

Faith Community Advisory Group Meeting Minutes

Date: Tuesday December 14th 2021

FCAG Members Present: Anne Derse, Abbi Sharofsky, Christopher Matthews, Kersi Shroff, Claire Waggoner, Gareth Murray

FCAG Candidates Present: Carmen Castro-Conroy, Amjad Chaudhry, Amy Costello, Kenneth Nelson, Robert Panke, Saba Rashid, Marla Schulman, Aman Shergill, Daisy Thompson, Walter Weiss, Tal Widdes

County Staff Present: Kate Chance, Diane Vu, County Executive Marc Elrich

Minutes taken by Amy Costello

1. Welcome – Kate Chance
2. Introductions: name, faith community/house of worship, time in MC, priority issues
 1. FCAG Executive Members
 - i. Anne Derse – deacon at St John's Episcopal in Bethesda Chevy Chase. Spent 30 years overseas as a diplomat prior to being ordained as a deacon. With FCAG since 2018.
 - ii. Chris Mathews – in MoCo for several decades; belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Faith community. Excited about the DC Temple re-opening in April – we are all invited to attend! Has been involved in interfaith work for about 35 years.
 - iii. Gareth Murray - Serves on Neighbors in Need committee primarily. Also helps with book clubs.
 - iv. Abbi Sharofsky – Rabbi Abbi – Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of Greater Washington. Joined FCAG executive committee in 2018. Works primarily within JCRC in the interfaith arena; represents the Jewish community in interfaith spaces.
 - v. Kersi Shroff – Zoroastrian community representative. Involved in interfaith work for several years.
 - vi. Claire Waggoner – member of the Buddhist community, with a Temple on River Rd. Their community has lots of

Tibetan and Vietnamese members. Has served on this committee since 2014.

2. FCAG Prospective Members

i. Carmen Castro-Conroy – member of St Rose of Lima Parish x 30 years. Lives in Gaithersburg.

ii. Amjad Chaudhry – Belongs to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in East Montgomery, at the Bait-ur-Rehman Mosque. They have a food pantry and other social services. He invites us all to his mosque to have a good party and a good visit.

iii. Amy Costello – Rockville Baha'i Community; focused on racial justice, literacy, and the equality of men and women. We look forward to working in the interfaith arena.

iv. Kenneth Nelson –Pastor at Seneca Community Church, which is a primarily black church. He is at this meeting because he promised a friend (Brother Gareth) that he would come and help.

v. Robert Panke -Father, St John Neumann Catholic Parish, in Gaithersburg.

vi. Saba Rashid – called in from Pakistan. With the Montgomery County Muslim Foundation (MCMF); works for a non-profit that runs several social programs and is looking forward to working with this interfaith group.

vii. Marla Schulman – called in from Florida; from MoCo and raised kids here. Owner of Schreiber Translations, in Rockville. Belongs to B'nai Israel in Rockville. Chairs their Faith Outreach committee; brought program of social and racial justice to her congregation. Also belongs to Action in Montgomery. And belongs to the JCRC, with Rabbi Abbi and Tal Widdes.

viii. Aman Shergill – in MoCo since 2015; as a Sikh, she worships at the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation in Rockville. Their priority is to serve the human race, regardless of background.

ix. Daisy Thompson – belongs to the Black Ministers Conference of Montgomery County; has lived in MoCo for over 20 years; works at a non-profit that provides housing and mental health services.

x. Walter Weiss – belongs to the River Rd Unitarian Universalist Congregation, since 2000. Is a lay leader there; co-chairs

environmental group. Co-founder of MoCo Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions. Concerned with climate justice, and dealing with racial inequities that are magnified by climate change.

xi. Tal Widdes – board of the Jewish Community Relations Board (JCRC); also is on the board member of Identity Inc, which serves Latino youth and their families. Was COO of the Jewish Social Service Agency, providing an array of social services.

c. Diane Vu – Office of Community Partnerships

3. Remarks from the County Executive Marc Elrich

1. Thanks to everyone for coming out tonight and thanks to Kate for taking on leadership of this group. FCAG is very important to the County; one of the better things of America is that people from so many different communities can get on so well together, and get so much work done.
2. The FCAG's work in conveying messages to our communities is valuable, whether it's supporting COVID vaccine efforts or letting people know about social services, etc
3. COVID is probably not over, and we should not diminish the fact that if we're still sending people to the hospital with COVID, it's still a big problem
4. Appreciates our willingness to use our links to the community to convey government info **to** our faith communities, and to bring information back to govt **from** our faith communities.
5. Happy to answer questions tonight. Two big things we need are: 1. Racial equity and inclusion – need to broaden understanding that we all rise together and racial equity is important for all of us. We are measured by how we treat the least among us. 2 climate change - we are in deep, deep trouble. The news is uniformly bad and accelerating. Sea level rise is happening and is alarming. Faith communities can advocate for us to behave as stewards of our environment. He hopes we all get the vital importance of trying to lead the effort to leave the Earth a better place than we found it.

