

Lafayette citizen committee aims to make city more diverse, open



Photo Chris Rauber

Lynná McPhatter-Harris speaks at the July 27 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee "community conversation."

By Chris Rauber

Inspired by protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, the city of Lafayette is working to make the city – often criticized for its exclusivity – far more welcoming to a far more diverse population.

In March, Mayor Susan Candell recruited 17 volunteers to participate in a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion community committee, which started meeting May 3. The committee – separate from the city’s official task force on similar issues – is making recommendations on a rolling basis, and expects to have more in coming months.

Committee member Wei-Tai Kwok said the group’s primary goal is to “advise the city on tangible measures we can take” to make Lafayette more diverse and more equitable.

Committee members are meeting weekly and holding community events to discuss ways to address what they call longstanding systemic biases and inequities in the community.

They’re looking for additional volunteers and encouraging support from a broad cross section of the Lafayette community – businesses, religious groups, schools, government and local grassroots groups – to help create a new path forward for the city.

That outreach began with a July 27 “community conversation” at the Lafayette Public Library, held in its outside amphitheater on a blazing hot summer evening – the first in a planned series of such gatherings.

“The shift is really starting to happen in Lafayette,” event moderator Lynná McPhatter-Harris, Ed.D. told an audience of about 60 local residents and activists.

McPhatter-Harris is the Acalanes Union High School District’s newly hired director of student support, equity and inclusion.

She and other speakers emphasized the need to consider not just ways that Lafayette excludes or devalues Blacks and other groups on racial grounds but also other forms of structural and cultural bias based on age, class, gender, sexual orientation, and physical or psychological differences.

Another key area of discussion was Lafayette’s reputation for extreme exclusivity, according to several speakers, based in large part on its historic land-use commitment to single-family homes on relatively large lots.

Recent controversies over in-fill housing and the planned Terraces of Lafayette project on

Deer Hill Road exemplify the dilemma. On one side are advocates of the town’s traditional, semi-rural ambiance; on the other, those who argue that Lafayette cannot remain an unchanging island in the midst of a rapidly evolving region and world.

“In my opinion, affordable housing and DEI are connected at the hip,” said Jay Lifson, executive director of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce and a committee member.

“We’re still living the suburban dream,” he said, but many people who work in Lafayette can’t afford to live here.

Leaders of several business, parent and community groups spoke at the two-hour July 27 event, including representatives from the Chamber, Lafayette Partners in Education, Town Hall Theatre, Temple Isaiah, Inclusive Lafayette, and the parents’ diversity, equity and inclusion committee at Acalanes High School.

Matt Pease, a member of the Chamber’s board and chair of its DEI committee, stressed connections between greater diversity and Lafayette’s continued economic health.

Being “welcoming,” being inclusive, will help attract new jobs to the community, he said. “This is a very important issue for us” at the Chamber.

Lafayette has long been a largely white enclave amid the broader diversity of much of the Bay Area, both in its early agricultural days and more recently as a largely upscale suburb.

In 2000, nearly 87% of the city’s population was classified as white; 20 years later, in 2020, that percentage was still overwhelming, at 75.2%, and Lafayette’s Black population was still tiny (less than 1% of the total), although there were a growing number of residents of Asian or Latinx heritage (11.2% and 8.6%, respectively).

Nicole Wan, a lifelong Lafayette resident and University of Michigan student who serves on Inclusive Lafayette’s board, spoke passionately at the meeting about Lafayette’s need to become less “dismissive” of the reality of racism, and open to land-use changes that would help more people afford to live here.

Voices like Wan’s are what the committee is seeking, said Kwok.

The July 27 meeting was designed “to kick-start the conversation on what community members and groups are doing in this space,” he said. “We were very pleased to see the strong turnout and the highly thoughtful and articulate speakers share their stories.”



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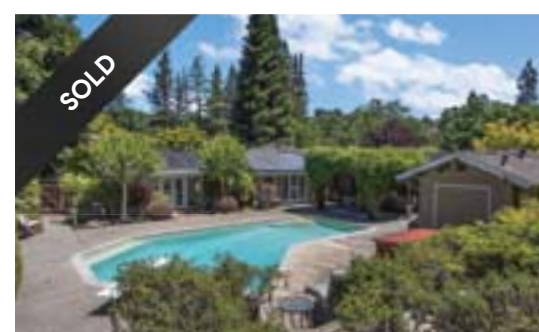
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Lafayette Public Meetings

City Council

Regular Meeting
Monday, Aug. 9, 7 p.m.
Teleconference via City of Lafayette's YouTube Channel:
http://bit.ly/LoveLafayetteYouTube

Planning Commission Meeting

Monday, Aug. 16, 7 p.m.
Teleconference Meeting via Love Lafayette YouTube
http://bit.ly/LoveLafayetteYouTube

Design Review

Wednesday, Aug. 11, 7 p.m. Zoom
Teleconference Meeting via Love Lafayette YouTube
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