

March 5, 2024

Dear Mayor, Councilors, and Residents,

I am grateful that the Racial and Social Equity Committee's (RASEC) recommendations have sparked a conversation about the Town's next steps to make the aspirations and commitments in our resolution a reality.

After hearing the discussion at the meeting on February 27 and reading the posted comments, I realized that we did not provide enough context to explain what precipitated some of the recommendations partly because we did not want to disparage individuals who did not intend to offend Emory Grove residents. However, one must consider the effects of our actions regardless of the intentions. I will review each recommendation, explain the background when appropriate, and respond to some criticisms.

First, I would like to remind everyone that we proposed these recommendations as possible first actions to follow through on the Town Resolution's vows. The recommendations were based on the following sources:

- Town survey and discussions
- Ongoing discussions at RASEC meetings and events such as the discussion following the documentary about racism, "Deconstructing Karen"
- Stories from joint events with Emory Grove
- Observations of Town practices, culture, interactions
- A structured discussion with Emory Grove to gain insight into their view of the resolution and meaningful ways to operationalize the promises of the resolution. The salient points made during that discussion included: Washington Grove would benefit from interpersonal anti-racist work and education and focus on joint activities with Emory Grove that reach a deeper level of trust before reaching out to other communities.

Since most of the discussion and website commentary was about the renaming recommendation, I will address that recommendation first.

I am generally in favor of actions that are practical rather than symbolic. The RASEC Leadership Team and the Recommendations Workgroup are aware that I had mixed feelings and a nuanced position regarding the McCathran Hall renaming recommendation, but not for most of the reasons stated thus far.

I do not doubt the well-researched facts presented in the slide presentation, nor do I think that renaming is dwelling on the past and erasing history. I have learned from discussions with non-white people that moving forward does not mean passing a resolution and inviting non-white neighbors to parties. Like any relationship,

cumulative acts, time, and work are required to build deep trust and authentic interactions.

I am thankful for the vision that Roy McCathran had to maintain forested areas, create the Town's infrastructure, and the direct form of a democratic government. His accomplishments cannot be dismissed and deserve honor.

A commitment in our Resolution is to examine policies and practices and consider how our actions affect our neighboring communities. Examining the name of the Hall is one step toward moving forward on that promise. Names on a town's buildings represent the values of that locality. Erasing history occurs when we do not tell the whole truth.

I was ambivalent because I thought there might be another way to acknowledge the whole truth and I did not want this recommendation to overshadow the others.

I am going to mention a few residents by name who spoke publicly or posted comments publicly on the website because I think they have made points that could bring us to a consensus, hopefully. Please know that I understand that these individuals may not agree with the conclusion I have reached.

Larry French mentioned that we could come up with a more creative solution that more residents could agree upon.

John Brasunas and Kathleen McCann suggested a plaque explaining both the reasons we honor Roy McCathran and things we are not celebrating in the context of the times. Their suggestion reminded me of when RASEC reminded the Comprehensive Planning Workgroup to clarify phrases such as, "preserving the historic character of the Town" by adding "as described in the Historic Register" because we wanted to make it clear that the intention was not to preserve past racist policies.

Bob Christin wrote, "Roy McCathran, whatever his faults and virtues, was not a time or an era. He was a person. His name on the hall honors him for the good he did. It does not reference his times."

So brainstorming ways to include the accomplishments and acknowledge the policies that he promoted during his time that we repudiate may be possible.

My position and the outcome of that recommendation aside, I would like to respond to some of the comments in general because I worry that these positions /tactics will not help us grow together not just on these issues, but in all future discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Discrediting well-documented sources used for research confuses and distracts from the issue at hand. In this instance, the Shantz book is said to be biased, but that was not the sole source used for the research.

Using examples citing positive interactions with Emory Grove residents who worked in Washington Grove or who guarded Washington Grove in the winter months to prove that Washington Grove had a harmonious relationship with Emory Grove, discounts the

power imbalance between employer, employee, black and white. Personal examples may be true but during the RASEC Emory Grove History Walk, descendants from the original Emory Grove families related their stories of how parents told children to keep their heads down and walk fast when they got to Boundary Street.

I agree that one individual should not be vilified for the white ignorance and discrimination of the times, but the reasoning to excuse racist behaviors is horrifying to me. One comment noted that Roy McCathran did not write the exact wording of the covenants and should not be held accountable even though he was on the committee that voted for the restrictive covenants. His actions were noted because his name is on a building, not the other participants'.

The lack of acknowledgment of the context if it does not support the writer's opinion is dangerous. The authors of the slide to change the name acknowledged that restrictive covenants were a common occurrence in the Jim Crow era, however, not all municipalities had them (see Dick Cavicchi's posted statement). I did not see anyone else mention that not all municipalities carried the covenants.

Another example of excusing racist behavior is comments about blackface being a common art form and that McCathran did not invent it; he was only a performer. As a school counselor, I taught my students to take responsibility for their actions even if they did not initiate the action or did not directly participate. The students had to find ways to make restitution for the harm they caused. This is the issue that concerns me the most. I heard few comments about the harm that was caused by the policies. The covenants contributed to the national policies and practices that strengthened institutional racism and had far-reaching effects on many people and their ability to own homes to create generational wealth and live in healthy environments.

Those policies created our majority white community that still exists among the diverse communities that surround us. I have had non-white visitors tell me they feel very uncomfortable when they walk into a wall of white.

One commentator noted that RASEC should work on creating a more diverse town. We are.

I have been working on raising my awareness about racism and equity years before the George Floyd tragedy, but my blind spots are frequently noted by my non-white friends. I still need training.

