

414 Center St.  
Washington Grove, MD  
28 February 2024

Mayor John Compton  
Washington Grove Town Councilors  
McCathran Hall  
Washington Grove, MD 20880

Dear Mr. Mayor Compton and Washington Grove Town Councilors:

I am writing to share my thoughts regarding the five recommendations of the Racial and Social Equity Committee (RASEC) that were discussed at the Town Council Meeting of 27 February 2024.

I am requesting that the Council act at its next meeting, or the earliest possible time, to vote to reject four of the recommendations as proposed and to dispense with further discussions on the fifth as it has already been accomplished. For convenience and to encourage a clear way to reference the recommendations, I am adopting the order and the numbering scheme put forth by Tom Land in his thoughtful and comprehensive letter to the Council of 24 February 2024.

### **1. Recommendation to Create a Town Website Protocol**

I urge the Council not to adopt this recommendation. The Town already has a protocol for posting communications to the Town Council. The protocol is that all communications are posted as long as they are signed. I support the present protocol. I would like to be able to read any and all opinions without censorship. I understand that could result in my reading opinions that I find disagreeable or even repulsive. Given that the website is an official organ of our Town government I believe that any censorship would be a violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment.

### **2. Recommendation to Collaborate with Neighboring Communities Regarding the Shared Use Path**

I urge the Council not to adopt this recommendation. Plans for the Shared Use Path are now entering their final stages and there is little opportunity for additional meaningful collaboration with neighbors. The path in question is about 900 feet connecting Washington Grove to Crabbs Branch Way. To invite additional input into the plan at this stage would be disingenuous to the invitees.

I would, however, support ongoing conversations and collaborations with neighboring communities about how to make additional roads like Washington Grove Lane and

Midcounty Highway more conducive to walking, biking and other forms of recreation, or the development of additional shared use paths that could connect Washington Grove and our neighboring communities.

### **3. Recommendation to Consider Restoring the Name of Our Town Hall to ‘Town Hall’**

Unlike some, I believe it was a reasonable recommendation to *consider* a name change, and with the discussion at the 27 February Council meeting, this recommendation has already been implemented and indeed completed. It was considered. Both those in favor of changing the name and those opposed have had an opportunity to share their thoughts with the Council in the meeting or in writing. I believe that no additional ‘consideration’ of this question by the Town or Council is warranted or useful. Here’s why.

McCathran Hall was, of course, named for Washington Grove’s first Mayor, Irving LeRoy ‘Roy’ McCathran. Mayor McCathran was honored in this way by the Grove citizens and the Town Council of his day in recognition of his decades long selfless devotion to the Town and its welfare and to our predecessor entity the Washington Grove Camp Meeting Association for many years before the Town was established.

Roy McCathran was also by all accounts beloved by residents.

I believe it is fair to say that Washington Grove would not exist today in its present form but for the efforts of Mayor McCathran and his contemporaries. Having said this it is clear that our first mayor, like all human beings, had his flaws and foibles, particularly when viewed in hindsight through the lens of our particular time in history.

In particular he stands accused today of two serious misjudgments for which RASEC has suggested considering renaming McCathran Hall. (The actual wording of the recommendation is that the Council consider *restoring* the name to “Washington Grove Town Hall.” However, the original name of the hall was Assembly Hall. To the best of my knowledge the hall was never named “Town Hall” although it may have been referred to as that and it continues to be called “Town Hall” informally today. It goes without saying that the name can’t be *restored* to something it never was.)

It is appropriate in a time when statues of Confederate generals are being toppled, long-standing names of buildings are being changed, and a there is a general rise in awareness of injustice, particularly the injustice of racism, to examine our own history and assess how best to mend the mistakes of the past committed in name of our Town even if we didn’t live here at the time. Therefore, I do not find it unreasonable to take an unflinching look at the two charges being leveled against Roy McCathran and see if they rise to the level of demanding that we strip his name from the building that was named in his honor more than 65 years ago.

The first charge and in my view the more serious one is that Mayor McCathran was involved in and possibly led or drove restrictive covenants to be inserted into property deeds. The history of such covenants is well known. These covenants contrived to prevent people of color, Jews, and others considered to be “non-white” from buying or owning property in certain areas, effectively excluding, and segregating them. As a Jew, I am all too aware of the destructive effects that these practices had both on the peoples who were discriminated against and on society as a whole. The legacy of these abhorrent practices lives on today and deserves to be acknowledged, addressed, and corrected to the extent possible.

Having said this, these covenants were, along with the practice of ‘redlining,’ not only common up until the 1970s they were, in many places (like my hometown of Baltimore), actual public policy. Were he involved in initiating or perpetuating such practices, Roy McCathran would scarcely have stood out.

