

Community Meeting Notes
Consideration of Establishing a Race Relations Committee in Danville
2:00 p.m. • July 31, 2013 • Institute for Advanced Learning and Research

At its July 2nd work session during City Council's initial discussion on forming a Race Relations Committee, Council suggested that the Mayor and Vice-Mayor seek input on the matter from the community. Accordingly, a public meeting was conducted at the Institute at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesday, July 31st. The community meeting drew more than 50 participants, some having been invited by the Mayor and Vice-Mayor and others having come on their own. Mayor Sherman Saunders, Vice-Mayor Gary Miller, and Councilmembers Larry Campbell, John Gilstrap, and Alonzo Jones were in attendance, as were Joe King, Ken Larking, Clarke Whitfield, Susan DeMasi, Amanda Paez, Arnold Hendrix, Sgrinia, Marc Aron, and Philip Broadfoot. Anticipating more than two members of Council would attend, the meeting was advertised in advance as a special work session.

Mayor Saunders and Vice-Mayor started the meeting reading the attached talking points. They concluded with the following ten items for the assembled group's consideration:

1. Danville should proudly celebrate its diversity.
2. The City Council should create a "Coalition Celebrating Danville's Diversity."
3. Its purpose should be to engage those interested in working together to make Danville a tolerant and welcoming community to all regardless of race, sex, religion, creed, nationality, or economic status.
4. It should have no regulatory authority. Neither should it receive or investigate complaints.
5. Membership of the Coalition should be open to all, from organizations to individuals.
6. The Coalition should encourage member organizations to independently and collectively undertake activities and programs.
7. The City should provide staff support for the Coalition.
8. For the first six months, the Mayor should serve as its chairman and the Vice-Mayor as its vice-chairman.
9. The Coalition should implement appropriate best practices established in other communities.
10. The Coalition should meet monthly initially and then on a schedule of meetings and events determined by the membership.

There was a strong consensus that Danville should acknowledge and celebrate its diversity. However, some questioned whether or not many citizens of Danville are ready to do so. Otherwise, there was nearly complete agreement with all but the fourth item presented -- that a race relations committee should have no regulatory authority and should not receive or investigate complaints. Some felt strongly that it serve a regulatory role and handle receive and investigate race discrimination complaints. Comments from the group during the meeting included the following:

- Stan Hood wanted to know what kind of research had been done about race relations prior to the meeting.
- Doris Wilson wondered if we were celebrating the fact that diversity exists. She said we are not ready to celebrate.
- Shelia Baines said Danville should celebrate its diversity. Danville is changing and continues to change.
- David Wilson wanted to know if we are going to deal with history.
- Dr. George Wilson wanted to know who put the points together.
- John Gilstrap said that we should celebrate.
- Speaking about creating a coalition, Lille Jones said that in order to plan, we need to get more people involved. We need to look at different ways to reach groups.
- Pastor Fuller wanted to know who would investigate complaints. The Mayor stated that complaints would be referred to the proper group.
- Pastor Ron Johnson expressed concern is that some people think that we are past racism because laws have been enacted. Is that enough? He looked at other communities such as Charlottesville, Fairfax, Alexandria, Newport News, Prince William County, and Virginia Beach that all have commissions with anti-discrimination enforcement powers that have become a distinguishing factor for each of those jurisdictions.
- Mayor Saunders noted his response would depend on the recommendation from this body to City Council.
- Ms. Baines said she does not think we should rule out any activity.
- Someone said after we form the committee, we can deal with the answers to these questions later.
- Stan Hood asked if it was the Mayor's vision to bring people together.
- A resident of North Carolina asked if this committee would be open to people outside Danville.
- Someone stated that what might work in other communities may not work well in this community.

