



Council Worksession
September 12, 2023
5:00 pm

Present: Mayor Kari Niedfeldt-Thomas
Councilmember Abdullahi Abdulle
Councilmember Graeme Allen
Councilmember Pam Axberg
Councilmember Emily Dunsworth

Absent:

Staff in Attendance: Devin Massopust, Hue Schlieu

Guests in Attendance: Mary Margerat Reagan, Kisten Thompson, Liliana Triviski

Land Acknowledgement Presentation

Massopust stated DEI Coordinator, Hue Schlieu, will present about land acknowledgments and offer a preview to the statement that Council will be asked to consider at the 9/26/2023 Council meeting. The land acknowledgment statement was drafted in partnership with the Equity Strategic Action Team and was presented to Equity Commission on Aug 17, 2023. The statement recognizes the Dakota people, acknowledges their history and losses, and outlines the City's commitment to do more.

Schlieu provided the Council with a presentation on land acknowledgements. She explained the purpose of this presentation was to provide context and a deeper understanding on the City's proposed land acknowledgement statement. She provided a brief overview on the impacts of colonization and discussed the history of indigenous people in New Brighton. She explained a land acknowledgement is a message at the beginning of a gathering that acknowledges the people whose ancestral homeland we are on. She reported Dr. Sam Torres stated it is an effort to ensure the connection between indigenous people and their land are not erased or forgotten. She shared a video with the Council that addressed the importance of land acknowledgement. She reviewed the City's proposed land acknowledgement statement and asked for comments or questions from the City Council.

Councilmember Abdulle thanked DEI Coordinator Schlieu for sharing the video with the Council. He explained he was not native to the United States, but was a native to Africa. He stated he believed land acknowledgements were powerful and was the least the City could do to bring light to the good and bad. In addition, he believed this would start a road towards healing by acknowledging what has happened. He reported he works for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. He further discussed the special tribal training he receives on an annual basis and commented on how this has helped him better understand the rich history of the Native Americans and the land that we sit on. He hoped by practicing the land acknowledgement the City would be more mindful of this history.

Councilmember Allen explained he grew up in Oklahoma and learned from a young age about the Trail of Tears and the genocide that was committed against people. He reported his wife was part Native American and her grandmother was a full tribal member, along with her aunts and uncles. He believed the land

acknowledgement would not erase the history but was an awareness that can help influence where we are today. He indicated this was a start but there was more work to do.

Councilmember Dunsworth thanked staff for the presentation and video that was shared. She stated a part that resonated with her was how the Native American woman's guard came down after hearing the land acknowledgement prior to a meeting commencing. She believed this was a step the Council could take in order to encourage more people to interact with local government.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas reported this video was shared with the Equity Commission and led to a number of great conversations. She commented on how the City was working through its Equity Plan and was now working through the land acknowledgement process. She thanked staff for the time they spent working on this matter. She looked forward to the Council considering a land acknowledgement as this would be another step in engaging community members that the City may have not made feel welcome.

Councilmember Axberg stated she has been a part of boards that use land acknowledgement before meetings. She discussed how Native Americans think differently about the ownership of land and she saw real value in the City adopting a land acknowledgement. She hoped by recognizing the past the City could move forward together with different people with different histories. She discussed how she came from an immigrant community and commented on how this community was changing to be many different cultures. She supported the City honoring this history while recognizing the richness of the cultures and communities in New Brighton.

Schlieu commented further on the land acknowledgement that was drafted and reviewed by staff. She reported the words were very intentional and reflective of the City moving forward. She explained the Equity Commission reviewed this language and recommended the City recognize that this statement will change and evolve over time. The next steps for the land acknowledgement were discussed in further detail and it was noted the Council would be considering the land acknowledgement at their next Council meeting. She explained the Equity Commission suggested signs be posted in the City's parks that would acknowledge the Dakota history in the community.

Councilmember Dunsworth reported the United States has not done a lot of reconciliation with the historic wrongs that have happened. She believed this was a good first step locally. She noted she worked at the University of Minnesota and the university has a land acknowledgement statement that was shared at any public meeting. She was of the opinion this statement made a strong impact. She reviewed the U of M's statement and encouraged the City to consider using Dakota or native language. Schlieu stated she understood this was important, but noted the statement was viewed as being a first step and would invite people to learn more.

Councilmember Abdulle believed the first draft of the land acknowledgement was very good. He asked if any Native American community members had provided input on this statement. Schlieu stated this had not been done. She commented on how the City was working to commit to the words within the statement and the commitment to the indigenous people would be going forward.

