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Reparations Task Force

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Agency: Detroit City Council

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Notes

BACKGROUND:

The City of Detroit Reparations Tax Force is a 13-member body consisting of four executive members appointed by Council President Sheffield and nine general members. The task force will develop recommendations for housing and economic development programs that address historical discrimination against the Black community in Detroit.

Members of the task force:

Lauren Hood (co-chair) (D5)

Keith Williams (co-chair) (D5)

JoAnn Watson (D5)

Dorian Tyus (D5)

Allen Venable (D1)

Gregory Hicks (D5)

Janis Hazel (D7)

Anita Belle (At-Large)

Bernard Parker (D4)

Jeffrey Robinson (D2)

Maurice Weeks (D6)

Cidney Calloway (At-Large)

Camille Collins (D3)

Prior to the meeting beginning there were issues with audio for the Zoom participants. No dedicated mic could be used to ensure people online could hear the task force members and the WCCC IT person had called out. While everyone tried to work around the problems, this continued to be an issue throughout the meeting.

Prior to officially beginning the meeting Co-Chair Williams asked member Robinson to lead a prayer. Once the prayer was finished a second prayer was said for member Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson who is in the hospital.

Meeting was officially called to order by Co-Chair Williams at 2:11 p.m.

Roll call was taken and all members except Watson were present either in person or via Zoom.

The agenda for the current meeting and minutes of the previous meeting were approved. The agenda had not been posted prior to the meeting. It was provided to online participants and printed copies were distributed to people attending in person.

Ken Coleman (local historian) was scheduled to give a presentation but had to cancel. He wants to reschedule for the August meeting.

No new business. There is an all-day retreat scheduled for task force members on July 22, 2023. It will be facilitated by the International Center for Transitional Justice ([ICTJ](#)). Three areas that will be covered at the retreat are helping the task force get to know one another, helping the task force set deadlines and define strategic goals, and giving the task force guidance on how to operate their committees.

The issues with audio, specifically for the Zoom audience members, was an issue during the entire meeting. The first complaint was brought up less than 10 minutes into the meeting. Discussion turned to the next meeting which will be at Wayne County Community College's downtown campus. Co-Chair Williams said they need to work on finding new locations for their meetings. Member Hicks suggests a central location so as not to overwhelm Member Weeks with finding locations that meet all their needs (audio/visual connection, ADA compliant, etc.). Member Weeks says if there is no objection from the other members he will create a checklist that potential locations can use to determine if they will work for future meetings. Member Parker asks for a motion for an agreement to have at least one meeting in each of the City Council districts in the city. This policy is already in place so it did not need a motion. No further action was taken.

The next agenda item was Fiduciary Entity. Paris Blessman, the Legislative & Organizational Director, was present. The task force would like to have control of their own funds. The question was posed to Director Blessman who recommended that the task force executive committee set up a meeting with [Office of the CFO Watson](#) to

figure out next steps to set it up as a fiduciary. In the meantime, Director Blessman thinks submitting memos for any expenditures is the best practice. This includes any personnel they may want to hire. Member Hicks suggests that he and Member Parker could join in the meeting because the city has a habit of losing institutional memories. Co-Chair Williams states that is not necessary and that it is the job of the Executive Board. Member Hicks says that's not how he would approach it. Member Belle, via Zoom, suggests all members be part of the meeting. There was a lot of head shaking in response to that proposal. Member Hicks clarifies there was no motion and suggests they move on and Co-Chair Williams moves on to the next agenda item.

The [website](#) update is still being worked on. Member Weeks agrees to work with City Council President Mary Sheffield's office to prepare a memo to contract with someone to update the site for purposes of education and transparency. The question of if they have to put out a request for bids is asked. Member Weeks says that from what Director Blessman has said they first have to submit a memo to get the funds.

Public Comment:

Anthony William Lloyd, Jr., a second generation Detroit-born and an independent historian with the [Black Bottom Archives](#). Mr. Lloyd spoke at the first task force meeting about the "organizational conflicts of interest that exist within the political structure pertaining to lineage-based reparations." He said he was able to prove that the lack of homeownership that affected his family almost 100 years ago. He also mentioned that government programs that have hurt Black Americans, like the Naturalization Acts, President [Franklin] Roosevelt's New Deal coalition remain detrimental to Black Americans today. On June 26, 2023 a letter was sent to President Joe Biden demanding comprehensive immigration reform, streamlining greencards, work permit process, and protection for Black migrants fleeing from adverse circumstances. He suggests that City Council President, Co-Chair Williams, and the rest of the task force study "slavery, and slavery only, as the integral part of society that still exists today. . . . Detroit is still one of the most Black populated cities in America and Black Americans have never fled adverse circumstances despite the deterrence and absence of generational wealth and inheritance."

Shannon Slaton: Speaks to the issue of chattel slavery. Several early Detroit residents owned slaves, including the Woodwards, the Campuses, Macombs, etc. An acknowledgement should be made that a specific harm was done to specific lineage of descendants who also have dealt with conviction leasing, Jim Crow, housing discrimination and redlining. Wants the members of the task force to go on record

stating this. Co-Chair Williams states “I totally agree with you ma’am.”

