

Small Group Conversation: Equity and Inclusion 3.1.22

This small group discussion will take an overall view of equity and inclusion at Zilker Metropolitan Park, focusing on racial equity as well as intersectional issues facing Austin community members. The conversation will briefly touch on key issues facing the park, such as getting to the park, feeling a sense of belonging, interpretations and storytelling at the park, and additional issues raised by the attendees.

Approach to questions: How does this connect to you on a personal level, how does this connect with community & communities that you connect to, keeping in mind institutional and structural approaches as well.

Attendees:

- T.J. Owens – Program Manager and Facility Director, African American Cultural & Heritage Facility
- Steven Brown – Clinical Specialist; Community Advocate
- Mike Haynes – late arrival, association unknown
- PARD – Justin Schneider, Gregory Montes, Megan Eckard

***Notes of the conversation, not an exact transcription**

When was the last time you visited Zilker?

- T.J. Owens

I did visit the drive-through Trail of Lights the year before last. Before that, it had been a while. Being part of Economic Development, we had a couple of offices that are close in the vicinity, so from time to time I would get close to the park to visit places but as far as taking the time to visit the park, a very long time before then – probably 5-6 years before. But that is talking to someone who really knows the history of the park and knows the history of other parks within the city. Sometimes in terms of showing support, you just want to go where you feel welcomed. Also, accessibility has been brought up before. I think the message may not be clearly amplified about the true identity level of the park and that has an effect on folks of the BIPOC community because it is a place of theirs as well. Steven is an advocate for the park. For me as a person in the BIPOC community, it's going to take some true ambassadors [like Steven] that take advantage of the full-service portfolio of Zilker to really drive that point home.

- Steven Brown

Last time was yesterday. I try to swim at Zilker - for the last three years - at least twice a week (rain, sleet, or snow). I swim there in honor of the women who helped desegregate the pool. Knowing the history, I remember plenty of times my great-grandmother told me not to cross

[west of] I-35. Born in 1905, she was a part of that community that was destabilized, moved east in 1928, and told not to come back west of 19th Street/I-35. So, we were always taught to not go there, even after it was desegregated. I was born in '83, but to have that messaging...and then now, to have that courage. And I really didn't have that courage until my white colleagues from the hospital took me to ACL for me to realize that is safe over here. Coming to Zilker Park, ironically, it's a newer thing for black east Austinites, a new evolution of where we should be going. I remind people though that that area was settled by a lot of freedmen communities. It's a part of the Goodrich Plantation and there's a lot of history to it. The healing power of the nature and the pool...those things are powerful and want to make sure it's accessible. I understand that the Parks Department has a huge road in driving this, but other departments do too. I say this about Givens, I say this about any park. No one wants to participate in designing something that they don't see themselves a part of. We are talking about accessibility, being able to utilize the features of the park, they need to be able to have jobs/live close by. What would make them come visit once a month if they don't have the accessibility and the free time? I have the accessibility and job flexibility to do that. So, I just go to hold space. I hope that in 10 years there will be more brothers and sisters that are showing up, swimming, and enjoying themselves. That's a little bit about my passion about the parks.

- Mike Haynes

Probably back in the fall when everything was a bit warmer. Today is a beautiful day, it'd be nice to be out there today. I used to take my dog and enjoy the dog park and things like that. I like getting on the trail. I used to swim at Barton Springs, don't do that much anymore. But I love going down there and being a part of things. My girls play sand volleyball, so we are often down there watching them play. Lots of things that draw me to the park. Accessibility is a big key for me (and our constituents, if you will). I'm always trying to make things more accessible - like the ramp down to Barton Springs. It's awesome when you can get somewhere and wheel right down to the water and get out of your wheelchair, take a swim and get back.

(To Steven) You mentioned you go to hold space and you didn't feel welcome at first. Do you feel that you have stepped into it as a place you have to be, or do you actually feel more welcome now?

