Draft press release, WT TFAD -- Susanna’s version

A survey of West Tisbury board and committee members conducted by the town’s Task Force Against Discrimination has found that 98 percent of those members are white, 76 percent are in their sixties or above, only 6 are under 50, and men and women are represented in equal measure. Boards and committees represented ranged from the Finance Committee to the Conservation Commission, from the Affordable Housing Committee to the Climate Action Committee to the Task Force itself.

The survey, devised and conducted by Task Force member Loren Ghiglione, sought to learn how inclusive town bodies are and how they might be made more diverse. Of the 114 copies sent out, 60 were returned, by any standard an excellent response rate. In addition to requesting demographic data, the survey posed two questions: “Are there ways the town of West Tisbury or its Task Force might encourage greater inclusion in the make-up of town bodies?” and “Is there anyone that you feel would make a good board or committee member? If so, briefly explain why.”

About a dozen individuals were suggested in response to the latter question. Task Force members are currently following up to see if they are interested and if so what boards or committees they might be interested in joining.

Many survey respondents noted the lack of racial, ethnic, and economic diversity on the town’s boards and committees, and especially the dearth of young people. This was often attributed to the lack of affordable housing and the high cost of living. A library board member wondered if “new people might feel reluctant to apply or express interest” because it sometimes seems as if “the same people have the same positions in perpetuity.”

Some of those longtime members, however, expressed a desire to step down -- if only a replacement could be found. In other words, it seems that there is no lack of opportunities, but this may not be obvious to those who aren’t currently involved. A member of the Historic District Commission wrote: “Almost every committee needs more people and has vacancies. Please! Please! Join a committee!”

Several suggested recruiting high school students as committee members or interns, and encouraging them to come to town meetings.

Many respondents believe that more could be done to let townsfolk know in a timely manner when openings are available. Postings on the town website are sometimes out of date, and they’re not easy to find. Flyers on the town’s several public bulletin boards might attract more attention, and both email and social media could be used more effectively. Having a presence at public events, such as the annual Agricultural Fair, might reach people that other methods don’t.

Several people emphasized the importance of “one-on-one contact” or “neighborly outreach,” as two current committee members called it. Planning Board members once went through the Vineyard phone book asking West Tisbury residents to serve; they recruited a member that way.

The Task Force Against Discrimination is pursuing a suggestion made on several surveys: sponsoring an open house or forum at which participants can learn more about how the various boards and committees contribute to the well-being of the town. Such events were held at the West Tisbury library in 2017 and 2020.

West Tisbury’s Task Force Against Discrimination was formed as a result of the town’s adopting its Diversity Statement at a town meeting in 2020 (??? is that right?). Its current members are Omar Johnson, chair, Alexandra Pratt, Brad Cortez, Loren Ghiglione, Susanna J. Sturgis, Ted Jochsberger, and Terry Kriedman. Like many other town boards and committees, it welcomes new members and anyone who wants to attend its meetings. These are currently held on the first Tuesday of every month at 5 p.m., usually via Zoom. For more information, email WTTFAD@gmail.com.

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