- Someone stated that staff would provide research on other committees.
- Pastor Fuller said he wanted to hear what Pastor Campbell thought.
- Bishop Campbell said that the idea for this committee was born out of his experience. The overall approach is to not only celebrate our community. We are trying to reach a goal by achieving objectives. We want it to be a proactive group in this community, not a reactive body. There has to be some place where we can discuss race relations. We need to focus first on our race issues.
- Vice Mayor Miller said we cannot exclude anyone.
- David Wilson said that the meetings need to be at different times during the day, as some people may not be able to attend during the work day.
- Faith Stamps said that as we move forward, we need to be conscience that we have a lot of work before we can celebrate.
- Rhonda Vogler said we need to get it to the point where a diverse community is not divided.
- Debra Dodson said we need the help of an outside advisor.
- Someone suggested the committee be made up of 24 members. It should be focused on freedom, justice and equality for all.
- Kara Nooruddin said that there may be diversity, but you would not know it.
- Someone said that it is great that we have a meeting and that we should not leave anyone out.
- Someone said there are serious race discrimination issues that need to be dealt with before considering the broader issues of diversity.
- Avon Keen said we have a race problem between blacks and whites. We need to define racism.
- Sonja Ingram said our history has to be a focus. Some of it is painful. We need to celebrate our shared heritage. We need to look at our heritage.
- Ms. Baines said this is long overdue. We need to look at what other communities are doing. We need to look at all history.
- Cara Burton said we should be sure to have objectives. Perhaps this could be called a working group.
- David Wilson said we need to acknowledge there is still a race problem. He said we must look at our history.
- Dr. Wilson said he thinks Danville is thirsting for this kind of group. He said we need to proceed expeditiously and thoroughly.
- Peggy Craft said she thought this meeting was a good start.

- Someone said that we need to be sure there are funds in the City budget.
- Adrian Massey said we need a plan with strategies. We need to identify barriers.
- Ms. Campbell said she wants us to think about that we all have a common background. We need to be concerned about access.
- Ms. Wilson said we need to have a small, representative group of people to be able to get anything done.
- Someone said we should take these objectives back to the community and come back.
- Someone said if we come with a positive attitude, we will have a positive result.
- Police Chief Broadfoot said that his department is ready to help in any way it can to support this effort.
- Ms. Saunders said that, hopefully, when this committee is established, it is honesty that is shared.
- Willy Thompson said until we come together with one common goal, we may have division.
- Someone said there is a lot we can celebrate.
- Sammy Fitzgerald said we are all humans who feed and thrive off of love and we should use this fact as our core common trait.
- Michael Duncan said we need to deal with the economic disparity among races. He said he would commit the resources of the Institute to help us get started.
- Someone said we need to address unemployment. We do not need to focus on the past; we need to focus on the future.
- Someone said she was disappointed that Bishop Campbell was not appointed to be chair and also said he wanted to see more involvement from church leadership.
- Someone said that the mission we are looking toward is a good mission.
- Dr. Miller said we can't fix all the wrongs. We can learn from the mistakes and all work together to move forward. He said we should try to change our reputation from the place where Bloody Monday occurred to a place that celebrates and encourages our diversity.

Talking Points
Sherman Saunders & Gary Miller
Discussion on Creating a Race Relations Committee
January 31, 2013

Welcome

Let me start us off with an explanation of why we're here this afternoon and what we hope to accomplish, within no more than an hour, if possible.

This is not the first meeting of the Danville Race Relations Committee. It's a meeting on to discuss if and how we might form such a committee.

At the June 18th City Council meeting, Bishop Lawrence Campbell of Bibleway Church requested that the City establish a race relations committee. Bishop Campbell suggested that this would be an appropriate way to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the "Bloody Monday" event here in Danville.

To many, the need for such a group is underscored by the death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin and the outcome of the Zimmerman murder trial.

In considering this matter, the City Council asked that Vice Mayor Gary Miller and I reach out to the community for ideas and advice on how to organize a race relations committee. That's why we're here this afternoon. We very much appreciate your attendance and hope to spend the next hour in a good discussion on this important matter.

We believe the City Council is prepared for the City of Danville to play a stronger role in promoting better race relations in our community. The challenge is determining how to do that in the most appropriate way.