- Steven Brown

I feel like in the beginning it was a place I had to be. And that's because I work out a lot in my spare time and the cold water really helps after running (inflammation). When I first would go and go into the Bathhouse, I really feel welcome. Especially given the times that I ran - morning time - a lot of older white males there. But the more I came, the more I became a "usual" - that's what they consider me now. We started telling stories - saying what they remember and me being honest of what I was told and what I remember. It's created more of a welcoming

interaction. It's going to take folks going and interacting and staying engaged. I've been going almost 4 years consistently. We're "the regulars" now. You start to feel like you are part of this community – and it's a great one – one of healing and recovery. But it didn't initially feel like that. The more I am honest with them and myself. When I show up, I don't move out of the way like my grandmother taught me when you see a white person. Hearing the stories and seeing the documentary about kicking the girls out, when I was consistently going swimming there were times when I questioned whether I was doing something wrong. But I had to challenge that perspective and I've gotten to a place where now I am offended when I can't go.

(To T.J.) You said one of the reasons you don't go often is because you know the history. How does that play a part for you?

- T.J. Owens

Knowing that story and history, sometimes when you're in a trauma-informed environment, you hear the narrative that if you ask someone about their trauma, they are in essence reliving that trauma. It's hard sometimes when you think about a park and think about it as a fun place for relaxation, but then I know that Austin's history is also my family's lived history. So, when I hear those stories about how they had to find these back routes to sneak in. This is something prevalent throughout the entire park. As a native Austinite and remembering the controversy of renaming what was Robert E. Lee Avenue. There has been a lot of stories that are not just history in a book. When it is familial history and you're told these stories by your aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, it hits home, it is a lot more real and that has stayed with me. As I've been a part of this project, I've been thinking of ways in which - outside of the revamping of layout and architecture of the park - tools could be implemented to help make sure that the voice of the park is much more inclusive than it had been in the past.

- Steven Brown

It is our families' lived history and experience – I got to remember too, I know people who are descendants of the Goodrich Plantation. The name is up there [Goodrich]. There are a lot of atrocities that there are still people here living through. It's going to be powerful to help folks challenge that perspective and to get back to that healing source that the natural environment brings.

(To T.J. & Steven): Often the way we do community engagement, we aren't able to have a trauma-informed approach....to the detriment of any particular project, and to the City and efforts individuals are trying to make. Putting a bandage over history does not mean that it is healed. Thank you both for sharing.

(To Mike): If you would like to share your experiences.

- Mike Haynes

I grew up here in Austin before MoPac was even there. I graduated high school in 1981. I have always enjoyed the pool area and all the events in the park. Around age 40, I started doing triathlons and started swimming there on a regular basis. That's when we started looking into putting in a ramp and having more access to the water. A lot of the time at parks, they make things accessible for a person in a wheelchair to go and look/see things but not participate. I've always been one that strives to make sure things are accessible for anyone that wants to swim or be a part of the concert, or whatever it may be. I've always grown up going there. It's the pride of Austin. When somebody comes to Austin to visit, I always send them there and one of the things to do is go and experience the cold water there. Thinking about the history of what went on there. I never knew about that history growing up and that people were told to not go to that area of town. That brings light to why you don't see a lot of people of color over there. I'm all for anything that can bring more people to one of the prides of Austin and have people participate and swim in one of the largest natural springs pool in the country.

Justin: One of the things we often hear when asked, "What would draw more people of color (or specified community) to the park?", is programming. Often times it's stereotypical (e.g., basketball court). But that's making some assumptions, and why drive all the way over to Zilker for that. So let's have a real conversation and let's acknowledge that's not what it takes. Thinking deeply and knowing the communities you are a part of, beyond programming what do you think would draw people in your communities to Zilker - whether it's design, structure, storytelling ideas. Here is an example that I've heard – a physical hub/welcoming center that would be a performance art space that focuses on the storytelling of Zilker Park and is set up for small performances.

