr. Borrelli noted that this was the only bullet item that referenced individual as all others referenced “Town.” Ms. Smith-McQueenie stated that this point is included as the other bullet points did not include individual commitment.

**Mr. Spencer made a motion to recommend the six bullet points be recommended to the Select Board for adoption, as written. The motion was seconded by Mr. Nelson. The motion was unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.**

Ms. Smith-McQueenie suggested that the working group review Guiding Principles #3-5, initially, as they are shorter statements, and then return to #1-2.

Guiding Principles 3: A healthy community recognizes the harm created by implicit bias, intolerance and racism and strives to embrace diversity and inclusion by using a racial equity lens to promote anti-racist behaviors and attitudes in all aspects of civic and inter-personal living.

Mr. Nelson asked how “healthy community” was defined. Ms. Smith-McQueenie noted that it was a thriving community with the capacity to recognize. Mr. Spencer asked if there was another word closer to “equity.” Mr. Abrishamian suggested that “healthy” has universality as opposed to “equitable.” Ms. Neckes suggested the word “healthy” connected to areas identified including physical, mental and emotional harm. Ms. Howard Schroeder suggested that “healthy” opened the door to public health, with the physical and mental health system. Mr. Borrelli asked if both the words “healthy” and “equitable” could be included.

**Mr. Abrishamian made a motion to recommend Guiding Principle 3 to be recommended for adoption as “A healthy and equitable community recognizes the harm created by implicit bias, intolerance and racism and strives to embrace diversity and inclusion by using a racial equity lens to promote anti-racist behaviors and attitudes in all aspects of civic and inter-personal living.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Nelson. The motion was unanimously approved 10-0 by roll call vote.**

Guiding Principles 4: We value lifelong/ongoing self and group learning and critical social analysis to acknowledge and to further understand the dominance of white culture and privilege throughout US history, and the importance of disrupting racial structures that perpetuate it.

Mr. Borrelli stated that “the dominance of white culture and privilege” appeared to be controversial. Ms. Espada suggested adding the wording “majority white culture” so that the phrase still makes an important statement. Ms. Cooley suggested that Guiding Principle 4 discussion be held, as there isn’t consensus, and return to the discussion after reviewing the other guiding principles. Mr. Nelson asked if only a majority vote was needed on each item or if unanimous vote was needed for each. Ms. Hsu stated that the statement is viewing the term through a historical lens and a recognition of concepts. Uncomfortable dialogue is needed to go forward. Ms. Howard Schroeder stated that no matter what words are used, some people will be uncomfortable, and that it is time for difficult conversations and to learn. Mr. Spencer stated that the wording was tough but true. The wording needs to be defined and promote dialogue. Dr. Fayemi challenged Mr. Borrelli to develop similar wording that provides needed message. Mr. Abrishamian noted the statement is true and asked what people found offensive. Mr. Borrelli agreed that difficult discussions are needed, but that the final document would be presented by the Town of Needham, so he suggested that something less divisive and “finger pointing” would help move forward. Mr. Abrishamian asked if the statement was true, and Mr. Borrelli agreed that it was, but that it didn’t recognize good that had been accomplished. Mr. Nelson noted that the statement wasn’t just about the past but about what was still happening. Dr. Fayemi stated that his culture has not been considered human, being killed for being in the wrong place or not being able to purchase a home. Many people, today, did not do any of that personally and are not at fault, but benefited from it. Ms. Howard Schroeder stated that the guiding principles are tools to fight against racism. If the working group doesn’t define using powerful language, not sure there is purpose in doing anything else.

**Mr. Spencer made a motion to recommend adoption of Guiding Principle 4 for adoption as “We value lifelong/ongoing self and group learning and critical social analysis to acknowledge and to further understand the dominance of white culture and privilege throughout US history, and the importance of disrupting racial structures that perpetuate it.” Mr. Nelson seconded the motion.** Discussion continued. Mr. Borrelli acknowledged horrible events throughout the country, but stated he was Needham-centered. Mr. Nelson felt that the statement reflected Needham and how many people living in Needham currently, and Ms. Cooley stated that the working group was addressing current Needham issues. Ms. Espada explained how her family had been impacted by blatant racism and that it was her goal to help change Needham to be a better community. **Ms. Cooley called the roll, and the motion was passed 9-1. Mr. Borrelli voted against adoption.**

Guiding Principles 5: Becoming anti-racist means that we must tackle our own implicit and discriminatory lenses – thus, bringing about restorative justice, healing and reconciliation to truly bring together the community we live in.

On the wording, Ms. Neckes stated that “restorative justice” is a process to correct a wrong, so is that the wording that was meant to be used in this principle? Ms. Smith-McQueenie noted it was included with healing and reconciliation, so there was a place for it, but it did indicate a commitment. Ms. Cooley asked if the wording connects the Town to a “means and methods”? Ms. Neckes noted it was a desirable commitment. Ms. Hsu noted “restorative justice” is a concept as well as a process. The concept of it is important to the state. The consensus was to leave the concept in the text.

**Ms. Neckes made a motion to recommend adoption of Guiding Principle 5 as “Becoming anti-racist means that we must tackle our own implicit and discriminatory lenses – thus, bringing about restorative justice, healing and reconciliation to truly bring together the community we live in.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Borrelli and the motion was approved unanimously on a roll vote 9-0. Natasha Espada had to leave the meeting early.**

A discussion was held on whether there was time at this meeting to discuss Guiding Principles 1 and 2, and after review it was agreed to hold both for an upcoming meeting. Ms. Cooley stated that the Vision Statement with bullet points and Guiding Principles 3-5 will be presented for adoption by the Select Board, with a notation that additional guiding principles will be coming forward. She thanked all the members for working together on a significant statement and for the respectful and candid conversations. The next meeting will include discussions on zoning and housing policies. There will be three meetings in March. The Tidwell report is due in late February. Ms. Hsu recommended that work begin on the glossary of terms. Ms. Cooley thanked Ms. Smith-McQueenie for all her work with the group. Ms. Smith-McQueenie acknowledged that hard work done by the working group, with each member bringing his/her whole self to the conversation.

7:45 PM

**Motion made by Mr. Borrelli that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group meeting be adjourned. Second: Mr. Nelson. Unanimously approved 9-0 by roll call vote.**

A list of all documents used at this Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group meeting is available at <https://www.needhamma.gov/Archive.aspx?ADID=8833>.