

# Policy Report Memo

To: City of Framingham  
From: Marina Berardino, Byron Lo, Liah Alemayehu, & Ysabelle Regis  
Date: December 9th, 2020  
RE: Accessibility in City Hall Forums

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## Methodology

To study racial inequity in political participation and representation within the City of Framingham, we observed various public community meetings, recording variations in race and age. For age, we sorted participants in three categories: (1) 20-30, (2) 30-50, and (3) 50 and above. Race was categorized into black, white, Hispanic, and whatever else deemed necessary to categorize.

If race could not be determined through visuals, surname analysis was utilized to estimate the probability that a community member belongs to a certain racial/ ethnic demographic. Community members who introduced themselves as a part of the Framingham Public Schools Faculty were also cross referenced with affiliated images found via Framingham Public Schools staff directory.

This coding systems allows us to present objective data that accurately reflects the demographic of various Framingham Public Meetings.

## Key Findings

We chose to attend four different meetings of various topics in order to increase the amount of community participants recorded in our findings.

The Keefe English Learner Parent Advisory Council Meeting regarded the support of students and families who are learning English as a second language (ESL). This meeting, comprising of 42% people of color, discussed the challenges of ESL students assimilating into the Framingham community, especially due to remote learning in the COVID 19 pandemic. Translators were offered in Portuguese and Spanish, allowing more accessibility to community members who are not fluent in English, however this also took up a considerable amount of time in the meeting, limiting the amount of conversation and topics able to be covered.

The School Committee Executive Meeting was centered around the potential reopening of in-person classes at Framingham Public Schools in a hybrid learning system. This meeting was comprised of 19% people of color, all of whom were affiliated with the Framingham Public School Committee. Community members had to register to speak at the meeting in advance, stifling commentary that may occur in the moment.

Framingham's City Council Planning and Zoning Meeting regarding industrial manufacturing sites was comprised of 7% people of color. Goals and agenda of meeting were not clearly delineated at the beginning of the meeting. Zoning phrases and jargon used were not within the common knowledge of the average community member. Certain comments regarding "attracting highly skilled, educated residents" to the community suggested racial and socio-economic bias, which other members of the community questioned.

Framingham's Planning Board Meeting pertained to a VY Properties LLC site plan, and was comprised of 13.6% people of color, all of Asian descent. Public comments were predominantly in opposition of the property development, calling it an "eyesore". Those in support noted the opportunities for low income individuals seeking fair priced housing.

Between all four meetings attended, we found a significantly lower percentage of people of color represented in community meetings than reflected in the overall community's population. The majority of meeting participants were categorized as Caucasian and over the age of 50.

## Recommendations

Accessibility is a key factor in overcoming racial inequity in political participation. Defining key terminology in layman's terms, as well as clarifying the agenda and goals of the meeting ensures that all proceedings feel accessible to the public. This can be done verbally or in a provided handout at the beginning of every meeting. Providing translators at more public meetings creates inclusivity of the immigrant population within Framingham. Framingham's Public School Committee & English Learner Parent Advisory Council may work in collaboration to promote resources and access to community meetings, facilitating a dialogue between the City of Framingham and their immigrant population.

## **Summary Memo**

Our policy report offers an analysis of the Framingham Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) to gain greater insight into how the City of Framingham may create equitable and inclusive community processes. This memo will deconstruct our report by first detailing our methods in using meeting minutes recordings to gather data, our key findings, and recommendations to remedy the exclusive practices we found.

As the purpose of our project is to assess equity and inclusivity of the Framingham ZBA, our methodology includes a qualitative analysis that first relied on meeting minutes and recordings of 2020. In collecting our data, we examined all of the meeting minutes and recordings of 2020 to understand how implicit and explicit discrimination affect applications. We observed coded language, the demographics of attendees, and content of meetings to look for language that may be perceived as unwelcoming and create uncomfortable attitudes. In order to assess meeting accessibility, we analyzed how user friendly the ZBA website is in presenting meeting information to encourage participation. We compared Framingham's ZBA website to that of Worcester in order to quantify the discrepancies in accessibility to ZBA meetings.

Our key findings from our research fall into three categories: political influence from an unrepresentative group, obstructions to multi-family housing, and meeting and applicant accessibility. We noted that residents who attend ZBA meetings are a civically engaged group that regulates the character of their community. Language used by these residents demonstrated who and what may partake in their community. Next, we found that in comparison to single family housing, multi-family housing faces more obstructions in receiving approval from the ZBA. Zoning bylaws and appeals to the ZBA cultivate a setting that complicates the creation of affordable housing. We then found that the ZBA website contains a lack of consistent and accessible information that hinder participation from Framingham residents, especially those with limited capabilities for navigating technology. Finally, we found that the ZBA process itself proved inaccessible as it worked against those with language barriers or without professional representation. These meetings do not favor those with limited knowledge in navigating bureaucratic institutions.

After evaluating the equitable and inclusive practices of the ZBA meeting, we recommend the following actionable steps. We recommend that the City of Framingham record meetings that happen over Zoom; make minutes easier to find; write more detailed, complete and comprehensive meeting minutes; and foster partnerships with the Fair Housing, Planning, and Development committees to have discussions about how to center race in conversations about development. These recommendations will work to remedy inaccessibility to meetings and increase meeting participation. Explicit conversations on the relationship between race and housing also highlights what important steps the City itself may take.

All in all, our report maintains that the City of Framingham can complete effective measures to increase diversity in meeting participation, accessibility to ZBA discussions, and promote access to fair and equitable housing.

