

Harvey, Nancy

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Sent: Monday, October 15, 2012 9:05 PM
To: parkboard
Cc: Harvey, Nancy; Smith, Terry; Henry, Kevin; Wallace, Kevin R
Subject: Testimony to PCS Board Regarding Cultural Diversity
Attachments: Written Testimony to PCS Board, 10122012.pdf

To members of the Parks & Community Services Board, City staff, and council liaison Wallace,

On Tuesday, the 9th of October, I testified at the Parks & Community Services Board meeting regarding the issue of cultural diversity in Bellevue. I have attached a summary of these comments in writing. In addition, these comments also include some considerations that have been brought up in correspondence with Mr. Kevin Henry, Cultural Diversity manager. Feel free to follow up with me at your convenience.

Best,
Sherwin Lee
Somerset

TESTIMONY TO PARKS & COMMUNITY SERVICES BOARD

October 9, 2012

Dear Chair Robinson and members of the Parks & Community Services Board,

I'd like to relay to you testimony that I made to the City Council two weeks ago, regarding the matter of cultural diversity in this city.

As you all know, the demographic face of Bellevue is evolving—more than 40% of city residents are of minority descent, about three-quarters of which are Asian. The Bellevue School District is now a minority-majority district, the first time that has ever happened.

Recently, the City has taken many steps in discussing the matter of diversity in our city through a number of forums and community meetings. While these allow for excellent outlets of engagement, I believe that they, in themselves, can be institutional barriers for ethnic groups and immigrants.

At a Crossroads neighborhood forum in May of 2011, I participated in a subgroup that discussed the matter of ethnic and cultural diversity. However, very few, if any, of the attendees were actually of ethnic minority descent.

In a similar manner, from my observation of many council and commission meetings every now and then, seldom do I see immigrants or persons of ethnic descent attend, let alone actively participate.

The question is, 1) how is this City creating a fabric in which ethnic and immigrant groups feel comfortable establishing their communities, and 2) what are we doing to open up channels of communication that actually engage these citizens (as opposed to just hosting discussion forums)?

My understanding is that cultural diversity affairs are currently handled by the Parks & Community Services (PCS) Board, but the rate at which these issues are growing and becoming more complex really warrants extra attention. This Board was created in its current form in 1993, rebranded from its commission as the “Board of Parks Commissioners.”

The original ordinance outlining the PCS Board's responsibilities include not only focus on parks and community services, but also recommendations to the council regarding community programs, services, natural resource and land stewardship, cultural diversity, special events, probation and parole issues, etc.

My concern is that this language puts cultural diversity matters as a mere afterthought. We have to remember this was drafted in 1993, nearly 20 years ago. Much in this City has changed since then.

My recommendation to the City Council on September 24th was for them to explore the idea of adding a new citizen commission or board that would be specifically for the purpose of cultural diversity. I repeat that same refrain but also acknowledge the bureaucratic challenge of doing so. As an alternative, the City could also explore sponsoring an external citizen board or group aimed at promoting cultural diversity matters.

None of my comments here intend to take away from or impugn upon the work of the Parks & Community Services Board. My testimony merely reflects that this issue has grown to the point where it may no longer be appropriate for just one citizen board to handle these matters. I would recommend that PCS board members work with the City Council and city staff to potentially explore the feasibility of adding this new board or sponsoring an external one.

An example could be drawn from Richmond BC in Metro Vancouver up north, where they have an Intercultural Advisory Committee, the purpose of which is to “enhance intercultural harmony and strengthen intercultural co-operation in Richmond.”

Areas of focus for this board might include engagement with the business community, ethnic faith-based organizations, social service groups, partnerships with existing non-profits, etc.—these are all formal and informal networks that really need to be woven together so that Bellevue can become an open and comfortable environment for peoples of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

