Lee, MA Wrestles With Idea Of Official Welcoming Resolution

By JOSH LANDES • NOV 27, 2018

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Multicultural Bridge CEO Gwendolyn Van Sant (L) addresses the Lee selectboard.
A coalition of groups that promote multiculturalism in the Berkshires recently proposed a “welcoming” resolution to skeptical leaders in Lee, Massachusetts.

On Tuesday, November 20th, Lee residents stood with representatives of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing and Multicultural BRIDGE – which stands for Berkshire Resources For Integration Of Diverse Groups Through Education – to hear the town selectboard consider a so-called “Welcoming Resolution.”

“We already do this in the town of Lee,” said board member Patricia Carlino. “We feel we’re a welcoming town, and we don’t have any issues with anyone.”

Carlino was responding to the resolution’s text, which calls on the town of about 6,000 to acknowledge and celebrate its diversity and “the need to provide a safe community for all residents.”

It commits Lee to “ensure the civil liberties of all persons and enforce protection from discrimination regardless of their demographic characteristics.” The resolution lists factors like race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, immigration status, religious beliefs and activities, age, and health and economic status.

Carlino’s sentiment that the statement was redundant for Lee proved to be a recurring theme among the town’s three selectmen. But Gwendolyn VanSant – the CEO and co-founder of Multicultural BRIDGE, based in Lee – said the statement would just formalize what the selectmen already knew.

“Right now we just want to have a resolution that states that Lee is doing what it’s doing – it’s welcoming and treating all residents the same, and treating them as people that have opportunity for safety and trust in the community,” she said to the selectboard.
“My issue is some of the language,” said Selectboard Chair David Consolati. His first stated concern was with the statement’s mention of immigration status and how it pertained to town police.

“But if they arrest them and they’re not here legally, I’m not tying my police chief’s hands to not deport them or not do whatever they need to do,” said the chair.

Agreeing with Carlino that Lee already is a welcoming community, Consolati pushed the petitioners for more.

“I want to know what you’re really looking for, because this – is nothing,” said Consolati. "There’s something else that’s coming that you want or need or think you should have, and I’d like to know what that is before I approve this.”

“You may be doing a lot, but the community doesn't know it, so the residents don’t know that,” said VanSant. “So the value of the resolution is that everybody that steps into Lee knows that you do all those things, because I don’t know that. We’ve been at this for 18 months trying to figure it out. We found an affirmative action policy, we've called different people in the town – but this is what the resolution would do, be a front and center statement saying that everything you all do and hold true is known to everybody and is accessible and visible.”

She noted that the group had worked with Lee Police Chief Jeffrey Russo, plus other law enforcement officers around the county like Pittsfield Police Chief Michael Wynn and Great Barrington Police Chief William Walsh, about how they handle immigration issues.

Consolati expressed skepticism that anyone in Lee had experienced discrimination around that issue, and pushed VanSant to clarify what would follow the resolution.

“I see this as your first foot through the door,” he said to VanSant. "There is something else coming beyond this, and I'd like to know what that is.”
VanSant said after Great Barrington passed a similar resolution, the group worked with the town to make sure it was communicated to key groups.

“It just could be a sharing of information so that we can also disseminate that out to the community,” she responded. “I don’t have a proscribed next step, but I wouldn’t want to say to you that there isn’t a next step.”

Carlino seemed to be warming up to the idea.

“I kind of understand what you’re saying – that yes, we do all these things now, but how do you let the general public know that we do those things now,” said the board member.

But Consolati suggested agreeing to the statement was a step too far.

“I’m not about to make a political statement about these things,” he said. “I agree with 90 percent of what you have here, and I think we already deal with 90 percent of this. But there is a grey area in everything in this life.”

Although the resolution has no explicit guidelines for the town, Consolati said it would limit Lee’s ability to react to “unforeseen” circumstances. VanSant pushed back.

“But you do know that there are places in our communities that people aren’t safe, right?” asked VanSant. “So the fact that Lee…”

“There are places everywhere in the world that aren’t safe!” interrupted Consolati.

“Right, so it would be great to know that Lee, Massachusetts is a place that is welcoming,” VanSant responded.

“But making this statement doesn’t make them any safer,” Consolati said.

“It lets people know,” VanSant replied.
After more back and forth, Consolati revealed that he interpreted the Welcoming Resolution as a slight to Lee.

“To make this statement to me is something that’s a bit offensive as well, because you’re assuming that we’re not that way,” he said.

“It’s not an accusation, it’s saying, join us in letting people know that Berkshire County is a safe place and you’re one of the towns that’s going to post that up and let everybody know,” said VanSant.

Reinout Van Wagtendonk is a Lee resident who immigrated to the U.S. about 40 years ago. He became an American citizen in 2016. He noted that the judge who presided over his swearing-in mentioned welcoming American attitudes due to anti-immigration statements during that year’s elections. Van Wagtendonk summarized the judge’s remarks, noting the value in making official statements despite assumptions about prevailing attitudes.

“And so in spite of what you hear political candidates say, it goes without saying that Americans do not believe this,” said Van Wagtendonk. "It goes without saying that the American way is to accept you all, and then he paused: ‘it goes without saying, but I want to say it anyway.’ And so, that is what I would like to ask us as a community of Lee to do, with this resolution, with some words on paper. We are a welcoming community. Perhaps it goes without saying, but I think we should say it anyway.”

The third selectman, Thomas Wickham, joined Carlino in a cautious acceptance of the resolution.

“I don’t want to get in an argument or a thing where we’re stating it because we don’t do it, or we’re stating this because we feel we don’t do this or somebody else feels we don’t do it," said Wickham. "We’re not making this statement – that’s not why we’re making this statement, we do do this. So if we make a statement, it’s just reaffirming what we do. And I’m OK with that.”
“This past Sunday, November 11th, we celebrated five years of being an open and affirming church in Lee," said Barbara Mahoney. A congregant at Lee’s First Congregational Church, she brought the church’s statement of its open nature literally off the wall of the building to share with the selectboard. She proudly noted that the congregants had overwhelmingly voted to adopt it.

“We said no matter who you are or where you are in life’s journey, you are welcomed here," said Mahoney. "And this was ratified November 17th, 2013.”

The last speaker from the assembled group was Thomas Ramirez, who emigrated from Guatemala to the United States 14 years ago. Ramirez said life under the Trump administration has changed things for some in the country. He asked town leaders to think of Lee’s future.

“I agree with Dave Consolati what he said about ‘we already do that’ – and I can give that for true because I’ve been living here for eight years," said Ramirez. "But I think it’s important that we continue doing that for other generations and they can have the same feeling in this country, in this town, just like I had in the last seven years.”

Consolati concluded by saying that the resolution itself was useless without the belief to support it.

“The people I know in this community, the people who sit on this board already believe it," said Consolati. "So regardless of if you want to write it on a piece of paper and hang it on a wall is irrelevant because we already believe it. And the people I know in this community already believe. So if this makes you feel better, than we'll discuss it and see what we can do, but in the hearts of the people who live here, it’s already being done. And I don’t know how to explain that any easier to anybody else.”

The selectboard told the group to check-in again in the New Year as it reviews the resolution with a working group including the police chief, the board of health, and others. VanSant suggested a member of the faith community also be involved, but the selectboard insisted on performing its own deliberations first.
So, by not declaring the resolution the town selectmen prefer to hide the town as a welcoming and safe harbor. Yes, those who live in Lee know it in their heads and hearts .... and embrace the position. So what's the harm in saying what you believe? Don’t dwell on the negative issues that don’t exist. Stand up for these American values. Just do it!