

To our Peekskill City Staff and Community (7/17/20)

City Manager Statement on Racial Justice

Black Lives Matter.

The City of Peekskill has a diverse, hard-working and talented workforce. We are police, we are firefighters, we are sanitation workers, and we work with youth, affordable housing, seniors, businesses, homeowners and more. We serve a special place, Peekskill, on the banks of the mighty Hudson River, blessed with beautiful parks, unique history and diverse cultures.

We strive to serve all residents equally and to listen very carefully, especially when questions of safety and fairness for people of color are raised. The same applies internally, as our organization is a microcosm of the broader community. We understand that even with the abolition of slavery and the striking down of Jim Crow, there still exist written and unwritten discriminatory rules and beliefs that can make the color of one's skin a determining factor in one's opportunities for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Outrageous and criminal violence against people of color still exists, such as the killing of George Floyd that ignited the extraordinary new civil rights movement of today. But the problem runs far deeper than the abhorrent actions of a few bad people. The fact that whites are overwhelmingly in control of wealth, government, media and popular culture, and people of color are disproportionately impacted by poverty, illness and violence, mean that unconscious biases and racial hierarchies are cooked deeply into our culture, institutions and life stories. These biases and hierarchies continue to be reproduced, generation after generation, despite the extraordinary efforts of people to change course.

Peekskill has changed course, but we have more work to do. Peekskill has come a long way since Peekskill's "Grand Glory Klan #3" hosted one of the largest KKK rallies ever held in the Northeast in 1925, convening an estimated 20,000 white people and inducting some 450 women and men as new members (Curran, 2008, Peekskill's African American History). In 1937, Peekskill residents formed the

first local branch of the NAACP in Westchester County, meeting in the AME Zion Church. In 1949, about 15,000 attended an outdoor concert by Paul Robeson and in support of racial justice, an event held right outside the City's border that ended in the infamous "Peekskill Riots" as departing concert-goers were attacked by rioters infuriated with Robeson's criticism of racism in America and flirtation with communism, and incited by the KKK, other local groups and the media. Yet, by the mid-1950s, the Peekskill NAACP had the largest Youth Council in the United States, with over 400 members, *and most of them were white*. Peekskill was the first place in New York to elect an African American mayor, Richard Jackson, in 1985. In 1989, Pam Beach took the helm of the Clerk's office as both the youngest and first African American to serve as municipal clerk in Westchester County. She served 31 years and just retired. In both its leadership and personnel, the City increasingly reflects the people who work, live in and call Peekskill "home".

Peekskill is proud of its vibrant cultural diversity most recently propelled by Latin American immigrants. Yet the city faces the continuing challenge of poverty, aging infrastructure and, now, the terrible Coronavirus pandemic. Nobody is immune to the virus, but African Americans have been hit the hardest in our region, reigniting concerns about disparities in social conditions, especially access to health care, safe housing, secure employment and safe working conditions.

We must re-commit ourselves to eradicating racial bias from our organizations, businesses, and personal lives, and make Peekskill a leader among small cities in this regard. The Governor recently ordered all local police chiefs and city managers to conduct a critical and thorough review of police policies on use of force and other practices that in many cases have unfairly impacted people of color, and to conduct this review in partnership with community organizations, experts and residents. This will be the "front burner" anti-racism project for our organization through April 1, 2021, when our police reform plan is due, even as we strive for fairness in all the work of providing essential services to city residents, businesses and visitors. Personally, it is an honor and a privilege to help lead this effort, among others, to forge an even better Peekskill.

Sincerely,
Andy Stewart, City Manager

