

From: "Sam O'Keefe" <sokeefe@vassar.edu>
To: DMahon@town.arlington.ma.us
Date: Sun, 20 Sep 2020 17:53:00 -0400
Subject: Message from concerned Arlington resident

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Dear Selectboard Member Mahon,

Hello, my name is Sam O'Keefe, and I am writing to express my sincere concerns about the unanimous vote on the part of the Selectboard to remove the Black Lives Matter banner from the Arlington Town Hall.

As a resident of Arlington for most of my life, thanks to my different forms of education, which include conversations with community members, I have come to recognize the many privileges I have as a white man. What the nationally resonant calls to address systemic racism, particularly that against Black people, have importantly made me realize is that Arlington is not immune to these structural issues, as demonstrated by several racist incidents that have transpired in the town in recent years. Arlington has been and remains a predominantly white community that has not fostered a welcoming, inclusive, and economically accessible environment for non-white people, especially Blacks.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder and waves of protests across the country and world this summer, it seems that Arlington and some of its residents have awakened to their own complicity in systemic issues that disproportionately impact Black people and have begun pursuing more introspective dialogues individually and collectively; this has been a positive development in which I have partaken and learned a lot from. For me, the presence of the "Black Lives Matter" sign on the Town Hall was an important and comforting symbolic reminder of our town's intention of doing better, and affirming its support for a statement that is at its core a human rights assertion, and not something political. While some may read these three words as a message of *exclusion*, upon closer examination and a reckoning with the real and visceral violence Black people have disproportionately faced throughout the history of the U.S., they transmit a fundamental notion of *inclusion*, and community, which should be able to be enjoyed and celebrated by *all* Arlington residents, and visitors.

While I respect and appreciate the fact that Black people are not the only demographic who has faced and continues to endure systemic oppression and exclusion, I strongly disapprove of your vote to remove the banner, and replace it with an anti-discrimination bylaw that is tantamount to "All Lives Matter". This statement continues to silence the history of years of economic, political, and social exclusion and inequity faced by Blacks at the hands of government institutions and -sanctioned policies, a history and its effects which remain very much alive today.

The truth is that *Black lives are endangered* in many ways in the U.S. currently, and *that matters*. "Black Lives Matter" is a statement that encapsulates the unique history of anti-Black violence and how it has shaped the present reality of systemic marginalization of the Black community, and thus can serve as a potent pedagogical tool that can spread awareness and empathy for Black lives. The visibility and promotion of this statement on a political building is one symbolic step towards reversing anti-Black policies designed and implemented by governments at all levels for generations, and creating spaces where Black people feel physically and emotionally safe, and able to fulfill their needs and desires like everyone.

At such a polarized time in the U.S. when movements seeking to center Black lives and highlight the disproportionate violence perpetrated towards them throughout history has elicited such hateful and

ignorant backlash, the ramifications of this vote in our town, and the message it transmits are difficult to quantify. It is hard to see this as something other than a capitulation to a line of thinking that negates the history of anti-Black violence, devalues Black lives, and validates the ignorance and conscious and/or unconscious racism and beliefs held in our town leadership and community. I fear that the removal of this banner represents a way to placate individuals who are unwilling to accept history and reality, and consequently forecloses an interrogation of the mindsets and attitudes that perpetuate structural racism, and productive dialogue.

I hope and expect that you will take my concerns and arguments that I have articulated here seriously, and I look forward to holding you and the other Select Board members accountable for that. I additionally request that you attach the points I have made in my email here to the meeting minutes for tomorrow evening's Select Board meeting at 7pm.

Thank you,

Sam O'Keefe