

Mukilteo Council rejects mayor’s DEI Commission picks

By KIENAN BRISCOE

MUKILTEO, Wash. – Despite Mukilteo Mayor Joe Marine advancing three candidates for DEI commissioner positions, the city council voted against approving them without any explanation nor asking the candidates, all of whom were present, a single interview question.

At Council’s meeting Monday, March 7, Diversity Equity and Inclusion Commission candidates Gauri Sanghvi (for Position 1), Michael Dixon (for Position 2), and Ewa Wheeler (for Position 3), were not approved 2-3 with Council Vice President Elisabeth Crawford and Councilman Tom Jordal voting in favor; Council President Steve Schmalz, councilmembers Louis Harris and Riaz Khan voting no; and council members Jason Moon and Richard Emery abstaining.

Councilman Emery originally voted in favor but changed his vote to an abstention after Councilman Moon decided to do so.

Council President Steve Schmalz moved to approve Marine’s selections to fill the Mukilteo DEI Commission vacancies, seconded by Councilman Jordal, but was not passed following a contentious discussion with implications that questioned the decision-making authority of the Mayor.

“I’m not sure exactly what the council wants,” Mayor Marine said. “We had six great candidates. I was voted as Mayor and it is the Mayor’s prerogative to choose these. I’ve never had commissioners that you’ve basically said no to.”

Chapter 2.48, section 2.48.010 of the Mukilteo Municipal Code states “there is established a diversity, equity and inclusion commission consisting of seven members to be appointed by the mayor, subject to confirmation by the city council according to the confirmation process established by council resolution, from residents of the city.”

Councilman Harris and Council Vice President Crawford, who both serve as council liaisons to the Mukilteo DEI Commission, questioned the mayor’s choices making the points that the three candidates who were not chosen to advance were “highly qualified.”

Harris questioned the “objectivity and

equality” of the decision making process, since there was no deadline to apply, motioning to reopen the application for an extended 15 days.

“I understand that all of the applicants are great residents of Mukilteo and have done a lot of great work and have a wealth of experience to bring to the DEI commission but I’m a little concerned about the city’s process,” Harris said.

City Administrator Steve Powers responded to Harris’ concerns that boards and commissions typically do not have set cut-off application dates because the city typically leaves it open until positions are filled.

“I hear your interest in having a closing date on the application process, but I think you could think of this from an employment perspective: you often see postings that stay open until filled – that’s historically the process that we’ve use here,” Powers said.

Mayor Marine admitted he did not consult with council liaisons Harris and Crawford in the decision to which Council President Schmalz added he would like to see a process that did involve their input. However, this is not a normal procedure nor is required.

Despite all three candidates being present at yesterday’s meeting, and Mayor Marine suggesting, at least three times, that council interview them, not a single council member opted to do so.

Council Vice President Crawford stated she would be more interested in talking to the candidates who were not chosen, “based on their qualifications.”

“It sounds like a number of you have concerns about my choices,” Marine said. “All three of them are here. If you have questions for them specifically, I’m sure they would be more than happy to answer some of your concerns that you may have. But If you have a problem with me or the process then that’s different. We’ve gone through the process like we do any other commissions.”

Both council members Jason Moon and Riaz Khan attempted to allow the candidates an opportunity to speak and introduce themselves but was interjected by Councilman Harris who mentioned that Council President Schmalz pulled the item from the consent agenda to be

voted by council separately.

APPLICATION PROCESS

The City received six applications for DEI Commissioner positions, all of who were interviewed by Mayor Marine via zoom.

Out of the six applicants, Mayor Marine decided on the following three to advance:

- Gauri Sanghvi: A resident of Mukilteo for a year and 5 months who has several degrees and certifications for financial planning, business, and teaching. She was a teacher in India, a banker in Canada, and has been a broker in Washington State since 2011. Sanghvi is also President of the General Federation of Women’s Club, was a founding member of Sahara Group of Indo-Canadian Women and volunteered with Abbotsford Community Service. She has lived in 4 countries, speaks three languages, and is passionate about helping people from all backgrounds succeed in life.
 - Michael Dixon: A resident of Mukilteo for 14 years. He owns Dixon Insurance Agency in Mukilteo and has a Bachelor’s and Masters of Business Administration from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He serves on the Mukilteo Water and Wastewater District Commission, and previously served as Commissioner with Alderwood Water and Wastewater District. He also sits on the YMCA Board of Advisors and is part of the newly formed Diversity and Inclusion task force for the board.
 - Ewa Wheeler: A resident of Mukilteo for 22 years where she is a businessowner. Ewa was born and raised in Poland and hopes to bring to the table her experience of going through a refugee camp, and in her words, “life changing immigration.”
- The applicants not selected were the following:
- Sandra Holzer: A seven-year resident of Mukilteo who is a Family Liaison with the Mukilteo School District where she helps to improve communication between parents, schools, and mental health providers. She is a current member of a local school’s Equity Team.

