

Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board  
City of Roanoke, Virginia  
MINUTES (Virtual Meeting)  
January 7, 2021

I. **CALL TO ORDER - ROLL CALL**

City Attorney Tim Spencer called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Vice Mayor Trish White-Boyd, Councilmember Bill Bestpitch, Rabbi Kathy Cohen, Dr. Elda Stanco Downey, Patice Holland, Rev. Bill Lee, Angela Penn, Jerel Rhodes, Peter Wonson

**OTHERS PRESENT:** City Manager Bob Cowell, City Attorney Tim Spencer, Community Engagement Manager Tiffany Bradbury, Assistant to the City Manager Angie O'Brien

II. **ELECTION OF OFFICERS**

City Attorney Tim Spencer opened the floor for nominations for the position of Chair of the Board. Mr. Bestpitch nominated Vice Mayor Trish White-Boyd. There being no further nominations, Vice Mayor White-Boyd was elected as Chair of the Board by unanimous voice vote.

Mr. Spencer opened the floor for nominations for the position of Vice Chair of the Board. Rabbi Cohen nominated herself. There being no further nominations, Rabbi Cohen was elected as Vice Chair of the Board by unanimous voice vote.

Mr. Spencer opened the floor for nominations for the position of Secretary of the Board. Mr. Wonson nominated Mr. Bestpitch. There being no further nominations, Mr. Bestpitch was elected as Secretary of the Board by unanimous voice vote.

III. **NEW BUSINESS**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd assumed the Chair and called for the following items of new business:

**A. Welcome and Introductions**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd thanked everyone for the honor of allowing her to chair the Board. She stated that she is the owner of a home healthcare agency. She said that she expected the Board to focus on issues of equity and empowerment for all, not just racial injustice and disparities.

Dr. Stanco Downey reported that she has lived in the Roanoke Valley since 2004 and in the City of Roanoke since 2007. She is a professor at the VTC School of Medicine and the owner of Roanoke Spanish, a small business that provides bilingual communication strategies and cultural intelligence solutions.

Mr. Bestpitch stated that he had served on Roanoke City Council for 14½ years and had lived in the City for 30 years. He reported that then-Vice Mayor Joe Cobb, Mr. Cowell, and he had initiated conversations almost 1½ years earlier with elders in the community who were adversely affected by urban renewal in an effort to develop appropriate acknowledgement of, and apology for, the negative impacts of urban renewal. He said that the obvious pain still felt by the elders, who called themselves urban renewal survivors, had prevented the group from making significant progress toward the stated goals. He expressed his hope that this Board would be successful in addressing the continuing pain inflicted by the mistakes of the past.

Mr. Rhodes stated that he is a native Roanoker with 23 years of experience as an educator, currently serving as a guidance counselor at Forest Park Academy. He also is the founder of Rebounding Roanoke, a mentoring initiative which operates several programs. He said that he wants to help identify ways to make the City better.

Rev. Lee is the retired pastor of Loudon Avenue Christian Church. He reported that he came to Roanoke in 1974 and taught at then-Stonewall Jackson Middle School, now called John P. Fishwick Middle School. He stated that we cannot right the wrongs of the past, but we can move toward healing and avoid repeating the history of the past.

Ms. Penn reported that she manages the real estate programs for Total Action for Progress and formerly served on the City's Planning Commission for 12 years. She said that she was a member of the steering committee for the Interwoven Equity theme of the updated comprehensive plan, and she was glad to see this group's mission to continue that work.

Mr. Wonson said that he had lived in Roanoke since 1981 and retired with 38 years of experience as an educator at James Madison Middle School, Patrick Henry High School, and North Cross School. He has been a rock musician for 14 years. He is a life member and board member of the Roanoke Branch NAACP and sees the work of this board as fitting in his "wheelhouse."

Ms. Holland indicated that she is from Franklin County originally. She is the first Black female partner at the law firm of Woods Rogers. She leads the firm's diversity and equity task force, teaches at the Washington & Lee School of Law, and conducts training in diversity and equity issues for employers.

Rabbi Cohen has been serving Temple Emanuel for 25 years. She is past president of the board of the Family Promise program for homeless families and serves on the City's gun violence task force. She expressed her concern that Roanoke is known as a segregated city to our detriment, and she looks forward to working on integration and bringing people together, a need she has seen for the last 20 years.

## **B. Purpose and General Responsibilities of the Board**

Mr. Cowell thanked the Mayor and City Council for establishing the Equity and Empowerment Board; he congratulated the Board members and thanked them for agreeing to serve. He emphasized that this is a permanent board, in essence an extension of City Council. He attributed the creation of the Board to the work related to the Interwoven Equity theme in the updated comprehensive plan, City Plan 2040, to the times we live in, and to the insistence of our community. Mr. Cowell quoted from City Plan 2040:

***Vision:*** In 2040, Roanoke is both a diverse and an inclusive community with access and opportunities available to all including: education, housing, healthcare, employment, and quality of life. Roanoke recognizes how these opportunities are interconnected and how past actions created barriers that limited opportunity for underserved communities, particularly the African-American community, and eroded trust in institutions. To maintain a high level of Interwoven Equity and inclusion, the community is engaged continuously to identify and predict changes that could become opportunities or barriers and to adapt appropriately to those changes.

