

# Reading board considers rewording proclamation of inclusion

By Lauren Dorsey

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Following a contentious November meeting of the Reading Selectboard, where the typically rote adoption of a "Declaration of Inclusion" was stymied, the board met again on Monday night to discuss adopting a reworded proclamation.

The updated proclamation was authored by selectboard member Bob Hartnett as an alternative to the language initially proposed by the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion, a statewide grassroots movement. The rewrite is designed to reflect the language of a state proclamation issued by Governor Phil Scott in 2021.

The Monday night discussion followed an Oct. 9 presentation by Barbara Pulling and Norman Cohen, two Vermont Declaration of Inclusion members, who encouraged the Reading Selectboard to adopt a declaration for the town that has already been adopted by the neighboring towns of Woodstock, Pomfret, Hartford, Hartland, Cavendish, West Windsor, Plymouth, and Ludlow.

After Pulling and Cohen's October presentation, the

board voted to table the issue until November because one member of the three-person board was absent. The subsequent November meeting featured a lengthy discussion about whether a declaration

is necessary in Reading. "I would only say that as far as I know, and I've been here a while, that we have always been a place where individuals can express their opinions and live freely. I don't know of any situation in the past 70-plus years where anybody in the town of Reading has been discriminated against or talked about or not welcomed. I don't see why we need to do this," said Robert Allen, a member of the Reading Selectboard. Hartnett then offered to create a new statement that would reflect the language in the governor's proclamation instead of using the language presented by the grassroots movement.

The co-founders of the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion, Bob Hamish and Al Wakefield, began the movement

three years ago. "Our vision was that all 247 municipalities will adopt the Declaration of Inclusion, and that will be one part of making Vermont be known as the most inclu-

sive state in the country," said Wakefield in a phone interview with the Standard last week. The group, which has been joined by two other members, Cohen and Pulling, has been approaching towns one by one throughout the state, proceeding roughly by population, and so far, they have generally been met

with approval. As of Tuesday, Dec. 12, the Declaration of Inclusion has been adopted by 130 towns, which together represent 72.2% of Vermont's population.

Concurrently, in May of 2021, Governor Phil Scott signed a proclamation of inclusion and declared the second week of May to be "inclusion week" for Vermont. While

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— Reading Selectboard member Bob Hartnett

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the wording of his proclamation is not identical to the text by the Declaration of Inclusion, it is similar.

Since Reading's decision to postpone the vote on the Declaration of Inclusion in November, a group of about thirty Reading residents have come together in support of the declaration. "It's been nice to see this organic, grassroots, collaborative effort that's sprung up from the residents in support of the Declaration of Inclusion," said Reading resident Bill Bakker. The group has created an online petition, which so far has garnered about thirty signatures, according to Bakker, and many of the members attended Tuesday night's selectboard meeting.

"It's nice to have to see all these residents share the same values and really support each other and bounce ideas off of each other and create a community around this important topic," said Bakker. The group is unified around bringing a statement of inclusion to the town. "It's important to demonstrate to people outside the village that might be looking to move to Reading that we believe in inclusivity. I hope that this selectboard can come up with a statement that acknowledges the existence of discrimination and bias that rejects it in all its forms."

At Monday night's meeting, Hartnett presented the adapted language. "Every one of the tenets that were presented by this grassroots group that's trying to get this inclusivity statement signed by all towns, we all completely agree with," said Hartnett. "Our concern has been that the state has already taken some action in this. And we wanted to make sure that we're not doing anything inconsistent with what the state's done."

Hartnett read the adapted statement during the meeting. "The Selectboard of Reading, Vermont proclaims the following. The town of Reading stands with Governor Phillip B. Scott and the state of Vermont in condemning discrimination in all of its forms, and agrees with the Proclamation of Inclusion signed by Governor Scott on May 7 2021. With this Proclamation of Inclusion, the town of Reading follows the lead of the state and formally con-

demns discrimination in all of its forms, and welcomes all people who want to live and work and add richness to our town, regardless of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity or expression, age or disability. We call upon all members of the Reading community to work together to ensure every individual can live freely, equitably, and express their opinions free from fear, intolerance and prejudice."

During the often heated discussion Monday night, there was significant confusion about the relationship between the Declaration of Inclusion suggested by the grassroots movement, Hartnett's revised statement, and the proclamation issued by Governor Phil Scott. Additionally, state representative Tessa Buss mentioned that there are potential funds available from organizations like IDEAL Vermont to help municipalities implement some of the values stated in the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion. Several attendees at the meeting also noted that the categories "sexual identity" and "socioeconomic status," which are present in the Declaration of Inclusion, were absent from Hartnett's adaptation of Scott's proclamation.

In the end, the board decided to table adopting any statement until their next meeting. In the meantime, Hartnett offered to again retool the language of the proclamation to include the missing categories. Hartnett also said he would verify that changing the language from the text proposed by the Declaration of Inclusion will not prevent Reading from receiving any potential funds or assistance down the line.

"I think we've all learned a lot just through this discussion today," said Hartnett. "We want to make sure that we have access to funds, we have access to technical assistance, and that this isn't just a signature that goes on something and is forgotten. We want to take action on this. We want to take it seriously."

The Declaration of Inclusion has been made possible in part through the support of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, which has provided significant administrative support to help get the movement off of the ground. "One

of the reasons that the Vermont Chamber is helping as a partner in this effort is because our mission is to advance the Vermont economy," said Betsy Bishop, president of the Vermont Chamber. "When we look into the future, we see that we have a decreasing population, and we have an aging population. We need to present ourselves as a community that wants more people to come here."

The Chamber of Commerce has also involved another part of its organization, the Vermont Futures Project, to help track the declaration's adoption and, eventually, quantify some of its economic implications. Already, Kevin Chu, the executive director of the Vermont Futures Project, has found a correlation between economic growth and adopting the declaration. "Of the total population growth reported in the Census between 2010-2020, two-thirds of it happened in municipalities that support the Declaration," reads the Vermont Futures Website.

"The declaration alone isn't enough," said Chu. "But we have to start somewhere. And sometimes it does take symbolic action, not just to affirm to the people already here, but also as a signal to people elsewhere."

Wakefield and Harnish are aware that a statement on its own is far from sufficient. "The other part is what you do to make it real," said Wakefield. "And so we've offered some guidelines on our website about how you can implement some of these ideas. Most of the implementation pieces are relatively simple, but they will get more complex as time goes on." Some of their early suggestions include adding the declaration to the town website, putting it in a town newsletter, and incorporating it into the town report.

Ultimately, the declaration's ability to promote open conversations is one reason the Vermont Chamber has supported the town-by-town initiative. "As people who maybe haven't grappled with these issues begin to grapple with these issues, like anything new, we anticipate there to be difficult conversations, but that's how learning begins," Bishop concluded.