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FEATURED

City enlists mediator to issue report on farmers' market unrest

By Kurt Christian The Herald-Times 3 hrs ago



Sarah Dye organizes produce in August at the Schooner Creek Farm booth at the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market in Showers Common. (Rich Janzaruk / Herald-Times)

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City officials have solicited an outside mediator to envision a path out of the recent civil unrest stemming from the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market.

The Bridge Initiative, a part of the Divided Community Project at The Ohio State University law school, launched in January to provide communities with mediators who have experience resolving civil unrest. Bill Johnson — a former three-term mayor of Rochester, New York, and

former head of Rochester's Urban League — has already interviewed local government and university leaders. Now, he's planning a return trip next week to speak with people who may not hold a position within an organization.

"What I want to do now is talk to more average, unconnected citizens. I've used the contacts I've made so far to identify other people, to get a sense of the racial undercurrents that exist in the city and help the city come up with strategies to not only address the market situation ... but also this future of inclusiveness, including people who don't really hold the reins of power," Johnson said.

Johnson visited Bloomington in August and September to speak with dozens of representatives from organizations such as city government and the university, as well as community activist groups including No Space for Hate and Black Lives Matter.

Hundreds of residents signed a letter in June alleging the owners of Schooner Creek Farm, a vendor at the city's market, were involved in white supremacist activities. The letter based those allegations on leaked online chat room conversations and FBI records of testimony from a recent hate crimes case.

Schooner Creek Farm's Sarah Dye acknowledged in August that she'd written the posts, but has since said she rejects white supremacy.

Dye is a self-described Identitarian and has aligned herself with the American Identity Movement's mission to "staunchly defend the preservation of America's historical demographics in the face of mass immigration, and are opposed to the demonization of and discrimination against America's white majority."

The Anti-Defamation League, a nonprofit that tracks hate groups, said that group “espouses racism and intolerance under the guise of preserving the ethnic and cultural origins of their respective countries.”

Protesters and counter-protesters have sustained those tensions since the letter was made public. The city’s response has ranged from arresting a peaceful protester in an area where protests were not allowed (she was later released with no charges), to suspending the market for two weeks before reopening with new cameras and other increased security measures.

“Part of our motivating factor, as an institution, is a respect for the fact that local communities have these answers,” said Becky Monroe, director of the Divided Community Project.

“Sometimes it just takes outside assistance and support to turn those answers into action.”

Ultimately, Johnson will issue a report summarizing tensions related to the farmers’ market and any longtime racial or discriminatory issues the city may have. He said it will be an independent and objective analysis. His position is grant-funded, and he’ll receive no money from the city.

“When you’re in a really deep crisis, sometimes it’s helpful to have people come in from the outside,” Monroe said. “We’re not coming to tell you what to do. We are bringing a process because we think the answers are there.”

Johnson said he may have enough information to compile a report next week, but Monroe declined to name a due date for the report because the initiative doesn’t want to “artificially limit” Johnson’s opportunities to hear from the community.

Already, Johnson’s impression is that the farmers’ market situation is “very volatile.” However, he said some of the residents he’s spoken to view the market as a “boutique” gathering place.

He said his conversations will remain anonymous, but there are residents who said there are more significant problems for people of color and marginalized populations than what's happening at the market.

"I want to hear what they've got to say as much as I want to hear what the provost of the university or the mayor of the city," Johnson said. "It was very disturbing to hear that this is not a place that welcomes them. I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to the bottom of it, but I'm going to talk to these people."

Johnson said his presence in Bloomington has been intentionally covert because a large-scale public discussion on the matter could collapse into discord. He said his work needs to remain coherent.

That policy won't cut the general public out of his process, though.

Monroe said people interested in sharing their thoughts who may want to meet with Johnson should visit moritzlaw.osu.edu/dividedcommunityproject and click on the Bloomington banner to send a request.

"This idea of trying to hear from people you don't necessarily hear from is common sense, but it's challenging in practice. At the end of the day, it's only going to work if people have been engaged from the beginning," Monroe said.

Monroe acknowledged there will likely be criticisms of an outsider interfering, especially since Bloomington has its own Community Justice and Mediation Center. She said the Bridge Initiative is open to collaborating with local outfits, but there may be special benefits in having an outsider whose only goal is to find a fair resolution to an issue provide options.

"One of my big mottos is, 'Stop focusing on your deficit. Stop always calling out the problem and use that energy to find solutions,'" Johnson said.

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