- T.J. Owens

You are absolutely correct, and I can speak from the perspective of my job which does a lot of this for the city – helping people understand more or gain knowledge that can facilitate a cultural connection to the city. We all know that black flight is real. If you look at the proportional growth of the city and you look at any segment of the BIPOC community, you are going to see a huge disparity. If we know that this is a perspective that isn't going away, and it is one that has been suppressed intentionally throughout Austin's history, acknowledging that is a great place to start. After that, being genuine with making sure that those voices are heard – whether that be through art installations, storytelling, poetry reading, spoken word, etc. I do agree that that is what it is going to take. When someone says programming - programming was used against the BIPOC community for the longest in terms of engagement of Zilker Park.

Plays were not geared towards us and our perspective, what you had to go through in terms of accessibility and mobility to get to Trail of Lights, things that let you know you may have not been welcome. Even if you look at some of the large-scale events that occur (ACL, spinoffs of SXSW) - what names do you see headlining in big letters v small print. And I'm not here to get into the politics of ACL lineup, but this is an example of the messaging that is being received by the BIPOC community that really lets you know if you are truly, organically, and authentically welcome in this space. Whether he admits it or not, what Steven has been doing is basically a form of advocacy. Do I think that is fair that he should have to advocate in 2020 for folks within the BIPOC community to feel comfortable about engaging with Zilker as a space? No, but that doesn't mean it's not happening. When you say programming, you have to be intentional behind it. When you say to put up some basketball hoops just perpetuates a stereotype that is just offensive to folks within communities of color, especially to the black community.

- Steven Brown

I definitely agree. I don't think programs in it of itself will solve this. One, you look at what community of color are you referring to – there are the native people of color and then there are tourists or transplants. The transplants and the tourists really don't know the history so when someone says go over and see Zilker, they are going for the natural space or activity. But when they get there, they don't see black people there. I think having interpretive signage and building a culture of events over there that are culturally competent and mix with a lot of the native people of color. I think that those things will work but again, I don't think that's just Parks – they don't have the budget or the power to do that. People go to spaces that are closer to them. No one is trying to get off work at 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening and always drive to Zilker Park. The thing I would like to see is a bigger ask than what the Parks Department can do which is to make it affordable and accessible for people of color to be over there. But we missed that boat once we were marginalized east. We've lost a lot of that intergenerational wealth. So being close to Zilker Park is not the answer. You are asking people to make a hike over, so when they do there has to be something that they can really relate to (event on the weekend, etc.) They have to feel that there is an attachment to the park. I feel attached and connected to the park. I feel like the work that my ancestors did and the fact that my great-grandmother couldn't swim in that pool, in a way, I must swim in that pool. And it has does wonderful things for my body...being able to recover in that water. So, at the end of the day, I want people to have accessibility to that therapy of the water at the park.

Greg: We have to acknowledge and recognize too that people of color use the park differently than others sometimes. It's about acknowledging how people are using the park, what kind of space they need. We keep using the term "programming" but it's about making those public spaces accessible to accommodate people of color [reference to picnicking spaces, gatherings with large amount of people, celebrations with extended family].

Justin: That brings up also how we get to this park, and this is something we have heard a lot about as well. There's a big movement to drastically reduce parking spaces. But what we are hearing from those who don't live next to Zilker but still want to go, is that I'm not going to take a 2-hour bus ride to get there, I'm not going to park off-site with all my stuff and try to grab a shuttle. So, we are also feeling that tension, because we recognize we want to keep it a park, keep it beautiful, but how do we have parking and transit to the park be a question of equity.

