



# **Building a More Diverse Amherst Town Government**

**Amherst League of Women Voters  
Racial Justice Task Force  
May 12, 2021**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Amherst League of Women Voters supports the Town Resolution on Racial Equity in seeking greater diversity on Town committees, boards, commissions, and Town staff. We suggest a strategy that moves beyond intentions to establish specific systems and steps for the organization, procedures, and actions that we believe will lead to greater diversity and racial equity. We note that people of color often don't feel welcome to serve on Town committees or to apply for jobs in Town government, and that those who do serve have often felt undervalued and disrespected. To rectify this situation, we offer the following proposals.

Commit to a strategy to build motivated staff and volunteers who together create:

- Outreach that is self-perpetuating, sustainable and on-going;
- A robust outreach database, used by hiring committees, staff, volunteers and existing committee members to identify and recruit diverse candidates; and
- A strong, supportive organizational culture where all members feel valued, and where leadership encourages committees to welcome diverse issues and views.

The Town Manager, with the support of the Town Council, would initiate a process of establishing an 'Outreach Team' of motivated staff and volunteers, who will reach out to people of color and other under-represented citizens to serve on Town committees, boards and commissions, and to apply for positions in Town government. Specific steps to be considered would include:

- Establish an outreach database of knowledgeable and engaged contacts in diverse communities who will be able to identify and help recruit potential candidates; include key persons beyond Amherst, who have networks in communities of color;
- Establish criteria and simplify the process for application and appointments to ensure that these are inclusive, welcoming, anti-racist, and transparent;
- Utilize a variety of media channels such as targeted newspapers, social media, associations, radio, TV stations that reach people of color, to announce new Amherst policies, and committee openings and job opportunities. The Outreach Team will circulate job descriptions, be in touch with potential applicants, and respond to questions;
- Encourage a diverse pool of candidates before any committee membership or staff position is filled; when there are two or more candidates with close to equal qualifications, appoint the person who brings the most diversity;
- Create a budget to cover committee member childcare and transportation costs, and consider including funds for honoraria;
- Consider establishing internships on committees and for staff positions to increase diversity. Open these to university and high school students who may meet academic requirements with this service.

The League is pleased to support the Town's commitment to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in Town governance. We hope these proposals will be helpful in realizing this goal.



## **Building a More Diverse Amherst Town Government** **League of Women Voters Racial Justice Task Force - May 12, 2021**

The Amherst League of Women Voters supports the Town Resolution on Racial Equity in seeking greater diversity on Town committees and Town staff. To achieve this goal will require a process that is sustainable, as well as a reassessment of the workplace or committee culture, so that people of all backgrounds will feel welcomed and their contributions valued. This memo suggests a strategy for moving forward, based on an approach shown to be effective in other organizations.

We encourage thinking of diversity as more than racial diversity, although that is central. Not unrelated, is more participation from renters, low-income residents and immigrants, many of whom would also contribute racial diversity. In this memo we focus primarily on communities of color, although similar approaches could be used to create diversity in a variety of ways.

The central concept of this plan is to create systems that once in place will do much of the work of identifying and recruiting diverse people to join town committees and boards. While the details of recruiting members of committees are different from recruiting diverse staff, the strategy is similar, as we outline here.

In brief, the strategy is to build motivated staff and volunteers who together create:

1. Outreach that is self-perpetuating, sustainable and on-going;
2. A robust outreach database, used by hiring committees, staff, volunteers and existing committee members to recruit diverse candidates; and
3. **A strong, supportive organizational culture where all members feel valued, and where leadership encourages committees to welcome diverse issues and views.**

All three of these elements are necessary. Without a well-built list of cultivated contacts, we would have to start from scratch for every search. Without a cadre of motivated volunteers and staff with clear roles, the very best plan won't actually happen because of other competing priorities. And, particularly critical, without a strong organizational culture and leadership in support of the plan, well-meaning efforts may falter. Diversity brings diverse perspectives and ideas. We should not launch a plan to build diversity if we are not prepared to value diverse opinions from people with different life experiences.

## **Building a Diverse Town Staff**

This process has already begun, with the creation of a Core Equity Team. However, the process is larger than one small group of busy staff can achieve. The Core Equity Team can be the source of ideas, be the catalyst, reach out to contacts, etc., but thought needs to be given to how best to support and leverage their efforts.

### Database

A broad and sustainable database, reaching well beyond Amherst, is the key to creating a diverse applicant pool when a job opening arises, although local candidates certainly should not be overlooked. A database manager is needed to coordinate this effort.

Build a database of key contacts around Massachusetts, in Amherst and nearby towns, and in nearby states, who have networks in communities of color and are willing to circulate job descriptions and direct interested candidates to people who can answer their questions. Create protocols and staff culture to build and expand the database.

Develop media contacts for announcing job descriptions that people of color are more likely to read. For example, the *Baystate Banner* is focused on Boston but widely read by African Americans. The *Springfield Republican* has more diverse readership than the *Gazette*. Utilize appropriate social media, radio, and TV outlets as well.

### Workplace Culture

Changing the workplace culture is crucial for hiring and retention of a diverse workforce. If people do not feel valued and respected, they will not remain. Leadership must set the tone, beginning with the Town Manager and elected leaders, but also including Department heads.

