Siler City’s Immigrant Advisory Committee meets for the first time

Elects committee leadership, sets monthly meetings

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The Siler City Immigrant Community Advisory Committee held its inaugural meeting last Tuesday night at the Wren Memorial Library. Back row, left to right: Hania 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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News + Record Staff

SILER CITY — The town’s first Immigrant Community Advisory Committee appointed a chairperson and vice-chairperson, set a monthly meeting time and established members’ terms during its inaugural meeting last Tuesday at Wren Memorial Library.

Members voted in Guatemalan native Hania Benitez as the committee’s chairperson and Norma Hernandez as vice-chairperson. Benitez also serves as the Hispanic Liaison’s Lee County deputy director, while Hernandez, born in Mexico and raised in Siler City, works in Chatham County’s Department of Social Services.
“I look forward to working and collaborating with each and every one of you,” Benitez told the committee shortly after the meeting began. “I’m so excited. I see some very familiar faces, and I know that we have a wonderful group of people that are really going to be here, invested in our community and be a wonderful voice.”

As required in the town resolution, committee members also drew lots to decide which person would serve which staggered term. Jisselle Perdomo, Victoria Navarro and Hannia Benitez will serve three-year terms while Carlos Simpson and Norma Hernandez will serve two years. Shirley Villatoro and Danubio Vazquez Rodriguez will serve for one year.

“With the exception of the three-year terms, these are all partial terms, so anytime a committee member fulfills a partial term, then they’re still eligible for the two- to three-year terms after that,” Town Clerk Jenifer Johnson said during the meeting.

The committee will meet every second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. in Wren Memorial Library. Its next meeting will be Tuesday, Dec. 14. The public may attend in person or connect via Zoom.

“I’m really excited to be here and share in what I believe is a historic moment for Siler City, for Chatham County,” Hernandez told the committee. “I think that Siler City deserved this a long time ago ... I don’t think that there was a formal place for people that look like us to really have a place to go and say, ‘Hey, we feel this way. We want this. We want to strive for this.’ So I’m really excited that this committee now exists.”

**The Building Integrated Communities plan**

The Siler City Board of Commissioners appointed seven members to the town’s first Immigrant Advisory Committee on Nov. 15, nearly five months after commissioners unanimously approved the committee’s formation. Originally, the town planned to appoint members in August or September after setting the initial application deadline for Aug. 9, but the board delayed appointments several times to solicit more candidates.

Among the new committee members, all migrated from Latin American countries — including Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica — or have Hispanic ancestry. All seven also reside in Siler City.

The idea for the committee originally emerged several years ago amid a two- to three-year community planning project called Building Integrated Communities (BIC). Launched in 2017, this project brought the town, the Hispanic Liaison and community members — including some now leading the Immigrant Advisory Committee — together to identify immigrant residents’ needs and create a plan to address them.
Forming an immigrant advisory committee was one such step in the project’s finalized plan, but the COVID-19 pandemic and personnel turnover delayed its implementation until June.

According to the town’s resolution, members will provide a bridge between the board and immigrant residents, offer strategies to foment civic participation among immigrant residents and serve as a forum to both discuss and address the immigrant community’s concerns. Committee members will also take the lead on implementing any and all recommendations outlined in BIC’s action plan to better serve the town’s immigrant residents.

The plan identifies eight key strategic objectives, which together create a list of more than 40 policy and action items. Some of these objectives include improving communication between immigrant residents and the town, enhancing leadership opportunities for immigrant residents, addressing housing issues, and generating more trust and communication between residents and law enforcement.

The entire plan can be found at https://unc.live/3Donqpl (https://unc.live/3Donqpl).

‘This committee brings me hope’

Since the plan’s approval in February 2019, the town has managed to check off some action items. Besides publishing a bilingual guide to Siler City government in both English and Spanish, the town now offers a Spanish-language section on its website. It also increased pay incentives for bilingual employees, offering a 5% pay increase to police officers who could speak fluent Spanish — an offering expanded to other town employees in June.

“We do have a new website that will be coming online here hopefully in the next couple of months,” Town Manager Roy Lynch told the News + Record in July, “and there is a button, or a link, that will be on the website that will automatically translate.”

The town also contracted a translation service to offer Spanish interpretation at board meetings upon request — something Lynch asked the committee to revisit last Tuesday as its initial project.

“For many months — I’m not sure how many — we had the interpreters show up for the board meetings, but we had no one to show up that had a need for interpretation,” he said. “... Maybe this committee can look at that and say, ‘Well, this is the way that you can go about that, and this is the way we can reach out to the community for those that do want to be involved in the board meetings.’”
Several Siler City immigrant residents attended the meeting by Zoom last Tuesday, including Mexican immigrant and DACA beneficiary Jazmin Mendoza Sosa. She told the News + Record she hopes the committee will go out and engage with the immigrant community to learn about their needs and collect feedback about what the town’s doing right so that “the supports continue.”

“I would like for the committee to really try to bring the voice of the immigrant community of all Chatham County,” Mendoza Sosa said. “I am confident there will be action and I hope I can see at least one project that this committee can accomplish within their term. I am very proud to see many familiar faces in the formation of this committee, and this committee brings me hope (that it will) be the door to better opportunities for immigrants and the whole Chatham County community.”