

## Renaming controversy and RASEC report

March 3, 2024

Dear Mayor, Councilors and Fellow Residents,

I share with many in our town both a sense of privilege to live here and a concern with exclusionary and discriminatory practices in our past that not only harmed others but also limited our own consciousness and development.

I don't believe that we should strip away the name of McCathran from our town hall because Roy McCathran's sins pale in comparison to the foundational role he played in this community for so many years. For a more systematic take on this renaming issue, I encourage you to take a look at Dave Cosson's letter on this site in which he applies a Yale University guide to renaming buildings.

In lieu of beating the renaming issue into the ground, I believe that our me, efforts, money and community solidarity could be better spent on efforts to engage communities outside our little enclave in programs grounded in recognition of our broader interdependencies with our neighbors and the common interests and needs we share with them. To be credible, such efforts require the active and visible leadership of our mayor and town council and should not rely solely on the initiatives of RASEC or other committees.

As important as our discussion about RASEC's proposal to "consider" renaming the town hall may be to some, I think it really distracts from some disturbing parts of their study, begun in 2021, which they undertook and submitted to the town council. Unfortunately, it was to be discussed at the last meeting but the renaming issue consumed virtually all the me available

First, let me say that I find it surprising that only about 20-25% of the town population of the town's residents over 15 years or so filled out a very short questionnaire. For many surveys of this type, this is a decent response rate but this strikes me as low for a very small town that at least sees itself as welcoming and encourages the participation of all in community affairs. I also found it strange that only 14 people under 46 years of age found me to participate when the census data suggests that perhaps as many as 150 adults in this age cohort reside here. Perhaps the twin burdens of jobs and parenting were too much. As a result, the older folks in town, mostly long-term residents, are vastly overrepresented in the sample as well as women and, of course, whites.

Second, the numbers reporting that they witnessed discrimination or bias in town would suggest that we don't need to rehash our history to find examples of these attitudes and behaviors – they are alive and well today among ourselves. Roughly 40% of the respondents believed there were "issues" (whatever that means) of discrimination and/or bias today in WG. Fourteen percent claimed they had actually experienced discrimination or bias and fully 36% claimed to have "witnessed" these attitudes or actions. Buried in the footnotes is the claim that some number of those claiming to have witnessed discrimination or bias didn't actually witness anything, they just heard about it. Obviously, we need more information about these disturbing responses.

The questionnaire invited respondents to describe the discrimination or bias they experienced or witnessed but the report breezes over whatever comments there were with extremely brief notations. Classes of people were mentioned to have “experienced” discrimination/bias: newcomers, single working parents, edge-of-town residents, inner circle people. Under the “witness” category was remarks made during the bike-path conversations about outsiders, the alleged or apparent racial profiling of people using the lake, changes in access to soccer field and expressed concerns about local public schools. We, the community, need more information about what was seen and heard and by whom and under what circumstances.

RASEC has been extremely concerned, if not obsessed, with guarding the privacy of the respondents and, one assumes, especially their extended remarks. At one time, one of those dealing with the questionnaires justified the exceedingly slow pace at which they were proceeding (it’s been at least two years since the data were collected) by indicating that they were having difficulty how to reveal the comments without violating someone’s privacy. However, privacy concerns can be usually met by eliminating references to names coupled with some minimal editing to obscure other identifying information. Moreover, the community is a stakeholder in this enterprise and has rights as well, in this case, rights to access these extended comments to make judgements as to the significance of RASEC’s findings that over a third of its residents had “witnessed” discrimination or bias. Without full disclosure of those comments as well as basic demographic information, many reading this RASEC report now or in the future (e.g. non-residents, local historians, etc.) would quite probably conclude that discrimination was alive and well in our town. Given the RASEC report, I’m not sure what we should think.

Third, and to bring this full circle, given the way in which the RASEC report discusses the terms “discrimination” and “bias” without defining them, one wonders what labels their members will place on those of us who fail to support their calls for renaming the town hall and adopting their other recommendations.

Sincerely,

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