4. Questions from the faith community:

Gareth: Glad you raised the issues of racial equity and the environment. Folks want to get back to church. How can we make them as safe as possible? There's new technology for disinfection. How can we get technology that works into MoCo, if there's no proposal out there, because people aren't aware of it? Gareth's brother-in-law has a plant-based proposal for a disinfectant that prevents COVID. **Marc** – we wouldn't approve things that haven't met national standards – we are not the ones to do that. The biggest COVID transmission is airborne, not on surfaces. So disinfectants are not as helpful – COVID risk depends on how much of it you breathe in. So for example, it's important to do contact tracing from restaurants or other indoor gathering places where people don't have masks; it's how much COVID you're breathing from the air. Gareth will send the Kate the information about his brother-in-law's product, for review.

Walter: Can you dig in on how you think the faith communities can help enact the County climate action plan? **Marc:** There are 2 levels of things you can do. 1. Is talk to people about the importance of personal actions wrt climate change. Ex: use of household solar panels – the payback on solar is improving. Also, food recycling – reduces landfill use and methane gasses. Explain to people in our faith communities about why we do this and why it's important; hopefully get their buy-in. 2. The County will look for people to act as climate investors, who will go talk to their neighbors about, for example, solar panels. Can you put panels over your church parking lot? Can you do rain harvesting over your parking lots? Can you use pervious materials on your property to reduce run-off? He sees us both as ambassadors and doers. If all churches had solar roofs, we would reduce our impact on the environment.

Father Panke: Thank you for taking the time to be with us. We started a food pantry and have gotten a lot of food from the County, for the pantry. We have a very diverse community in Gaithersburg and it is a very beautiful example of how people can live together in harmony. Pope Francis sent out a message about how churches can reduce their environmental impact. Father Panke's question is about construction. They are blessed to put a small addition onto their church, just to expand their chapel and add some living space. The Goshen Rd project – they are getting slapped with a fee that will run to tens of thousands of dollars, because they are supposed to build a sidewalk but it will go nowhere. They asked for a waiver but got a very curt answer 'no' – and it's a \$50,000 cost. The county govt will not do a covenant. **Marc:** give Kate the full information, and he'll have one of his special assistants look into it. If no one else is going to build sidewalks on Goshen it's kind of ridiculous.

Saba: MCMF is very active in resettlement of Afghan refugees. Housing is a big obstacle. Do you have any solutions to helping; perhaps the County can co-sign leases to help encourage landlords to rent to Afghan refugees? **Marc:** the County is waiting for the Fed govt to agree to provide funding – they have committed the US to assist these refugees and they need to provide some financial support. We've been trying to help around the edges, but we can't even provide affordable housing for the people who already live here. He understands the challenges of not having credit. Would be happy to try to work with the state to secure some funding.

Diane – There has been a lot of conversation about this; not only about Afghan newcomers but also people coming across the Southern border. There are a lot of agencies working on this right now, especially trying to get the fed govt to sign off on funds and resettlement assistance. Have to continue to push the state and fed govt to allocate additional funds.

Rabbi Abbi: As a parent of 2 MCPS students we are watching to hear about the Superintendent search process. What is the County office hoping for in the next Superintendent? **Marc:** my experience with interim superintendent Dr McKnight was the best of any superintendent I've worked with – she was open and willing to look at new ways to deal with problems. He hopes the County considers, if not her, then someone willing to work on the same things: solar on schools, cost of counselors, etc. Wants someone willing to work in partnership, and to be pragmatic. His office isn't part of the search but he thinks the things she brings to the table are really important. **Abbi:** JCRC has also found her to be a tremendous supporter of things that impact the faith communities, and they see her as a tremendous partner

Amjad: their HQ is in the mosque and they are happy to be in MoCo. They also work on racial equality, and their national leadership has told them they should be considering environmental impact in their mosque landscaping plans. Thank you for participating in the 4th of July weekend with us at the Good Hope Rd Center. They would like to have a 5k run as part of the next celebration. **Marc:** you can bring that to Kate – we can help set up a 5k run.

