

A-9-0

City of Beverly
Legal Affairs/Committee of the Whole City Council Meeting
Public Meeting Minutes
Monday, January 31, 2022, 6:30pm

CITY OF BEVERLY
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Estelle Rand, Chair of Legal Affairs Committee, called to order Legal Affairs Committee at 6:30pm and called to order Committee of the Whole.

Committee Members Present: Todd Rotondo, Brendan Sweeney, Estelle Rand

Other Councilors Present: Hannah Bowen, Steven Crowley, Julie Flowers, Scott Houseman, Matthew St. Hilaire

Order #023-Council President Flowers-Amendment of the Rules and Regulations, Rule 19 Order of Business.

Rand stated she received some letters of support for this item from constituents and asked other committee members if feedback had been received.

Rotondo stated the ones he received were sent to the whole committee.

Sweeney stated he received some feedback, which was a bit of a mix.

Rand asked Flowers to speak about the order since she brought it forward.

Flowers stated the idea of adding the land acknowledgement statement was something she had been thinking about, and the rules would need to be amended to officially add it to the agenda. Some other communities have been exploring this and are moving in this direction. It is valuable to consider a step like this to lift up history that has been omitted or truncated. Land acknowledgement statements are not grim; it is a celebration of the people who called this land home first and who cared for this land and still live here. This also could be a door to work more closely with the Massachusetts Tribe. As a city, we have been thinking about how to take care of the environment, and that is something that is valuable to the Massachusetts Tribe as well. Flowers stated that she had recently been working with Thomas Green from the Massachusetts Tribe and asked if this is something he finds useful and beneficial. He said yes, it is a way to build relationships and help people think more expansively about not only the history but the present. Those ongoing relationships are important. Flowers stated she also became acquainted with an organization located in Danvers, the Massachusetts Center for Native American Awareness. Flowers stated she does not want to assume what people want or to do something just to check the box, which is why speaking to Thomas was so important.

Rand thanked Toppin for his letter of support and asked him to speak on the item.

Abu Toppin, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Director, stated he did not hesitate to support this when Council President Flowers asked about it. It is very much akin to African Americans' treatment in this country and referenced that omitted, truncated history. There is a system that was built in this country intentionally, and so we must be intentional to change it. If the time is when everyone is comfortable, this will not happen. We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Toppin also recognized the importance of long-term relationships, growth and seeing this as an opportunity to move towards a different foundation that we are used to. Toppin read a quote emphasizing the importance and value of visibility and stated that this is an intentional step he fully supports.

Rand opened it to committee members.

Sweeney stated that it is important to acknowledge this history and talk about it more. Sweeney stated that one piece he has been wrestling with is that if the City Council were to adopt the land acknowledgement, there are other groups deserving of recognition as well. Sweeney asked why this vehicle is the best to take this first step. Sweeney agreed that a step should be taken in some form. Sweeney asked how to reconcile this with other groups equally deserving of recognition, stating that he does not want to pit people groups against each other. There are so many pieces of our collective history.

Rand stated this is a land statement more about the specific land that we are occupying.

Toppin stated that there is a lot of work to do and it is going to take a lot of time to do it. Toppin stated he does not think Sweeney is wrong in acknowledging any of that but the statement is to be concentrated on the land we are sitting on. Far too often we have not done that. It is a way of acknowledging who was here before us.

Flowers stated she thinks the distinction about the land piece is what is unique about this particular proposal. This is a first step; it can be a series of first steps. Flowers highlighted one thing Thomas Green had pointed out was that in this part of the country there really was a sense that when people arrived from England, there were settlements already set up. It was not necessarily the same as what happened in the west. When smallpox came and a lot of people died, they had already-created places to live which were ready made for the people who arrived. There really was this sense of displacement. This is an opportunity to celebrate the people who first loved and cared for the land that City Hall is on.

Sweeney appreciated the points and asked why this step is the best vehicle as opposed to resolutions or other avenues for land acknowledgement.

Flowers stated the idea to incorporate this as a part of regular business is to have it become as much a part of our story as the other things that we do routinely. The more it is done as a community, the more it becomes a part of the story. Flowers stated Mr. Toppin helped with the thought that resolutions and proclamations are one-off and special instances, and people of color have often been asked to compartmentalize down into segments that are more palatable. Part of working against the system that has been created is helping make it more a regular part of our history and easier to talk about.

Toppin asked when looking at regular things like the pledge of allegiance, how we reconcile that ideal not being applicable to everyone. Toppin stated we need to normalize these conversations and opportunities for acknowledgement. It gives people opportunities to ask questions and discuss it.

Rotondo stated it can be overwhelming to think about all the things we need to acknowledge. Resolutions are actions more than words. Right or wrong, war is how things were created. Rotondo stated he agrees with acknowledging the land and believes in the statement but does not believe it is the place for the statement. Rotondo suggested hanging up the acknowledgement in the City Council chambers and not necessarily having the whole procedure.

Rand stated she liked the idea of having something hanging up in addition to being part of the meeting.

Flowers stated that this is something the Massachusetts Center for Native American Awareness specifically requests, and it is important to listen to the voices of people who are the experts of their own experiences.