Councilmember Abdulle stated he would like the City to envision what policy improvements could be made, in addition, to the symbolic actions the City was taking like the land acknowledgement. Schlieu thanked Councilmember Abdulle for these statements. She commented on the funding she had moving forward and noted she would be engaging community members in 2024.

Councilmember Dunsworth indicated the piece that may be missing for her was the cultural competency. She questioned if the City used cultural practices that honor the culture that was being acknowledged. She appreciated the fact that this was a living document that could be altered and changed going forward.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas stated the Equity Commission agreed this statement should evolve over time. She commented on how staff should be delegated to review this statement over time. Massopust reported the land acknowledgement was not statutory, but rather the City was doing it on its own accord. He anticipated staff could come back to the Council with every revision in the future, or staff could be directed to review and revise the statement going forward. He explained this statement was the City's commitment or an awareness to working with this group.

Councilmember Axberg supported the City Council being able to make changes to the land acknowledgement when the Council knows more and learns more.

Councilmember Dunsworth agreed with this statement, but recommended the City continue to ask how the City was honoring the cultural ways of this people group. She supported the City moving forward with the land acknowledgement, but supported the City Council being able to ask questions. Schlieu thanked the Council for their valuable feedback.

The Council thanked DEI Coordinator Schlieu for her efforts on the land acknowledgement statement.

Equity Commission Applicant Interviews

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Mary Margaret Reagan for coming in and applying for this position.

Councilmember Axberg asked Ms. Reagan to provide the Council with a brief history on how her personal and professional experiences will help her be an effective commissioner, if appointed.

Ms. Reagan stated she has been a resident of New Brighton for almost 19 years. She explained her family was a family of color as she was Korean and her husband was Mexican, which meant she was raising multi-racial, multi-language children. She indicated when she first moved to New Brighton, she did not receive the welcome she hoped. However, this has since changed. She commented on how New Brighton has become her home. She reported she has worked in non-profits for close to 20 years and she has worked with families who need access. She anticipated serving on the Equity Commission would lead to heated or interesting conversations and now that she was an empty nester, she had time to contribute to this endeavor.

Councilmember Abdulle asked what are some of the specific goals Ms. Reagan hoped to accomplish while serving on the Equity Commission.

Ms. Reagan stated she has had the opportunity to educate and share what she knows, based on the challenges she has faced, with others. She hoped to continue this work on the Equity Commission, while also bringing her professional experience to this group.

Councilmember Dunsworth requested Ms. Reagan speak to the City's biggest opportunity and biggest challenges in New Brighton when considering inclusion.

Ms. Reagan stated there were challenges surrounding inclusion including cultural and language. She believed there were unique and innovative ways to overcome some of those challenges. She believed she could offer fun ways to move that forward.

Councilmember Allen stated each Commission is tasked with making recommendations to the City Council that comply with policies, rules or ordinances already adopted by the City Council. She asked Ms. Reagan what she would do if she disagreed with a policy or ordinance already in place.

Ms. Reagan stated she liked to ask a lot of questions and would try to understand the points of contention. She indicated if she felt strongly that something was important, she would hold her ground. She believed everyone had things to share and experiences that would inform the process that helped everyone learn in order to come to some sort of middle.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Ms. Reagan for coming in and applying for this position. She noted City Clerk Spangrud would be in touch with further information on how the Council was moving forward. She explained the next person to be interviewed was Kisten Thompson.

Councilmember Axberg asked Ms. Thompson to provide the Council with a brief history on how her personal and professional experiences will help her be an effective commissioner, if appointed.

Ms. Thompson stated she was a child of the 1960's and 1970's that grew up in the south. She noted she saw a lot of the civil rights movement as a child living in Florida, Maryland and Memphis, Tennessee. She felt that coming back home to Minnesota would be a great thing, but she discovered that "Minnesota Nice" hid a lot of things. She discussed how she became more interested in racial justice in recent years. She explained professionally she worked as a nurse in the Mounds View School District where she saw the diversity in the community grow. She indicated she also served as a pastor in North St. Paul where she worked with those struggling in the community.

Councilmember Abdulle asked what are some of the specific goals Ms. Thompson hoped to accomplish while serving on the Equity Commission.

Ms. Thompson stated she was a long time member of the community, noting she moved to New Brighton in 1989 when moved to the area to attend seminary. She explained all her kids grew up here. She indicated she has deep roots and a commitment to the community. She reported she also has deep roots with the faith community, noting the first congregation she served with was Atonement Lutheran Church and now she was a member with Christ the King. She noted she served with the racial justice group within her church. She believed serving on the Equity Commission would further her efforts to build partnerships and relationships in the community.

Councilmember Dunsworth requested Ms. Thompson speak to the City's biggest opportunity and biggest challenges in New Brighton when considering inclusion.