He reviewed the three major responsibilities of the Board:

- (1) Review the priorities for Interwoven Equity in City Plan 2040 and any subsequent city comprehensive plan;
- (2) Develop proposed plans for the implementation of policies and actions identified for each priority set forth under Interwoven Equity in City Plan 2040; and
- (3) Review all existing city policies, ordinances, and regulations and recommend to city council changes in such policies, ordinances, or regulations to eliminate the city of any policies or procedures that promote inequality or limit empowerment.

Mr. Cowell concluded his remarks by noting that the Board faces exciting opportunities and great challenges.

Vice Mayor White-Boyd informed that Board that subcommittees would be formed to address specific areas of inequity and disempowerment in greater detail.

## **C. Adoption of By-Laws and Rules of Procedure**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd noted that the draft by-laws and rules of procedure had been sent to everyone in advance and asked if anyone had any questions. Hearing none, she entertained a motion for adoption. Rev. Lee moved adoption, seconded by Ms. Penn, and approved by unanimous voice vote.

#### **D. Adoption of Annual Meeting Schedule**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd stated that meetings of the Board were tentatively scheduled for the first Thursday of each month at 6:30 p.m.; meeting dates for the remainder of 2021 would be February 4, March 4, April 1, May 6, June 3, July 1, August 5, September 2, October 7, November 4, and December 2, with public hearings at the March, June, September, and December meetings. Vice Mayor White-Boyd entertained a motion for approval of the schedule as presented; Ms. Holland moved approval, seconded by Mr. Rhodes, and approved by unanimous voice vote.

#### **E. Review and Discussion of Relevant Materials**

Mr. Cowell presented an overview of current and ongoing initiatives to promote equity and inclusion, both community-oriented and organization-oriented. Descriptions of the activities are attached to these minutes.

Ms. Penn discussed the working group that addressed Interwoven Equity as part of updating the City's comprehensive plan for 2020-2040. She stated that the group had rescheduled its meetings at more convenient times to allow increased opportunities for people to participate. She noted that City Plan 2040 was guided by six themes drawn from the American Planning Association's Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans. This is the first time that Roanoke's comprehensive plan has included a specific focus on Interwoven Equity. The Interwoven Equity work group identified priorities, policies, and actions that will help direct the work of this Board. Ms. Penn quoted from page seven of the plan, which was adopted by City Council on December 21, 2020:

Roanoke recognizes how [education, housing, healthcare, housing, and quality of life] opportunities are interconnected and how past actions created barriers that limited opportunity for underserved communities, particularly the African-American community, and eroded trust in institutions. To maintain a high level of Interwoven Equity and inclusion, the community is engaged continuously to identify and predict changes that could become opportunities or barriers and to adapt appropriately to those changes.

The five priorities that emerged are: Trust, Break the Cycle of Poverty, Neighborhood Choice, Inclusion Culture, and Service Delivery.

The other five themes of the plan are Healthy Community, Harmony with Nature, Livable Built Environment, Responsible Regionalism, and Resilient Economy. Ms. Penn noted that each of the other five themes will be viewed through an equity lens.

**IV. HEARING OF CITIZENS UPON PUBLIC MATTERS RELATED TO EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT**

Ms. Bradbury informed the Chair that Marie Dagenais-Lewis, a disability rights leader and artist, wished to speak to the Board. Ms. Dagenais-Lewis stated that she was a victim of disability discrimination based on the termination of her employment. She expressed her concern that she had not heard disability rights mentioned during the meeting. Both Vice Mayor White-Boyd and Mr. Cowell assured her that this issue would be included in the Board's work. Vice Mayor White-Boyd also told her that she should feel free to contact members of the Board, City Council, or City staff at any time.

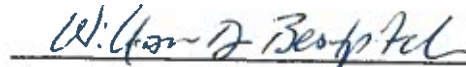
**V. ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NEXT MEETING**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd suggested that Hearing of Citizens upon Public Matters could be scheduled only during the quarterly public hearings. There was no objection. Rabbi Cohen asked that the information on the City's website regarding the membership of the Board be revised to show that she is now a resident of the City. The next meeting is scheduled for February 4 at 6:30 p.m. Vice Mayor White-Boyd indicated that materials from the Government Alliance on Race & Equity would be sent to Board members in advance of the next meeting.

**VI. ADJOURNMENT**

Vice Mayor White-Boyd entertained a motion to adjourn; moved by Ms. Holland, seconded by Dr. Stanco Downey, and approved by unanimous voice vote.

  
Vice-Mayor Patricia White-Boyd  
Chair

  
Council Member William D. Bestpitch  
Secretary