### Hiring Guidelines

1. Ensure that each job opening is widely advertised, as described above.
2. Commit not to proceed with any hiring interviews until the pool of *qualified* candidates, from among the total applicants, includes a set number or percent of people of color.
3. When there are two equally qualified candidates, commit to hiring the person who brings the most diversity

Our community will recognize that the Town is serious about diversity when we see people of color among management, supervisors, and front-line staff, and when the Town with all its departments provides an annual report with metrics that indicates progress towards greater racial diversity.

## **Building Diverse Boards and Committees**

People of color in Amherst can face various barriers to serving on Town committees. Some have reported feeling disrespected and not valued when they have served. This experience can discourage others from a willingness to participate. Town government may seem distant and irrelevant to their daily lives. Volunteer committees require a commitment of time, which is not easy for those with full-time jobs and childcare responsibilities. Lack of transportation may also be a barrier for meeting attendance.

A concerted effort will be required to overcome these obstacles and create the inclusive Town government we all desire. We offer the following recommendations towards achieving this goal:

### Outreach Team

1. Create an Outreach Team, comprised of outreach staff and volunteers. This Team should include current or past members of Town boards and committees.
2. Create an outreach database with email addresses of knowledgeable and engaged contacts in diverse communities, contacts who would be called on to help recruit diverse members from their respective communities. These people would be contacted by individuals who know them and are either Town staff or volunteers, including committee members who are recruiting for their committees. An impressive outreach database was initiated for formation of the Community Safety Working Group and this could be the starting point.
  - a. Each contact on the database will have a town staff or volunteer on the Outreach Team assigned to manage outreach to that contact, based on a relationship that already exists.
  - b. Outreach Team members regularly alert their contacts about committee openings and information about each committee. Keep contacts engaged through occasional updates and news. Maybe an annual appreciation event for volunteers. Recruit volunteers from retiring committee members.
  - c. Create protocols and staff culture to build and expand the database. For example, the Town Manager might send occasional updates about progress in recruiting diverse committee members.
  - d. Encourage conversations among staff and committee members when people can talk through concerns and questions so these worries are in the open and discussed, rather than grumbling around the edges. Learn to listen between the lines and to ask open-ended questions.

- e. Encourage members of Town committees to help build the database. Include email and outreach lists of leaders of various diverse organizations in Town, such as the Senior Center director, Health Department director and leaders of supportive organizations such as faith-based social justice committees and groups like Big Brother Big Sisters, Family Outreach of Amherst, affordable housing network, the Survival Center, Hope Church, Goodwin Church, Human Rights Commission, Community Safety Working Group, Racial Equity Task Force, Reparations for Amherst, Interfaith Opportunities Network, Jewish Community of Amherst, N'COBRA, and People of Color United (youth group at ARHS).
- f. Consider creating student positions on committees that would be filled by a variety of diverse young people. Their perspective can bring new vitality and their involvement would create a pipeline for leadership.
- g. The Outreach Team should examine the committee criteria to be sure they are inclusive and transparent; we need assure that appointments are not unconsciously prioritizing people who are familiar, and with whom white people are comfortable. The Outreach Team should encourage committees to welcome a range of views on topics with the expectation that diverse perspectives and possible controversy will be on the table and in the open.
- h. Conduct initial orientation for all committee members focused on creating a welcoming and safe environment.

### Application Process

The application process needs to be simplified, made less intimidating and easier to navigate, so that people are not discouraged from applying.

1. Create a new "Participation" button on the home page of the Town web site, right there across the top when you open the web site.
2. Change the name of the application form from "Community Activity Form" to something like "Participation in Amherst Government" or "Participate in your Town" or "Opportunities for Public Service." Serving on these committees is not really an activity; it's community service.
3. Make the list of openings easier to find.
4. Add a short description of the purpose of each committee and why each is important. Each committee could rewrite its mandate to be more accessible, less bureaucratic, and clearly explain why this committee's work is interesting and relevant to community members.

## Publicity & Community Outreach

- Tabling at community events - Amherst Community Fair, Farmers Market, Taste of Amherst, Block Party, for example - with information about specific committees and why they're important, perhaps staffed by committee chairs. Also, tabling at community events in neighborhoods where diverse residents live and displaying notices of committee openings in laundry rooms of apartment complexes.
- Place a sandwich board sign outside Town Hall listing committee and staff opportunities and other ways of volunteering
- Promote these opportunities on social media, Amherst Media, posters, etc.
- Buy public service announcements at Amherst Cinema about participation opportunities. Maybe we could convince Amherst Cinema to run them for free?
- Recruit leaders of color to promote specific committees, based on each recruiter's interests and connections.

## Internships

Consider creating internship positions on committees to give people a chance to learn about a specific committee without making a long-term commitment. Explore hiring interns to work in Town Hall and bring diversity. There may be students at the University who could fulfill academic requirements by serving our Town and bring increased diversity to Town Hall. High school students would be interested and could bring a fresh perspective and insights.

## Resources Needed for Ensuring Success

Create a budget for childcare and transportation for board and committee members, and consider including funding for honoraria

In conclusion, the League is pleased to support the Town's efforts to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in the Town governance -- including staffing, boards, commissions and committees. We hope that this document will be helpful in stimulating the dialogue and action leading to governance that reflects a strong commitment to racial justice and equity. We have attempted to lay out concrete suggestions for new systems that are sustainable and that will lead to greater diversity in staff and committee members.