Ms. Thompson stated she was a representative of the white Boomer crew. She explained many people move in circles of comfort. She anticipated most citizens have not connected with the changing demographics in the community. She discussed how the community was changing and she wanted this communicated to the entire community that was helpful and meaningful.

Councilmember Allen stated each Commission is tasked with making recommendations to the City Council that comply with policies, rules or ordinances already adopted by the City Council. She asked Ms. Thompson what she would do if she disagreed with a policy or ordinance already in place.

Ms. Thompson stated she has learned in her professions that one cannot engage in gossiping or back biting. She believed concerns for what was coming up, thoughts should be listened to without formulating responses in order to hear the heart of the issue. She explained around equity matters, there was so much fear and it was important to get to the root of the issue. She urged the City to find ways to host more celebrations as this was a way to bring the community together.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Ms. Thompson for coming in and applying for this position. She noted City Clerk Spangrud would be in touch with further information on how the Council was moving forward. She explained the next person to be interviewed was Liliana Triviski.

Councilmember Axberg asked Ms. Triviski to provide the Council with a brief history on how her personal and professional experiences will help her be an effective commissioner, if appointed.

Ms. Triviski stated as a student she could bring a new perspective to the commission that others may not see. She explained she could bring up issues that others may not see, especially ones effecting young people.

Councilmember Abdulle asked what motivated her to apply to be a student commissioner.

Ms. Triviski stated she believed being a part of this commission would help her learn more about the community and allow her to enact change more permanently and effectively. She would be able to give her values a bigger voice.

Councilmember Dunsworth each Commission is tasked with making recommendations to the City Council that comply with policies, rules or ordinances already adopted by the City Council. She asked Ms. Triviski what she would do if she disagreed with a policy or ordinance already in place.

Ms. Triviski stated she would discuss this with other commission members and see what their feelings were. If there was agreement, this issue could then be brought to the City Council. However, if they didn't agree, she would try and look at the ordinance from a different perspective to see it in a different way.

Councilmember Allen stated requested Ms. Triviski speak to the City's biggest opportunities and biggest challenges in New Brighton.

Ms. Triviski stated this year she has faced a lot of educational inequities at Irondale because the class sizes were huge or certain classes were not offered. She explained this meant students were having to drive to Mounds View in order to attend certain classes. She reported another concern she had was the fact that parking passes were \$225. She stated schools in the surrounding area were charging \$150 or less. She indicated this was a high fee for students and parents to pay. She stated she sent an email to the superintendent and he agreed this was a high fee. She noted she would be following up on this matter. She indicated she would like to bring this issue and other issues facing students up to the Equity Commission in order to facilitate change.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas thanked Ms. Triviski for coming in and applying for this position. She noted City Clerk Spangrud would be in touch with further information on how the Council was moving forward.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas questioned how the Council wanted to proceed with the Equity Commission appointments. She commented further on the red, yellow and green candidates. She explained the yellow candidate has been very active in engaging with the community.

The Commission discussed the number of vacancies on the Equity Commission.

Councilmember Dunsworth believed both candidates brought a lot to the table and she supported both being appointed to the Equity Commission because this would provide more voices at the table. Her preference would be to see what the City can do to appoint both candidates. She stated she was not suggesting the City continually increase the size of each commission.

Councilmember Abdulle stated the Council could appoint one member and have the other be a backup in the event another member were to step down from the Equity Commission.

Councilmember Allen asked if the Council should avoid having an even number on a commission. Massopust stated the Equity Commission was not voting on many matters, so an even number of members may not be a concern.

Councilmember Dunsworth stated because of the nature of the Equity Commission, she could support the expansion of this group. However, if only one member had to be selected, she could do this as well.

Councilmember Axberg encouraged the Council to consider what new perspective the two candidates could bring to the Equity Commission that was not currently being voiced.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas described the backgrounds of the members that were currently serving on the Equity Commission.

Councilmember Dunsworth stated her vote was to appoint the green candidate because she believed the yellow candidate would continue with her level of engagement in the community.

Mayor Niedfeldt-Thomas indicated she was leaning towards the yellow candidate given her high level of involvement in the community.

Councilmember Allen believed the City would be served well by either candidate. He suggested that the candidate that is not selected be put on a short list for future placement on a commission. He noted if he had to lean towards a candidate he would opt towards yellow.

Councilmember Abdulle indicated he was leaning towards yellow as well.

Councilmember Axberg stated the City had two great candidates. She noted she would support the yellow candidate serving on the Equity Commission and hoped the City would be able to find a way to draw the green candidate into service as well.

Worksession adjourned at 6:29 pm

Respectfully submitted,



Terri Spangrud
City Clerk