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**COMMUNITY NEWS**

# Richmond Heights council approves members of new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

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Richmond Heights City Council has approved members for a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. (Jeff Piorkowski, special to cleveland.com)

By [Jeff Piorkowski/special to cleveland.com](#)

RICHMOND HEIGHTS, Ohio -- In June 2020, City Council approved a resolution that declared racism a national public crisis. Nearly three years later, Mayor Kim Thomas, who served as Ward 1 councilwoman when that resolution was approved, said it was time to back that resolution with action.

On Tuesday (April 25), council took action by approving five residents as members of the city's new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee.

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"We passed (the 2020 resolution), and in that legislation it stated we had to create some action steps. And part of those action steps was putting together a DEI committee to help (further the resolution)," Thomas said after the council meeting.

"We have to put some action steps in place, or we'd just have a piece of paper. We had no guidance or direction on what to do; it (the resolution) was just declaring racism a public crisis. So what did that mean?"

"Now, this means that, OK, things are equitable, we can have minority participation when it comes to businesses partnering with the schools, it means so many different things. Making sure we hire LGBTQ and so many letters behind those names, but making sure we do what needs to be done as a community.

"This means that we can ensure fair treatment and participation of all people," Thomas said. "We want to ensure we have minority participation and partnership with our schools, businesses, and the residents in the community."

The five residents named to the committee were the five who responded to the city's call for people interested in serving, Thomas said. The committee will serve in an advisory capacity to council and the administration.

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The five residents council approved for the committee are:

-- Becky Stroom, a six-year resident and self-employed psychotherapist who has a master's degree in social work from Case Western Reserve University. Stroom is a retired Cleveland Clinic social worker.

-- Calinda Stringer, a corporate vice president for retention for a Fortune 100 insurance company who has 28 years of experience in the financial services industry.

-- Edwin Mayes, director of first-year experience and family programs at CWRU and a DEI trainer for students.

-- Alex Harper, who has 15 years of professional experience in manufacturing, supply chain global distribution, project management and workforce development.

-- Jannel Turner, a resident since June 2022 who is a social worker in an affordable housing HUD apartment building.

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Council approved each of the committee members by a 6-1 vote. Ward 4 Councilman Mark Alexander voted against each appointment, explaining that he was not voting against the individual, but rather because he did not see a need for such a committee.

"I'm not voting against any person. I did not vote for this program to begin with," Alexander said of his vote against the June 2020 resolution.

"I don't believe the program is going to solve any problems. I don't think there's problems to begin with in that area in this town. I'm not saying there are no problems anywhere, but I don't think this is going to get anybody where we need to be, so my vote is no."

Ward 2 Councilman Frank Lentine read aloud a definition of diversity, equity and inclusion and said it "promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people participating, but particularly groups who have historically been disrepresented or subject to discrimination on the basis of identity or disabilities."

Lentine then asked Thomas: "Have we had any cases or problems with this in the past that you know of? Why now? Has there been a problem? Is there a problem?"

"I really can't speak in saying there is a problem," Thomas replied. She said that the 2020 resolution, however, called for action to be taken.

Thomas said the committee will help ensure that discrimination does not occur based on skin color or whether someone has a felony on their record.

"So (it's) making sure we have equal representation across the board and minority participation across the board," she said.

“You don’t have to have a problem to put DEI in place; it should be in place. It’s in place at the federal level, the state level and now we are recommending that it’s put together at the local level.

“You don’t have to have a problem. We want to make sure we prevent a problem,” she said.

Ward 3 Councilwoman Cassandra Nelson, before voting to approve the committee members, said she would like to see a more diverse committee.

“I would like to see on our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Committee a white male, because what I see now is just people of color and we need to have diversity on our board, as well. I would like to see everyone participate -- everyone.

“I’m going to vote yes, but I hope that other person is another race or another gender.”

Thomas said she agreed with Nelson. She said that when the city put out the word that it was looking for committee members, it mentioned it was seeking people of all ethnicities and backgrounds.

Thomas said that Stroom, who was not present at the meeting, is white. The four Black residents who also make up the committee were present for Tuesday’s meeting.

Thomas said any resident interested in serving on the committee can [contact the Human Resources Director Rhonda Lowe](#) to submit a resume.

The committee does not call for a prescribed number of members, although Thomas said she would like an odd number.

The city is also forming an Ethics Committee. On Tuesday, council approved the first and, so far only, member of that committee, resident Dana Wiggins. Residents interested in serving on this committee can also contact Lowe.

### **New finance director**

Annette Harmon recently resigned as finance director due to personal reasons. On Tuesday, council unanimously approved the hiring of Highland Heights Finance Director Joseph Filippo to also serve, temporarily, as Richmond Heights’ finance director.

Thomas said she contacted Highland Heights Mayor Chuck Brunello Jr. after Harmon resigned and that Brunello suggested that Filippo, if he agreed, could temporarily serve both cities.

Filippo will serve Richmond Heights through July 30, by which time Thomas hopes to have a full-time finance director in place.

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