- Irina Kourilenko: An eight-year resident of Mukilteo who is a teacher in the Mukilteo School District and co-leads her school’s Equity Team. She possesses a Doctor of Education from Seattle Pacific University. She is an advocate for Black Lives Matters and states in her application that “educational equity is the intentional allocation of resources, instruction, and opportunities according to need, requiring that discriminatory practices, prejudices, and beliefs be identified and eradicated.” Kourilenko listed fellow applicant, Sandra Holzer as a reference.
- Kevin Lopez-Mohedano: A resident of three years and eight months, Lopez-Mohedano is a Regional Program Specialist with the US Administration for Children and Families. He possesses a Lean Green Belt from when he worked for Washington state at the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). He is currently helping to develop policy and training at his employer for DEI.

Council President Steve Schmalz asked the Mayor during yesterday’s meeting if there was “anything that stood out between some of the candidates and some of the others.”

Mayor Marine responded that the three he picked were based off a “number of things” such as diversity, time spent in the community, and so on.

“I was really quite impressed with not only the number of applications we had but the qualifications and the eagerness of people to get involved,” Mayor Marine said.

After last night’s meeting, the application will be reopened and the Mayor hopes these same candidates will reapply.

“I just don’t think this sends a very good message to our citizens when they apply for positions and get turned down,” Mayor Marine said.

The Lynnwood Times reached out to the three candidates for statements on the council’s decision yesterday, as well as City Councilmembers. Gauri Sanghvi declined issuing a statement to the Lynnwood Times stating that she was concerned that offering a statement to the press could affect her appointment.

As of the time of publication, Councilman Tom Jordal was the only city councilmember who responded to our request.

“I voted in favor of the three DEI commissioner candidates because they have wide ranging life experiences including unfair discrimination, Councilman Jordal wrote to the Lynnwood Times. “They are all well versed in spreading understanding of the joy of diversity.”

EMAIL TO MICHAEL DIXON FROM COUNCIL VICE PRESIDENT CRAWFORD

Immediately after the council meeting, an email was sent to Mike Dixon from Council Vice President Crawford requesting a conversation she would like

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to have concerning what was on her mind in regard to the DEI Commission.

All other candidates confirmed with the Lynnwood Times that neither Crawford nor any other councilmembers extended similar invitations.

Dixon declined a personal, off record meeting with Crawford stating he would rather hear her opinion in a public forum and in quorum in her official capacity as Vice President of the convened council, as that was the capacity in which he, along with two others, was summarily voted down without question.

STATEMENT FROM EWA WHEELER

“Listening to the Mukilteo City Council March 7 meeting, during which council members refused to accept the selected candidates for DEI Commission was very disturbing, and quite frankly, shocking.

“The process of selecting, interviewing, and appointing the candidates was followed according to the Mukilteo Municipal Code, in which, no codified criteria, nor specific qualification is required for the applicants of DEI Commission.

“During the meeting, Mayor Joe Marine asked on three separate occasions, if the Council members have any questions to selected candidates. Mukilteo council members had no questions to appointees whatsoever, yet they disqualified them, based strictly on the information contained in the applications.

“Without legit explanation from the City council members for the refusal, I feel like all three selected applicants were disqualified based solely on “dislike” by Mukilteo council members.

“As a refugee from Eastern Europe who went through a lengthy and difficult immigration process, proudly being called Polish American, and a Mukilteo resident of 22 years, raising three children in Mukilteo schools, volunteering with Mukilteo Lighthouse Festival and with Mukilteo Chamber of Commers in the past, I thought I could bring a fresh perspective to the DEI Committee. In addition, I would love to bring my experience and equality into Mukilteo and offer extensive diversity and equivalent mixture of experiences to the Commission.

“When I applied for Mukilteo DEI Commission, I was under the impression that Mukilteo is a city of fairness, integrity, open to citizens of multiple diversity.

“If there are no criteria in Mukilteo Municipal Code regarding selection of DEI candidates, if there were no questions asked to any of the appointees during the meeting, I feel my disqualification from the Committee was done subjectively, I feel I have been discriminated based on my application.

“I feel very disappointed.