However, from what has been revealed thus far, there is little evidence that Roy McCathran was instrumental in writing or inserting restrictive covenants into Grove deeds. On the contrary, in his 18 February 2024 letter to the mayor and Town Council Philip K. Edwards, longtime resident and the closest we have to a Washington Grove Town Historian, says:

“Washington Grove was a private organization in an era that believed in exclusionary practices to keep their homogeneity intact. In the teens and twenties, once people were allowed to be residents without being stockholders, the community wrestled with how to maintain its exclusivity, employing lawyers to come up with convoluted wording to place on stock certificates, leases and deeds. Unless there’s evidence otherwise, Roy McCathran, a patent attorney, had nothing to do with the wording of these covenants.”

Based on the known facts, I believe we must err on the side of presuming Mayor McCathran innocent of this charge. However, even if later revelations point to his guilt, I still would not support removing his name from Town Hall given the prevalence and broad acceptance of these covenants at the time even though such covenants would have likely prevented members of my own family from moving into Washington Grove and many other places.

The second charge leveled against Roy McCathran is that he participated in minstrel shows and wore blackface, something that we view from our perch in history as highly distasteful, even repugnant. The evidence is that this accusation is true and it is not disputed. As RASEC’s presentation notes of the photographs of the mayor in costume, “we can’t unsee this.” Indeed, we should not try.

It is not my intent to excuse this behavior even when we understand how widely accepted these performances were at the time particularly by those performing or watching the shows. Today we understand that this form of ‘entertainment’ is simply not acceptable. But

does this misjudgment, which we now know to be offensive, even hurtful, undo all the good the man did or render moot his decades of service to the Grove? I don't believe it does.

In addition, there are a few other things to consider.

In addition to his own service, Roy McCathran gave our Town an enduring legacy, first by modeling decades of unpaid service to Washington Grove. This spirit of volunteerism is alive and well in the Grove today. I don't need to remind any of you of that.

Second, he also gave us the legacy of his descendants, his children and grandchildren who live among us to this day and have also served the Town as mayors, Council members, committee leaders, and volunteers. It is also their names that are honored above the entrance to our Town Hall. They are our friends and neighbors. To be sure, I have had my share of disagreements with some of them on various issues, however they do not deserve to be treated with disrespect nor have their contributions discounted.

One may argue that no Town building, road, field, or maintenance shed should bear the name of a mortal however worthy since at core, all are flawed. That argument appeals to me but then let us replace every such name with the name of a tree, flower, or bird so that no one can ever be hurt, offended, or God forbid, reminded of a past injustice.

Finally, Tuesday's meeting and the letters that have been sent to the Council have demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of Grove citizens do not wish to see the name of McCathran Hall changed. Even RASEC members who attended the meeting did not speak out in defense of the proposal. Not one of the just five Town residents who voted in favor of the recommendation spoke up to articulate the reasons for the recommendation. They were certainly afforded ample opportunity to do so. Just two members of the committee spoke and they only to clarify that the proposal was not to change the name but to *consider* changing the name.

Well, it has now been considered.

Therefore, I urge the Council to view this recommendation as having been implemented. The Council, indeed the Town as a whole, has now thoroughly *considered* changing the name of McCathran Hall. It was appropriate and fitting that we did so. Having done so, and it being clear that very few support changing it, no further action is required. Nor, do I believe, is anything to be gained by further debate on the matter.

**Recommendation to Hire a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Specialist.**

I support this recommendation but with a caveat. I would support the hiring of such a specialist for a limited engagement or engagements to help the Town implement a specific commitment. For example, if the Town decided to eliminate barriers for the use of the Craig English Athletic Field and once again welcome our neighbors to use it without having to acquire onerous permits, a DEI Specialist might help us reach out to the surrounding community in a way that shows them that they are welcome again.

### **Recommendation to Establish a Communication System Between the Town of Washington Grove and Heritage Emory Grove**

I support a communication 'system' with Emory Grove, Shady Grove Crossing, and other surrounding communities. However, I see no need for Council action on this. Rather I urge RASEC to show initiative and create such a system and implement it. RASEC's Chair and Council liaison can keep the Council informed of progress and encourage forward momentum. Like most of the work of our Town committees, actions such as these do not need to be directed by the Council.

In conclusion, I do believe that it is incumbent upon all of us to work to create a world that is more just and that corrects and heals the injustices of the past. I supported the RASEC resolution that was adopted by the Council last year, but I also know much more needs to be done. Sadly, I believe that most of these current RASEC recommendations, although well intentioned, are misguided, poorly articulated, inadequately informed, and more divisive than restorative.

I have some ideas on more pro-active measures the Town might take to be more welcoming to its neighbors but due to the already considerable length of this missive, I shall hold those for another occasion.

Sincerely, and with gratitude for *your* selfless service to Washington Grove, I am, your neighbor,



Dennis M. Kirschbaum  
414 Center St.