My gut response to being "called out" is defensiveness, but I fight it because I know that will keep me blind. A lot of what I have been hearing is defensiveness which is a natural response because we live in a world where white is the default reference and it is hard to see outside of that. We all need to do our work within and help each other.

The remainder of my statement deals with the other recommendations.

Recommendation to Create a Town Website Protocol

Context: An incident precipitated this recommendation. During discussions of the draft Washington Grove Resolution, Acknowledging Washington Grove's Racially Exclusionary Past and Committing to an Equitable and Inclusive Future, Pastor Tim Warner from Emory Grove's United Methodist Church was invited to comment. Following his verbal and written testimony, a resident posted an anonymous comment about feeling threatened by Pastor Warner. The resident cited one paragraph of Pastor Warner's comprehensive written testimony as a veiled threat to force us to pass the resolution. The resident claimed fear of violence, lawsuits, and a demand for reparations. These racist tactics have been used for years to spread fear about black people and stereotype black men as aggressive animals. That posting and the fact that it was not publicly repudiated set us back in our trust-building with Emory Grove. I have come to realize that in incidents like this, my tendency to take a blasé attitude of ignoring it is a luxury because I do not experience the cumulative effects of frequent offenses that black people experience.

Creating a protocol was meant to support our webmaster who already has many demands and does an excellent job.

It was noted that it is difficult to get enough volunteers to carry out this recommendation, but how often is something flagged? The volunteers would only be called if the webmaster determined a posting was questionable.

The point about wanting to know residents' thoughts and that this could be considered censorship in violation of the First Amendment is a fact to consider. At the end of the recommendation, there is a note that suggests the council seek legal counsel to ensure the guidelines do not violate First Amendment rights and Maryland laws.

Recommendation to Collaborate with Neighboring Communities Regarding the Shared Use Path

A criticism of this recommendation is that Washington Grove is too far along in the process for interference from other communities. One resident noted that he would be in favor of collaboration for additional roads that would connect to the path.

Please read the PURPOSE section of the recommendation carefully.

The first bullet states that Washington Grove would **share** the results of the WG-MCDOT negotiations. There is no mention of soliciting input about the Washington Grove connection.

The second bullet states that the communities would share visions of the shared-use path for the **area**, which means collaborating on additional roads that would connect the path.

The Shared Use Path Committee has not yet worked with all the neighboring communities to explore shared interests and ways to support each other in future negotiations. It seems everyone would benefit now and in the future.

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

The Town Survey data and comments and the feedback from our Emory Grove discussions suggest that training is needed not only to implement a specific action like welcoming neighboring communities to play soccer on the field as was done when the field fell under legacy Open Space Guidelines (which is on our list, by the way) but to offer ways to identify racist behaviors and ways in which to deal with it. Some survey respondents indicated that they were unsure about whether they witnessed discriminatory behavior. On several occasions, there has been denial and debate about whether WG was a Sundown Town. The lived experience of Emory Grove folks who talked about getting out of Washington Grove by dark was dismissed and the call for absolute documented proof persisted even though historians note that a town does not have to be on a list to qualify and that if a town through deliberate actions has an overwhelmingly white population, it is considered a Sundown Town.

One resident suggested that we wait to see if an incident occurred before spending the money on training and if needed, suggested using free training that I had introduced to the Lake Committee. I am not sure if that particular training is targeted to our specific needs at this time, but that can be explored. There already have been incidents at the lake that RASEC discussed with the Lake Committee which is when the trainer was introduced. Two incidents occurred when an adult child of residents was back home visiting with a friend who happened to be black. Her friend was questioned and scrutinized and she declared that she felt unwelcome. When the same person brought a white friend, there was no issue. Yet the same grilling occurred a second time when she brought another non-white friend.

Recommendation to Establish a Communication System between the Town of Washington Grove and Heritage Emory Grove

Context: Two incidents that occurred during the 150th Anniversary Celebration precipitated this recommendation. We did not want to disparage individuals by relating these incidents because of the commendable work that was done for the celebration and we do not assign ill intent, but offense occurred and we wanted to find a means of clear communication to prevent future occurrences.

The Washington Grove and the Emory Grove churches created a joint resolution modeled after the Town Resolution to show their support and commitment to act to promote equity and inclusion. During the 150th celebration, the Emory Grove church joined the Washington Grove Church in a joint service and invited the community. The

joint church resolution was to be presented to the mayor. There was a miscommunication and the mayor was not present.

Also, the church attendees were invited to a reception at the town hall after the service, but the front entrance was blocked with a lectern and politicians speaking. Everyone was directed to use the BACK entrance. There was no specific welcome for Emory Grove and the speeches were boilerplate congratulations to Washington Grove so the Emory Grove attendees wandered or sat in the audience. The situation was awkward at best.

A comment suggested that RASEC take the lead in establishing this system. In the proposal under “Suggested Actions,” the first bullet describes RASEC initiating action. The following suggested actions describe consulting with the council to create a system that is practical and acceptable to the Council.

This system is not meant only to announce events. See the last bullet: “The 4-contact people meet to decide on a specific process, including how to communicate a controversial issue.” This does not necessarily mean one process for every situation. It may mean a simple decision such as communicating directly with the people involved and when to notify the mayor.

There was a suggestion to implement a protocol with all the surrounding communities. That seems like a good idea in time. As noted earlier, our focus is on Emory Grove and then to expand.

The Racial and Social Equity Committee is open to participation by all residents. If you have ideas or want to join the discourse, we welcome you.

Paula Puglisi