- T.J. Owens

As I reviewed the plans, the one that appealed to me is the one that had the parking surrounding the park itself, where it would give you the flexibility to have a parking garage that could be multi-level. The point has already been raised in this conversation that accessibility works hand in hand with mobility. So, if we are going to make this one of or the premiere park of the city, then it's going to take addressing that. And if structurally those parking garages do not impede the flow of the park from a visual line perspective, then that could be a viable approach. I would love to say when you have friends in town, go to Zilker Park but honestly when I have friends come to town, I don't think let's go to Zilker Park. And that's not a knock against Zilker Park...It's just not in the forefront of my mind, and part of that is the things that I've already mentioned. A big part of that would be accessibility. One thing that would make it more accessible is the ability to entertain those large groups like Greg was stating, whether it's a class reunion, large family, friend group, etc. If you are going to entertain those larger groups or want this park to be welcoming to those larger groups, it's going to take addressing that structure and I think if you can have the amenities kind of in the middle and spawn out. (aside from the pool – that's a high traffic area where immediate parking may be needed) but focusing on the amenity levels that are going to be provided is going to be super important. We talk about people not just of different ethnicities and races but different levels of physical abilities. To Mike's point, making sure you have places in the shade to congregate, be considerate of people not just in wheelchairs but the elderly, and sensitive to the sun. To Greg's point, things that make the other parks work like that are things like that (i.e., the shade, the amenities, accommodating to many family members, bringing food or a grill.

- Steven Brown

In my mind, there needs to be more parking. I like to get to the pool before 10 am or at night. It's pretty packed by 10 am. If you start transporting people in or catching a shuttle in, that just takes more time. A lot of folks are already working with limited time. When I get to the pool, I'm trying to get there before my workday and swim for my mental health, I don't have an extra two hours to dedicate. In my opinion, there needs to be more parking and I like the idea of a parking garage. To take away the parking, would really send a signal to me that that resource

and amenity is for those in close proximity and for those in the foothills who really don't want the parking around to have a barrier/buffer between those who are impeding on their lifestyle (getting to their home or walking conveniently to the park). That would sound an alarm to me if I saw actions like that.

Greg: In the past, the park has charged for parking (e.g., weekends or summer months when highest visitation numbers). Looking and thinking about the possibility of a parking garage, is cost to park in a garage something that is a barrier or challenge in your mind for friends and family or people of color?

- T.J. Owens

In my opinion, no person should have to pay for parking at a public park. You go to a public park because it is a *public* park. There are tons of other places to go so if we have to pay for parking, you might start exploring other locations with more amenities. I know it may sound like a joke but if you live in south Austin, you might be halfway between going to Zilker Park and Six Flags in San Antonio. If you are going to pay for parking, get a higher level of amenities, and an experience that is more relevant to my family, I may as well go in the other direction. A point of discussion could also be the difference between the level of parking that is provided and how it relates to the flow of through traffic as well. That's important to talk about – the amenity level that is being provided as well as the flow and setup of the park itself. Through traffic is one of those things that could impede some of that natural space how it is going to be leveraged or utilized [internal circulation].

- Steven Brown

Agree on not having to pay for parking. I really enjoy swimming in the winter because you don't have to pay for the pool either. When I used to change in the Bathhouse I would park on the [north side] but now I park on the back side where there is the little house that was part of the plantation....lack of signage on where to park. Agree on concept with parking along the perimeter and clarity on where to park (this if for the pool entrance, etc.). Another need is commerce or the black dollar. It should be easy for black food trucks to be over there and having resources over there – things like that make folks feel that this is part of their community.

Greg: Another way to connect people and draw people is through food that represents their culture. An aspect that can bring people together but also appreciate other cuisines and cultures for you to experience.

- Steven Brown

We talked a little bit about economic disparities. We have to start finding innovative and creative ways to help close the gap of those disparities. We know a lot of black food truck

owners or black startups, don't have the head start or as much wealth as some of these popular ones. So, utilizing parks so they are not paying overhead at a food park that would charge \$1000 and really force them to make that overhead before they are start making money. If they could work at a park, like I started doing with Givens paying the vendor fee of \$50, then their overhead would be smaller, and you could close the gap economically. That also gives them the space to start talking to customers about their food and their culture. Multi-prong approach to exposure and working together.

Justin: [Reference to outreach at Givens] Those are some of the comments that stuck out – the black dollar - If you want people to come, you have to offer food, vending, and concessions that they are going to connect to.

