

Parents, students remain skeptical following Pittsford forum on racism, want to ‘see action’

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Many of the 300 or so people attending a community forum on racism in Pittsford on Thursday night had the same takeaway message as Lluvia Ayala- Pound, an 11th grade student at Pittsford Sutherland High School.

She was excited to hear widespread commitment to eliminating racism in the district, and gratified to be able to tell of her own experiences. Even simply acknowledging the problem was meaningful.

When asked whether she was persuaded the change was real, though, she said: “Honestly, no. I have to see action happen first.”

It was the third meeting on racism in four nights in Pittsford as the district confronts a new wave of protest over an old problem. All three were well attended by both white families and families of color, the final one in particular.

Superintendent Mike Pero said that since last week’s explosive board meeting and the resulting media coverage, he has spoken with many current and former students, parents and staff members of color to try to gain a greater appreciation of their experience. “One of the things that became evident, especially when talking to students, is their experience in our school system isn’t always what we thought it was,” he said. That includes overt racial slurs as well as more insidious forms of racism, including a sense that speaking up about problems is pointless.

“Where we need to do a better job is to create an environment, without question where students feel good about reporting and knowing there’s going to be appropriate action that takes place,” he said.

Another Pittsford Sutherland student, Somayya Upal, said hearing from her classmates had been revelatory. She had never considered, for instance, the difficulties imposed upon an Urban-Suburban classmate because of transportation.

She also felt she hadn’t fully acknowledged the discrimination she and other students sometimes

face.

“I’ll hear subtle comments about myself or others, and I’ll write it off as just a joke,” she said. “But it adds up.”

The meeting took the form of a series of restorative circles, where participants are encouraged to share and listen open and honestly.

“One of the things we asked for was this,” said Mark Diggory, one of the active parents. “I’m very happy to see (Pero) open the door and participate in this.



Pittsford Sutherland student Liuvia Ayala -Pound listens to Tunisia Johnson speak during the end of "A Pittsford Community Conversation about Racism",

Pittsford Sutherland student Liuvia Ayala -Pound listens to Tunisia Johnson speak during the end of 'A Pittsford Community Conversation about Racism', where Partners in Restorative Initiatives worked with district families and residents to talk about racism. MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

... I think he stepped into a discomfort zone.”

Pittsford Town Supervisor Bill Smith and Village Mayor Bob Corby attended as well but, in an interview in advance, had little to say regarding how the town and village could add to its racial or socioeconomic diversity, including through allowing more affordable housing.

Smith noted the town’s substantial Asian population — 9%, according to the most recent Census data, compared to 88% white and 2% black — and said the demographics are “a consequence of the choices people make to move here.”

He and Corby both pointed to comprehensive plan reviews in process, including the potential to decrease the minimum lot size for houses. Neither draft document mentions diversity or affordable housing. While the town’s draft plan recommends reducing lot size requirements in some areas, it stipulates that “pricing of houses is subject to market conditions.”

Pero said the district intended to take feedback from Thursday’s meeting and incorporate it into action steps going forward. In the meantime, a summit solely for students is being planned and parent leaders have announced

some direction of their own.

Jessie Keating, one parent leader, said the PTSA’s Diversity and Inclusion committee was being redesigned to “house all of the training, advocacy, and other efforts to dismantle racism in our community under one umbrella.”

At the same time, parents Tanishia and Cory Johnson are creating a task force external to the district, not adversarial but “focused specifically on keeping the district, the town, the village and all leaders among us in Pittsford accountable and moving forward on issues of institutional, structural and personal racism and oppression.”

After the meeting, Tanishia Johnson dealt from a thick stack of business cards as people approached her and asked how they could get involved. She said she felt encouraged by the last week’s events, but cautiously so. “There was a lot of transparency and sharing; leadership has a lot to think about,” she said. “By our action or lack thereof, history is going to judge us.”

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