We're going to take good notes as we try to capture all of your input on the matter. In recent comments on the Zimmerman murder trial, President Obama suggested that all of us do some soul-searching. President Obama said,

"There has been talk about should we convene a conversation on race. I haven't seen that be particularly productive when politicians try to organize conversations. They end up being stilted and politicized, and folks are locked into the positions they already have. On the other hand, in families and churches and workplaces, there's the possibility that people are a little bit more honest, and at least you ask yourself your own questions about, am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people as much as I can, based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy."

There's not much our city government can do to change hearts and minds on race relations. But Danville would benefit from an effort that encourages and sustains the kind of soul searching and interaction between our citizens suggested by President Obama.

First, let's make sure we agree on what a race relations committee is.

Local race relations committees operate under various titles. Regardless of what they are called, these organizations generally focus on promoting understanding, tolerance, and goodwill between all citizens regardless of race, sex, religion, creed, nationality, or economic status.

Some race relations committees are community based; others are established by local governments. Race relations committees appointed by city or county governing bodies are typically organized as any other board or commission with members given specific terms of office. Local race relations committees vary in size.

Most local race relations committees are involved in public outreach, training, information, and education.

Beyond their public information and involvement activities, committees typically fall into one of two categories – those with and those without formal enforcement powers regarding the jurisdiction's anti-discrimination laws.

Danville has anti-discrimination provisions in its housing and procurement codes. Like any other employer, the City must comply with a wide range of federal anti-discrimination laws. Anti-discrimination complaints are afforded due process under these statutes. So in Danville's case, a race relations committee is not needed to enforce anti-discrimination laws.

As should be expected, activities of race relations committees normally reflect demographic and social issues relevant to their own communities. Those with significant immigrant or Native American populations have a different focus than committees serving differently constituted communities.

In Danville's case, race relations are currently a black and white affair. 96% of Danville's population is split nearly evenly between black and white residents. However, people of other races are coming to Danville, as are Hispanics of all races. People from many different counties also live in Danville. And, as the city of churches (and synagogues) Danville is also a community of religious diversity.

Before we focus on what we should do and how we should go about it, let us suggest that we can anticipate differing views on creating a race relations committee in Danville.

National surveys indicate that black and white Americans have diverse opinions on the appropriate role of government in dealing with civil rights in this country. There are similarly different attitudes about how governments like ours should try to engage the community in the kind of soul searching President Obama has called for.

We need your help deciding what steps should be taken on this issue.

- Should the City of Danville establish a race relations committee?
- If so, should it be a freestanding organization, or one affiliated with another organization?
- How should it be organized and led?
- Should it undertake programs and activities itself, or rely on its members to do so?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. We need your advice on what would work best for Danville!

To get our discussion under way, I'd like to get your reaction to ten points Vice-Mayor Miller and I are thinking about making with the City Council.

1. Danville should proudly celebrate its diversity.
2. Accordingly, the City Council should authorize creation of a "Coalition Celebrating Danville's Diversity."
3. The Coalition's purpose should be to engage those interested in working together to make Danville a tolerant and welcoming community to all regardless of race, sex, religion, creed, nationality, or economic status.
4. The Coalition should have no regulatory authority. Neither should it receive or investigate complaints.
5. Membership of the Coalition should be open to all, from organizations to individuals.
6. The Coalition should encourage member organizations to independently or collectively undertake the kinds of activities and programs that would make Danville a more tolerant, welcoming, and caring community. (We're working on a few programs the City of Danville would take on and encourage other organizations to do likewise.)
7. The City should provide staff support for the Coalition.
8. For the first six months until the Coalition is formed and can elect its own officers, I as Mayor would serve as its chairman and Vice-Mayor Gary Miller as its vice-chairman. Bylaws and other organizational details would be developed during the first six months.

9. The Coalition would review and implement as appropriate the best practices of race relations committees operating in other communities.
10. The Coalition will meet monthly initially and then establish a schedule of meetings and events as determined by the membership.

We'd like to suggest that we focus our discussion on these topics. However, we want to make sure to address any other concerns as we have this conversation. So, if, while we are talking, somebody has a burning question or comment they would like to make that is not related to how we organize this group, we will record it on a flip chart and make sure that it is discussed at the appropriate time.

O.K., so what do you think about our ten points?