

Officer's Communication

To: the Somerville City Council

From: Denise Molina-Capers, Director of Racial and Social Justice

June 10, 2021

To the Honorable Members of the City Council,

On Monday, June 7, I presented to the members of the Finance Committee the proposed inaugural budget needed to establish the City's first Racial and Social Justice Office, whose mission will be to work to dismantle *all forms* of systemic racism and injustice facing any and all members of our community.

I would like to thank the members of the public that came forward to express their concerns primarily over insufficient resources for three social-justice-related commissions: the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD), the Human Rights Commission (HRC), and the Somerville Commission for Women (SCW). I hear the frustrations voiced by the sponsored residents, and please know that this letter is not intended to minimize or dismiss them. As I said on Monday, the RSJ Office proposal is a start, but it is not the end. I know big challenges are ahead, and I look forward to engaging in the work with each of these commissions and my future staff and seeking continued investment wherever that work leads us.

Each step we take will matter, including this proposal. For this reason, I have to address the way my budget presentation was handled in the Finance Committee meeting on Monday and the impact that hearing could have on the future of the RSJ Office. I am saddened by the way the commissioners' concerns were handled and that the approach to this important discussion did not embrace a core element of equity and inclusion -- building public trust.

One of the key concerns voiced on Monday was that the commissions have not had the resources and attention to meet the needs of the community. The RSJ Office proposal takes steps to address this need in three ways: first, it establishes two full-time positions (a more than doubling of current resources) to serve three social justice-related commissions; second, it provides the commissions the resources of the full RSJ office including a staff of 9; and third, the Office plan is dedicated to grassroots collaboration with all community partners including these commissions. The proposed expansion of investment in these commissions aims to begin to address a longstanding imbalance. But instead, it was the hearing that became imbalanced.

There was last-minute notice of sponsored public testimonials, which to my knowledge has never happened during a budget hearing. To maintain equitable access to a public forum, residents have historically been directed to share their input about the proposed budget at the public hearing, the night designated for hearing community feedback from any member of the public. Why did the Committee break from this commitment to be equitable and fair? Why did this deviation from a long-standing budget hearing fairness practice first manifest here, in this

particular moment, during the first-ever budget hearing for the Racial and Social Justice Office? Why were some given planned and exclusive access when others were not?

The honorable members of the City Council have these important questions to consider. They must also consider the undercurrents of racism and bias that were evident in the conversation and the shared narrative of some of the sponsored constituents and the Finance Committee members. The hearing was almost entirely consumed by a hostile dissection and critique of one aspect of the RSJ Office proposal. This form of distraction, when you narrow the focus to one point of contention and use that conflict to foster animosity, is a tactic used to divide and to maintain existing power dynamics. A motion from the Councilors to add resources -- which is a standard practice during the budget process -- would have addressed the concerns raised. Instead these tactics served to diminish the credibility of the office before it even launched.

A repeated narrative within the conversation suggested that the important work of these commissions should be distinct from an office that focuses on racial justice, and comments further suggested that the RSJ Office should stay in its racial justice lane -- creating an "us" vs. "them" narrative that is not only disrespectful but that also ignores the intersectionality between racial and social justice issues.

There were several other comments made throughout the night, which would be classified as microaggressions that implied that the RSJ office could not manage to address both racial and social justice issues and the staff hired would not be capable. One comment went so far as to argue that the full proposal, which includes 7 new positions beyond my own and one repurposed position, does not offer anything new to address racial and social injustice. This begs another question. When the Office of Housing Stability staffing was proposed it was broadly recognized as a step forward -- not a full solution. Why is a similar effort targeted at racism and social injustice criticized for starting out the same way?

We cannot learn and move forward if we fail to address bias no matter where it originates. We all suffer when any of us becomes complicit. I speak fully understanding there may be retribution. I do so knowing that some may attempt to deflect blame or exploit differences. But we must all understand that this, too, is a dominant culture tactic. Fear of retribution keeps voices silenced.

Let us begin this work again. I remain fully committed to working with the Council, the commission members, and the full community going forward. I call on the City Council members to acknowledge that these expressions and noted behaviors will do nothing but deepen divisions and sow mistrust and animosity. The RSJ Office has been proposed to be a bridge, to unite, and to heal injustices in all their forms, conscious and unconscious. I call on the City Council to voice their support for these goals and to show their support with their words and their actions. We are one city. We must all be committed to working as a united front to make sure that there is accountability, trust, and community building on all levels within the city government and the broader community.