Bonita Lloyd: Remembers when her whole family lived and worked in Detroit. Now she is the last family member living in the city. Hopes the task force will succeed and reparations will happen because “if not now, when?” States that government is intent on rolling back every accomplishment Black Americans have made.

No name given: Discusses the historical injustices done to Black Americans and the urgent need for reparation actions. The root of the word reparations is repair. Black people are in most need of help and repair given the oppression they have endured. Reparations include various incentives, the first immediate incentive is cash payments. Human needs consist of healthy food, clean water, adequate housing, etc. Do not let minor differences stop the progress of the task force.

Cecily McClellan: Requests that notices of meetings be sent out with more notice so more folks can attend. The new Jim Crow can be seen in the emergency manager system in the state, specifically the Detroit bankruptcy which cut pensions for some city employees by up to 27%.

Jakar Amary: Panel members should identify themselves when speaking so people know who is who.

Marcia Black: Director of the [Black Bottom Archives](#). Historic research on reparations specifically focused on Black Bottom. With the 375 development there is an opportunity to pursue reparations for residents of Black Bottom and their descendants who were displaced from their community. Working with the University of Michigan, Wayne State University, Eastern Michigan University, and [Detroit Peoples Platform](#) to collect oral histories and conduct research using archival collections to bring to light a bigger picture of the multi-generational impact the destruction of Black Bottom had. Will help create community conversations around reparations and the [375 project](#). The goal is have proposals and assessments by next Juneteenth. Wonders if there is an opportunity to collaborate with the task force on any of this.

Stephanie Waters: Wants to know how the audio/visual issues will be addressed for the next meeting. Could not hear a lot of what went on in today’s meeting.

Roslyn: From District 7. Thanks Janis Hazel for giving her the information she needed for the meeting. There needs to be more timely distribution of materials and more notice of meetings. She could not hear and stated “The audio was very, very poor.” The

agenda was not on the website. The community wants to be engaged, but needs to be informed. In response to Marcia Black's comments she wants to make sure every historical resident in the City of Detroit gets access to reparations, regardless of where they lived.

Ernest Russell: Urges the task force to follow the lead of [St. Paul, Minnesota](#) to establish a permanent body dedicated to addressing the intergenerational harms that have been suffered from descendants of enslaved people. Two years of work and study proposals would not be able to effectively compete with 100 years of oppression in the city. In Evanston, IL commission members testified in DC that their programs are race neutral and white people and other people of color can apply. If the Detroit Task Force were to follow that model it would not be considered reparations. Reparations are for a specific group for specific harms with specific remedies. Even though it has been stated in previous meetings that the state is also responsible, there has been no word from Lansing about reparations. This silence is no different than the silence of those who are complacent. Apply more pressure to the state legislative body to form a statewide task force.

Anthony: Is it possible to get notice of the next meeting so he can attend in person?

Co-Chair Williams: The next meeting is Aug. 5 at WCCC Downtown campus, [804 W. 4th Street](#)

Member Hicks wants to mention that the task force should invest in equipment to make sure the public meetings are accessible to all, including good audio and video collections like what the city used to have.

Motion to adjourn by member Weeks. Motion is seconded.

Member Hicks mentions that he is mindful that this is a public meeting. Feels they should also engage in a sort of public education and brings up four items recently in the media:

- The [Michigan State University Law School Citing Slavery](#) project
- [Article](#) in Reuters showing that over 100 of America's "political elite" come from families who owned slaves
- The [California Reparations Report](#)
- A friend's family told him about how Black people were forced to pay higher prices for houses (in the 1950s possibly); an economic hardship on people. This

is an important fact that people, including the task force, should know. It's a concrete example to point to. Because the task force is going to "get one crack at this." The task force needs to recognize the context in which they are doing their work and do it with a level of discernment people may not be expecting.

Member Robinson adds that this is a period of racial realism; pay attention to what is happening at the Supreme Court. Many gains made during the civil rights era are gone. Thursday the Supreme Court said Affirmative Action is dead. Will affect many young people trying to get into higher education. The past is really today. One last tool we have is voting. The country is about to experience a third reconstruction. The Supreme Court is working on stripping rights not just from Black people, but from the country as a whole.

Co-Chair Williams read a letter he sent to Lansing as the Chairman of the Democratic Party Black Caucus asking for the state to establish a statewide commission to examine reparations. Also suggests a public apology. Member Hicks says it is past time for apologies and member Belle says that it can't just be empty promises, it has to be tangible.

Meeting adjourned at approximately 3:10 p.m.

Summary

- There is obvious public interest in this process (over 20 people were in person and at least 10 were online), but the issues with the audio/visual component and the lack of timely announcement of the meeting dominated much of the comments during the meeting.
- As a relatively new entity the task force seems to still be finding its feet, but members are determined to move forward and as Co-Chair Williams told me after the meeting they're "going to get this done."
- Helping to educate themselves and the public on the history of injustice in the city as well as current issues seems important to the task force and will likely help retain high community engagement.

Follow-Up Questions

- What are the tangible outcomes of the all-day retreat?
- What are some concrete next steps the task force will take?
- Will the task force collaborate with either the Black Bottom Archives or other community groups as part of their process?

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