Kersi: Would like to return to the permitting issues, eg about sidewalks or bicycle paths. The County staff should be more understanding of the financial constraints under which faith communities survive.

Gareth: He has been encouraging certain churches with large campuses to look at putting up solar fields, to bring down costs not only for themselves, but perhaps to assist their neighbors, maybe seniors or other low-income neighbors. At his last HOA, they are looking at putting solar farms in their green space. **Marc:** they have a plan where people can install solar infrastructure and share the savings with their neighbors. If you have greenspace that would be suitable, let him know and he can put you in touch with the company that has funding to do the work.

Gareth: wrt food insecurity, maybe we could do greenhouses and have master growers come in and teach people to grow food that can be given away. **Marc:** wants to put low-income housing on all the parking lots in MoCo, and solar farms on the green lots that can't be built on.

Rev Anne: Want to second Saba's point about refugees. MoCo has a great history wrt diversity. Right now it's Afghan refugees but there will be more. The more infrastructure we can build to support them, the better. The County can help faith communities who are sponsoring refugees by helping with bureaucracy. For example, Maryland is denying Medicaid to a disabled Afghan teenager as an anti-fraud measure. It would be good to have a govt POC who could help navigate these problems. They also need some help with storing donated items – is there space in MoCo that could be donated to store items while they get the families organized? **Marc:** We don't have much unused space, but will look. **Diane** says there is a work group mtg tomorrow night; they will discuss and report back. Also, wrt the housing issue; can pull together meeting with property owners and see if we can encourage them to work with the resettlement organizations. **Marc:** perhaps we could get an inventory of which churches in the county might have land they'd be willing to use for low-income housing? The County could facilitate them developing their land for affordable housing units.

Kenneth: Concerns about in-home COVID testing kits. Would like to see increased distribution of those kits. Also concerned about food security. People are doing small gardens, or urban gardens, and could use support. Also, people are working at WorkSource; would like to have people who could provide assistance with employment assistance. **Marc:** we can arrange a meeting with the WorkSource people and the FCAG. Also, the county is starting to distribute the at-home kits; Diane is on the planning team and will get him some information. **Kenneth:** we need to help the Haitian refugees here as well. Also, Upcounty needs broadband internet. **Marc:** we're working with the State to get that. Trying to make wireless affordable; should not have to rely on the cable companies. **Kenneth:** finally, we need more mental health service funding. We need staff to support people who are dealing with all the loss from COVID.

Tal: Active with an organization that supports the Latino community; we anticipate more people coming into the community. Perhaps if some groups have a surplus of resources, they can share with the groups working with Latino newcomers. Hoping we can mobilize the faith communities to support these groups like they are with the others. Hopes we can be inclusive of all newcomers. **Diane:** Our Caribbean liaison is actually Haitian. We have been working hard to keep Haiti at the forefront of peoples' minds, even through all the other crises. We would like to help the faith communities support all the newcomers in need. There is a Newcomers Resettlement Group, and people working in that sphere should join.

Chris: Researching potential housing options, because affordable housing is such a problem here. Has been talking with Marriott – they are desperate for employees right now – in food service, in housekeeping, etc. You don't have to speak English, and you can be trained. The challenge is working with the fed govt – they need work permits to get accomplished quickly. How do we put pressure on the fed govt to make sure they work through these problems? They invited a lot of people into the country; how are they going to help them navigate the bureaucracy so this immigration works? **Marc:** we don't have a direct line to the White House but we do have Senators and Congressmen. If you don't make it possible for people to support themselves, they will do whatever they have to. We need to help build a pathway to self-sufficiency. **Diane:** we do have a meeting with Work Source and will address the need for pipeline creation and support. Also, she is having a conversation with the White House Operation Allies coordinator on Thursday – she, and her Baltimore counterpart, and the WH, about what is needed from the WH to help the effort. She will make sure to plug these issues – work permits, etc. Send Kate your talking points and Diane will work them in. **Kenneth:** can the group consider a training partnership with Montgomery College? They are experienced in work re-training.

Daisy: Are there plans in the works to create more jobs for persons with disabilities? **Marc:** the county has long had a policy of making jobs accessible to people with disabilities. We're not the private sector so we may be more willing to deal with this than they are.

5. Closing – Kate Chance