Immigrant Advisory Committee creates subcommittees to tackle BIC plan

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The Siler City Immigrant Community Advisory Committee held its inaugural meeting in November at the Wren Memorial Library. Back row, left to right: Hannia Benitez, Victoria Navarro, Shirley Villatoro, Carlos Simpson and Jisselle Perdomo. Front row, left to right: Danubio Vazquez Rodriguez and Norma Hernandez.

STAFF PHOTO BY VICTORIA JOHNSON

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BY VICTORIA JOHNSON

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SILER CITY — The Siler City Immigrant Community Advisory Committee created five subcommittees during its meeting last Tuesday as a part of its efforts to help the town better serve its immigrant residents.

Those subcommittees include Business and Entrepreneurship; Housing and Public Transportation; Public Safety and Law Enforcement; Parks & Recreation and Youth Mental Health; and Communications and Leadership.

The committee also heard a presentation from UNC’s Hannah Gill and the Hispanic Liaison’s Ilana Dubester about the history, processes and recommendations of Siler City’s Building Integrated Communities (BIC) initiative, which helped the town identify practices to serve and engage with its immigrant population.
“I’ve been looking forward to this evening for so long,” Gill told the committee at the start of her presentation. She’s the associate director of the Institute for the Study of the Americas, which oversees BIC.

“I want to congratulate the board, the new board members, and express gratitude to each of you who volunteered to serve in this inaugural immigrant community advisory board,” she added. “You have clearly demonstrated leadership and commitment to the community thus far, and I know that you’re going to make a fantastic team.”

The committee met by Zoom last Tuesday night due to Chatham’s increasing COVID-19 cases; members Carlos Simpson and Victoria Navarro didn’t attend.

What is BIC, and what did it do for Siler City?

Beginning in 2017, the town, the Hispanic Liaison and community members — including some now leading the Immigrant Advisory Committee — participated in a two- to three-year community planning project to identify immigrant residents’ needs and create a plan to address them.

Under this project, known to its participants as BIC, Gill, her colleagues and other community leaders compiled existing data about Siler City’s immigrant populations and held three bilingual public meetings in which 75 people of various ages and backgrounds participated. They also interviewed nine Chatham-based mental health professionals, educators and health care providers who work with youth.

A steering committee of key community stakeholders, town staff and nonprofits then came together for over a year to compile an action plan based on the recommendations and information they’d collected.

“What’s really important about the mandate that you’ve been given is that it comes from the community,” Gill told committee members during the meeting. “It comes from more than 200 local residents, most with Latin American ancestry ... These local residents work hand in hand with town staff ... to envision a shared future with opportunities for everybody.”

Finally, in February 2019, the BIC steering committee finalized a 44-item action plan with eight key strategic objectives: communication, housing, leadership, youth mental health, business & entrepreneurship, public safety & law enforcement, parks & recreation, and public transportation. The full plan can be viewed at unc.live/3Donqpl.

To execute this plan, the BIC steering committee recommended the town create an immigrant advisory committee. Town personnel turnover and the COVID-19 pandemic, however, delayed its implementation until last June.
“You’re the keepers of the action plan, or the shepherds of this plan,” Ilana Dubester, the Liaison’s executive director, told the committee. “You’re not limited — this is not the only work you’ll be doing. This is not your only mission necessarily, but this provides you a template and a guide for things that have built up to this point, and that bring the voice of our community into this table and into this conversation.”

**Committee priorities**

Improving communication between the town and immigrant residents, Gill said, is one of the action plan’s biggest priorities; in fact, it’s the first objective to appear in the plan.

“While many Siler City residents are working hard to learn English, more than half of these residents who speak Spanish reported speaking English ‘less than very well,’” Gill said, adding, “so as you can imagine, actions to enhance language access through things like translation and interpreting services, better website and social media communication, can really inform residents about local services and utilities, events, job opportunities in small business development.”

To improve communication, the plan recommends that the town hire a bilingual town communications specialist, create and execute a bilingual strategic communication plan and offer pay incentives for Spanish fluency, among others. Many recommendations to improve communication, including a 5% raise for bilingual employees, have already been implemented.

Building community trust and communication with law enforcement emerged as another key objective during the committee meeting. The BIC action plan recommended that the town implement six ideas, including a pay increase for bilingual officers, a bilingual communications and disaster relief plan for Siler City as well as adoption of the Faith ID program.

Siler City Police Chief Mike Wagner — along with various other town department heads — also attended the meeting, where he expressed his hope that the committee would work with him to increase recruitment from Siler City’s Hispanic community.

“We have these great incentives that no one’s taken advantage of,” he said. “... I will be glad to serve as a chair on that subcommittee, or whatever the case may be, to increase our Hispanic applicants here at the police department.”

The committee is scheduled to meet again at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 8, in Wren Memorial Library, unless COVID-19 trends again prompt it to meet virtually by Zoom.

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