Summary Page: Racial Equity Analysis of The City of Framingham School Board Committee

### **I. Methodology**

With the Covid-19 pandemic, many students have faced educational challenges such as technological limitations and a less stable home life due to virtual learning. Currently a small group of the most disadvantaged “high need” students are in-person with plans to include the remaining “high need” students first in early December, followed by all other students. Many of these “high need” students are racial minorities and non-U.S. natives facing economic challenges that make virtual learning near impossible. Framingham’s decision to re-introduce in-person instruction has caused much debate among the community regarding safety and effective education methods in hybrid learning. To resolve community concerns, Framingham officials must create a solution that guarantees the safety of the entire community while simultaneously protecting every student’s right to equal education. To assist community leaders with their decision, we attended live school board committee meetings, thoroughly examined past meeting and subcommittee minutes, and incorporated data from Framingham officials to isolate critical issues and potential solutions.

### **II. Key Findings**

The key findings from our study were threefold. Firstly, we found that racial inequity had been discussed both in the Racial Equity and subsequent Equity, Inclusion, & Diversity committee, but these meetings were not very frequent and took a long time to take action on important issues.

Secondly, we found that these issues had not been thoroughly addressed by the school board committee. After attending the most recent school board committee meeting we found that many parents were worried about the quality of education that “high need” students were receiving through remote learning. We obtained data on the racial and ethnic makeup of these students, and found that there is a disproportionate number of “high need” students who are from other countries besides the United States. However, none of the parents of “high-need” students spoke up during the public forum portion of the evening.

Thirdly, after attending this school board committee we noticed that all of the members of this committee were White passing. This finding suggests that there is a lack of diversity in a growingly diverse city which should warrant more diversity in decision-making roles.

### **III. Key Recommendations**

1. Continue holding meetings for the Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity subcommittee, and find a way to address these meetings in the larger school board committee
2. If the School Committee decides to continue remote learning, ensure that high-needs students are more accounted for by having a system of renting iPads or Chromebooks based on need
3. Convene a diverse group “high-need” parents and include them in the decision making process regarding their students return to campus
  - a) Since language could be a barrier, the committee should ensure that a translator is present
  - b) Advertising in the community is particularly important, specifically in places where there is a larger population of immigrant students or Black students



## MetroBridge Project Memo

To: Representatives of the City of Framingham  
From: Sydney Gerbel, Amanda Li, Maya Mabern, Bang Tran  
Date: December 9, 2020  
RE: Racial Inequity in Framingham Multi-Unit Housing Policy

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### Introduction

In this memo, we want to showcase potential racial inequity in public opinion and political participation regarding multi-unit housing construction in the City of Framingham. We analyze the demographics of signers of the March 2020 petition that calls for a nine-month housing moratorium and find that there is a large racial disproportion among the petitioners and the general Framingham population. While the moratorium was ultimately approved by the City Council, we do not think that it represents the interest of the population.

### Research Question & Methodology

Our goal is to understand the demographics of petitioners and see if they are representative of the Framingham population. Using the Framingham MapGeo database and voter registration file, we find the names, addresses, age, homeownership status, property values, and political affiliation of the petitioners. Using this information, we predict their race using an R package called *wru* (Who Are You?) developed by Harvard professor Kosuke Imai. The package is effective in predicting race for an aggregated population. We predict the gender of petitioners by their first name.

### Key Findings

There were a total of 202 petition signatures, 188 of which represent active voters. 82.1 percent of the housing units inhabited by petitioners are owner-occupied, compared to 55.1 percent of owner-occupied units of the overall Framingham population. The median home value of petitioners is \$418,000, about \$30,000 higher than the median home value of all Framingham homeowners. Our findings indicate that white residents are overrepresented among petition signers: 93.1 percent of the petitioners are white, compared to only 64.8 percent of Framingham. Other racial minority groups like Asian, Black, Hispanic, and others are severely underrepresented in the petition. Our data shows that the petition signers skew whiter, older, and with higher property values than the overall population of Framingham. Since the housing moratorium was passed, these demographics seem to have more influence over the decision of new multi-unit housing construction. This demonstrates that the groups who may be most affected by an apartment moratorium (younger, nonwhite, lower or middle-income residents) were underrepresented in the decision-making process.

### Recommendations

Our first policy recommendation is to present the demographics of petitioners to City Councilors in public meetings. We hope that this will help inform policymakers and residents of the representation gap between the petitioners and the general population. Further analysis can be done to understand which groups are overrepresented in local government participation. An example would be to explore the neighborhood concentration of the signers to see if a specific area was overrepresented in the petition. Our second policy recommendation is to educate residents and City Council members on the benefits of multi-unit housing in Framingham, especially near metropolitan areas and public transportation. This could take place in public meetings and would involve working with the Departments of Planning and Community Development, Public Works, Public Schools, and the Finance Division.

### Closing

Although the apartment moratorium was passed, it was proposed by a petition that was not representative of the entire Framingham community. According to our data, older, white homeowners are overrepresented in the petition, and residents of color were largely underrepresented. As the petition had a direct impact on the City Council's decision to approve the moratorium, the interests of racial minorities and lower-income people were overlooked. Presenting the demographics data of petitions to City Councilors and the public might help inform how unrepresentative the petition is. Please reach out to Professor Katherine Levine Einstein at [kleinst@bu.edu](mailto:kleinst@bu.edu) if you would like to read our entire analysis.