Toppin stated we have to take these various steps, some small steps, some big leaps, and all in between. We have to be able to take that time to learn and have the conversation. Sometimes there is a desire to resist that because it is too much. It can be hard for people to go there because there is fear of what this information will do and what happens next. That is where the work is critical to moving forward to a different place. Unless we start to take those intentional steps, we will continue the cycle.

Rand opened the discussion to other Council members.

Bowen stated she was excited to be hearing the case made and wanted to speak to the experience of it. Bowen said the first land acknowledgement statement she experienced was seven or eight years ago in Australia, and it is much more routine there. Seeing that practice being adopted, it plays the function of, in a formal setting, having that moment of grounding and recognizing the history and what our role is of being stewards still. Bowen stated that it can be a very specific kind of tool useful in public meetings for recognizing history and our place in it. Where it has been normalized, Bowen stated she has felt that grounding and noticed that people maybe are expanding the conversation in ways they may not have otherwise. It can be similar to taking a deep breath before public speaking as a way of preparing. Bowen stated she was also interested in talking about what specifically is said in that time so that each of the Councilors feel comfortable signing on to it. Bowen stated she has seen other organizations incorporate it and had positive changes.

Toppin left at 7:23pm.

St. Hilaire stated he is excited to engage in these conversations; we can all agree that DEI is important. St. Hilaire asked if the mayor starts city meetings with a land acknowledgement statement and asked about the status of the race/equity audit. St. Hilaire stated he is not closed to the concept but is trying to wrap his head around the DEI plan and where that is at and if this is the best vehicle.

Rand noted that Toppin would be at the Council retreat on February 12 and could give an update. One thing to keep in mind is that the City Council operates often independently from the Mayor's Office. It is a council initiative that may propel other actions.

Flowers encouraged follow-up with Toppin and agreed with Bowen's assessment of it being a grounding moment. This tool is well suited for entering into public meetings together. Flowers stated as an example that someone may not be there when a resolution is done or may not remember, but if this is incorporated and heard at every public meeting, people will be more aware of it.

Houseman stated this has been interesting to delve into, especially as a history buff. Words matter, and the absence of words matters. We are at a point in our country's history of asking a lot of difficult questions. Houseman referenced a Smithsonian Magazine article about Francis Bellamy who wrote the pledge of allegiance and its etymology. Houseman stated he can imagine constituents will wonder where this comes from if we start doing it. Houseman stated he is comfortable with making people uncomfortable when it is appropriate and thinking about whether it will normalize people to start thinking about our history and knowing there is more to our history.

St. Hilaire left the meeting at 7:37pm.

Crowley stated that in his experience in the military and working with all types of people, the recognition is good, but in some sense the pledge of allegiance is an all the time thing, a kind of guidance. If everyone does not feel that it represents their experience, we should fix things so that it does apply. Identification is important. Crowley stated he is continuing to wrap his head around it. Maybe there are more steps to take.

Rand stated the pledge of allegiance is a part of the process already; we are continually honoring our flag and country and what it should or does stand for. Rand said to her it makes sense why we would want to honor it every day and it also makes sense why we would want to acknowledge the land we stand on every day.

There was some conversation on if this is constituent services, the challenge of comparing experiences of different groups, and education in diversity, equity and inclusion work.

Sweeney stated this conversation has been helpful and underscores the importance of continuing this conversation. The question about why this particular group has been addressed; there is the tie in to the land and the importance of that. There are still questions around the way of doing it. Sweeney stated he would want to make sure we are not unknowingly continuing any sort of divisiveness by bringing this forward following the pledge of allegiance. Sweeney stated that although he does not think this is what is intended, it could be perceived as a rebuttal because some of the wording of the land acknowledgement statement could be seen as divisive.

Flowers clarified that it is not proposed as a rebuttal; it is just a way to honor. This is beginning to become more common. If people feel it is prickly, we can turn together to learn more. The Massachusetts Tribe is willing to work on the wording together.

There was some discussion between committee members around the word “decolonization” and some of the language of the land acknowledgement statement.

Sweeney stated that potentially tweaking this language could be helpful. Going back to the piece on decolonizing, it should not be equated with deconstructing accomplishments of the past, but a lot of people may read it that way. Sweeney stated he would want to make sure the language accomplishes the goal it seems like a lot of us want to reach. These are uncomfortable conversations, but it is very important to continue.

Rand agreed it is valuable to continue the conversation.

Houseman asked if the item was sent back to Council, would it then be voted on at that time or if it would be referred back to the committee for more conversations or conversations around changing the language.

Flowers stated that would depend on the fuller conversation with the council and where that goes. Flowers stated she would be open to changing the language and would give the most weight to the voice of the Massachusetts Tribe.

There was discussion on whether the vote on this order would be to amend the rules of the Council or to amend the rules and accept the specific version of the land acknowledgement statement that was submitted with the order. The understanding was that the wording could be worked out later and the vote as presented in the letter would be to amend the Council rules.

Bowen left the meeting at 8:26pm.

The motion to adjourn Committee of the Whole was made and seconded. A vote was taken, and the motion carried (6-0).

The motion to adjourn Legal Affairs Committee was made and seconded. A vote was taken, and the motion carried (3-0).

The meeting adjourned at 8:29pm.