“What did Mukilteo council members

see in my application to offend them?

“Can Mukilteo council members tell me why am I not good enough?”

PUBLIC COMMENTS FROM MUKILTEO RESIDENTS ON DEI COMMISSION VOTE

Many vocal Mukilteo residents echoed concerns for council’s decision voting against the DEI candidates during the public comments section at the end of the meeting.

“I was very disappointed. I was invited to this meeting, I put my name forward, I’ve been a Mukilteo city resident for 15 years, I’ve been elected three times, and I don’t quite understand what the arbitrary and seemingly discriminatory standard is that I’m being held to,” Mike Dixon, one of the candidates, said.

“You’re voting down of the DEI Commission candidates was shocking and disgusting...It seems you don’t really want diversity on the diversity commission you apparently just want to advance people who fit your preferred mold,” Sharon Damoff, Mukilteo resident said.

“I listened in astonishment that the members of the city council voted down a diverse slate of DEI Commission candidates with no specific objections to one specific candidate. All I heard was that certain council members did not like the Mayor’s choices because they were the Mayor’s choices only or they did not like the process because they were excluded. As for the council members who abstained, council members are appointed to make decisions... how hard can it be to say yes or no?” Tony Damoff, Mukilteo resident said.

PUBLIC COMMENT BY MAYOR MARINE

Just minutes before the meeting was adjourned Mayor Marine had the following words to say to council about their decision:

“I think it was very embarrassing for the city tonight. I’m very disappointed. The council says that they want to work together, including the council President and Vice President. I desperately want to work with this council. I’ve seen it both ways; we only move Mukilteo forward together if we work as a team.

“It’s hard for the city staff if council is fighting with the Mayor. It certainly doesn’t look good for the city...I’ve never seen putting three names on a commission that just wholesale you turn them away. You told three citizens you need not apply. You are not good enough to be on this commission. And quite frankly I know it probably had little to do with any of those three. I think it has to do with the fact that council does not want me in any position that makes choices. I won’t try and be a council member, you don’t try and take away the Mayor’s authority and we will move forward really well together.”

Despite Mayor Marine inviting council members to defend their positions, there was silence.

Op-Ed: Mukilteo City Councilmembers don’t get to invent rules to suit themselves



Michael Dixon

I was denied the confirmation vote tonight to the City of Mukilteo Diversity, Equity and Inclusion commission. Appalled, I asked for an official explanation and have not yet received one.

Let me enumerate. The City Council is empowered by state law to operate within the confines of its City Code. The Code makes no mention of any qualification at all for members of any of its three commissions, nor have any other nominees to any other commission ever been voted down. Tonight, three nominees to the DEI commission were voted down. I was one of the nominees.

In a heated back and forth between the mayor who nominated us and a vocal and vehement Council, comments were made by Councilmembers such as “these nominees are less qualified”, or how struck they were by the absence of so many other “well qualified applicants”. Aghast, I sat befuddled and bemused as the mayor asked to no avail if the Council would simply ask any of the three nominees all in attendance on the Zoom session a single question. They never did. Then they voted in what looked like a 3-3 vote with 1 abstaining until Councilmember Emery recognized the mayor would vote with the majority, so said he changed his mind and his vote and would now abstain, yielding a bullet proof majority decision to reject all three of us. Whether I was voted in 4-3 with the mayor as the tie breaker or 4-3 in the Council, I would have been equally insulted by anything less than a unanimous confirmation.

Now, allow me to explain my qualifications which are already part of the public record. You be the judge.

- I’m African American.
- Owns a local Farmers Insurance Agency in Mukilteo.
- I’ve lived in Mukilteo since September 2007 – that’s 14.5 years.
- I’ve been elected 3 times as a utility commissioner here (twice for Alderwood Water and now currently for Mukilteo Water).
- I’ve served as President, Vice President and Treasurer of the Alderwood Water and Wastewater District Board of Commissioners and am currently Vice President of the Mukilteo Water and Wastewater District Board of Commissioners.
- Following both a BS and MBA from MIT, I have had a 20+ year corporate career spanning large to small companies.
- I worked in city government pre-MBA as the Associate Director for Policy of the Office of Management and Budget of my native US Virgin Islands.
- I worked in public finance investment banking for 3 years pre-MBA, advising municipalities in Texas on bond financings. In fact, during that time I

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WHAT MATTERS TO YOU?

The Lynnwood Times wants to know what issues you would like us to ask the candidates on your behalf. Email your issues in a form of a question to editorial@lynnwoodtimes.com or call 425-308-8371.