

Center St.

Washington Grove, MD

June 28, 2024

Dear Members of the RASEC Committee,

On Sunday, June 23, I attended the Reckoning with Racism forum at the Emory Grove Methodist Church. I would like to share with you and with our neighbors some thoughts and impressions. This was my first time attending one of these forums. I make these observations and recommendations in good faith and with a goal of promoting transparency and goodwill both within Washington Grove and with our neighboring communities.

After the formal part of the program, I had several positive conversations with some of the church members and with the pastor. I was encouraged by things that people from both Groves said about building relationships and understanding between and among our communities. It was heartening to hear these expressions of goodwill.

I was, however, troubled by some aspects of the formal part of the program and I want to share my thoughts and concerns with you.

First, many people, including myself, are uncomfortable inside a church, particularly in the worship space. I recognize that many, even most, Christians today are good people. Notwithstanding, being inside a church recalls for me the oppression and violence committed against Jews, Muslims, and people of color by the Church for more than a thousand years. Even without this legacy of hostility, it feels like a violation of the spirit of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which calls for separation between church and state, to hold a public meeting hosted by an official Town committee in the religious space of a house of worship.

Second, the venue itself did not appear to be ADA compliant and accessible to people with disabilities. Although churches are not required to comply with the law, such a facility is not suitable for a Town event. Perhaps it goes without saying that offering a Zoom option is not adequate. Separate is never equal. Nor is it respectful or inclusive of those with disabilities. The need for microphones was apparently overlooked until the meeting was well underway. There are so many people with hearing challenges that the need to provide a microphone for an event should simply be obvious to the planners.

The meeting was concluded with an explicitly Christian prayer calling upon Jesus Christ. I don't think I need to comment further on why some (including myself) might find this deeply alienating and discomfoting at a public meeting that includes people of many faiths or no faith. This lack of inclusivity seems grossly inconsistent with RASEC's overall goals.

Regarding the content of the meeting, I acknowledge that different people can have a completely different narrative about the same event or events. I have no doubt that Pastor Tim Warner's account of the anonymous letter that appeared on the Town website and which he found offensive, is his understanding of how those events transpired. However, with respect, his understanding is not correct in several important aspects.

In his narrative Pastor Warner said "The leaders of Washington Grove chose to publish that [letter] on the internet even though it was sent anonymously . . . The people of Washington Grove agreed enough with the sentiment, thought it was valid and legitimate enough, to publish it on their listserve."

This is not an accurate representation of how and why the letter was posted.

At the time, April of 2023, the Town was transitioning to a more dynamic website, and a decision had been made that the volunteer web manager, Christine Dibble, would post to the website every item of correspondence sent to the Mayor and Council. There were no exceptions and originally no qualification that letters needed to be signed. Letters were never reviewed or approved for posting by the Town Council or the Mayor. Anything sent to the Council was posted in the interests of free speech and open government. I recently spoke to Ms. Dibble about how these events unfolded and she confirmed that as web manager she was carrying out the policy of posting all communications to the Council.

After Pastor Warner complained about the letter, the website policy was reevaluated and modified to state that only *signed* letters would be posted. Once the policy change was made, the letter was taken down.

I also point out that it is only supposition that the letter was written by a Washington Grove resident. Given that the letter was unsigned there is a chance that it originated elsewhere. At very least we must say that we don't know.

I bring this up not to accuse anyone of intentionally trying to deceive about the events that transpired but because it was a significant enough misstatement of how the publication and removal of the letter transpired that attendees were left believing that it had been published because the Washington Grove Town Council or the people of Washington Grove agreed with its sentiments. This is very unfortunate and simply not true. Nor is it true that the letter was taken down because Pastor Warner demanded it. It was taken down after a reexamination and change of policy to require that posted letters be signed.

Next, I hope we can agree that there is near 100% agreement from everyone in town that minstrel shows, which include performers in blackface, are unacceptable. What is to be accomplished with the interminable repetition of this "story" except to attempt to shame and bully the descendants of those who engaged in the performances?

Lastly, I must mention Mr. Cavicchi's calling out Tom Land in the forum by name and publicly pressuring him to withdraw the resolution that was "put forward in [his] name." The reference was to the resolution that would restrict leadership positions on Town committees to residents. Putting aside whether Mr. Land would have any influence on the disposition of the resolution, which has already been introduced for consideration by the Council (he doesn't), it was wholly disrespectful to him to be confronted about this matter by a member of the RASEC leadership team without warning in a public forum. It also had no bearing on the forum. I'll note Mr. Land wisely chose not to engage with what some might understandably view as bullying.

Over the last month or so, I have had several conversations with Paula Puglisi, the RASEC Committee Chair, about my concern that rather than building bridges with our sister communities RASEC has been sowing division both with those communities and in Washington Grove itself. In addition, the committee has not conducted its proceedings with the same openness and transparency expected of other Washington Grove committees. Examples include not recording all Zoom meetings and the leadership team making decisions and not presenting them for open debate by other members of the committee but as a *fait accompli*.

As a resident who supports the aims of RASEC to enhance our relationships with our neighbors and to increase diversity in Town and at Town events and facilities, I suggest that RASEC immediately implement the following:

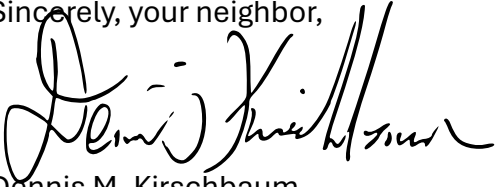
- Hold all forums in an open public, nonreligious affiliated space that feels inclusive of all and is accessible under the ADA, including providing adequate amplification of all events.

- If a story is to be presented publicly based on event that transpired in Town or involving Town residents, to attempt, in the interests of truth and balance, to seek other views on the same episode and invite those with a different take to present as well. Persons who are being accused in the story should also be told in advance and given the opportunity to be present to express their view. Even better would be to follow the ground rules that the Committee itself established and not attack, blame, and accuse people at these forums.
- Conduct all meetings in the spirit and letter of the Open Meetings Act as most Washington Grove committees do, even if not required by law, and to record all Zoom meetings to maintain a record of the proceedings and to avoid the appearance that something is being concealed.
- Avoid bullying or the appearance of bullying any resident or non-resident who has a different view on a story or recommendation of the Committee or who calls for more transparency and openness.
- Finally, I request that the full RASEC Committee discuss the concerns I have raised at an open meeting to determine what actions, if any, will be taken in response and to share any decisions with the public in a written document. I would be willing to attend the meeting to respond to questions or clarify my concerns or recommendations as needed.

I hope that everyone on the Committee and in Washington Grove and our sister communities will be able to receive these suggestions in the positive spirit with which they are intended. I am open to speaking with anyone at any time on this topic. I am willing and eager to learn where I may be mistaken.

I offer my thoughts and recommendations with gratitude for this beautiful and welcoming community I am lucky enough to call home.

Sincerely, your neighbor,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dennis M. Kirschbaum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "D" and a long, sweeping tail.

Dennis M. Kirschbaum