One of the bigger questions, is the idea of institutional and structural challenges. Zilker we know wasn't desegregated until 1963, but as you've talked about, segregation didn't just stop. It has changed, it has morphed, it looks different and sounds different. But even some of those things that your family was taught or passed on three generations, that is still a part of the learned experience. So, thinking about that experience, that we are still telling that story because is ongoing...thinking about institutional and structural racism that still exists today: What are ways that we can call it out in this plan? What are ways that we can start that acknowledgement and say this is no longer the future, that this is the shift in our vision.

- Steven Brown

I still think interpretative signage is key. You want to get people to stop and read the history, seeing that it was part of the Goodrich Plantation, seeing that it was segregated and then that there were women that fought for it, and then understanding you might not see a lot of black people here because they were told not to come here. I think a practical talking point is when you do see people of color coming here, you don't need to say it, but just be kind. If you have been coming there a long time, help with directions if needed. I think the biggest thing that we can do culturally is to stay engaged with each other and stay present. I will continue to post myself at Zilker Park/Barton Springs because I want people to feel like it's safe and comfortable. If we are going to get serious about it: the interpretative signage, making sure the application for food trailers (if that is pursued) is not a huge hurdle, making sure that we expedite things when it comes to the things black people want. We have been waiting so long for change, it's not something that's acceptable to be lackadaisical about or to procrastinate about anymore. We used to be told something would happen and it never did, and that's not something that will be tolerated anymore. When I know someone is serious, I see some action behind it. We have the statue of the Three Wise Men at Barton Springs – no one can tell me the meaning behind that being there. But I want to see a statue of the three wise black women who swam, got kicked out, were punished, and fought hard to desegregate. I'm not saying we need to take

away the Three Wise Men, but there needs to be some sort of acknowledgment that these people [from the swim-ins] fought for you to be here and you're welcome.

- T.J. Owens
- Interpretative signage is a great piece but think we can expand upon it to include a wayfinding strategy to make sure we are being inclusive of the BIPOC communities as this park is being revamped. Easy way to tie in some of the past history that we've already spoken to – and the great part is that we know the story is well-documented and there's content that has already been created about it. Opportunity for interactive and/or immersive wayfinding to engage not only with the past narrative but ways for them to engage in the space and make their own memories. Even if it is a backdrop for an Instagram photo that may have historical relevance. A lot of creative ways to do it (e.g., companies that does virtual maps where you can drop your pin/location and photos, screening of the documentary about the desegregation of the park – tie o that wayfinding strategy, art installations – working with programs like Art in Public Places who work with BIPOC community already). Leveraging City resources that already exist. So, if it's just about finding placement of those art installations that tell a story with the perspective that is more inclusive than it has been in the past. Taking inventory of all of the programs that the City offers and getting a catalog of some of the partners they work with (e.g., Steven mentioned food truck park area, Soul Food Truck Fest already exists, then great opportunity to partner with some of those community advocacy organizations who are looking to elevate their programming but reduce the barrier of entry not just for vendors but also for venue space for creatives to ensure the voice of the park is more inclusive. Once you have that, you have a start to know who you can work with. Some folks already using other spaces (e.g., Jazz Fest at the MACC, would love to have it within the African American Cultural District). Cultural alignment.

- Mike Haynes

Great ideas. From my perspective, it would be great to have a map you can pull up on your phone of entrances, exits, handicap parking, trails that are accessible, where not go. Information that you can pull up easily on your phone, pinpoint I am here and here's the quickest way to get out, where to go for shade, etc.

Justin: This is one of the most complicated, complex spaces in all of Austin. We know that there are people who love this space deeply and people who, as we've heard Steven mention, are scared to go. In looking at the plan concepts...this deals with some of the institutional some of the structural approaches. When the plan does get finalized, one of the aspects will be a phasing process. So, thinking about how we phase these elements, what would you recommend, what is a resource, or your thoughts on priorities for us to take an equitable approach to the phasing process of getting a vision that does include all of Austin?

- T.J. Owens

A good place to start is where we are right now – acknowledgement of the discord of trust between the government and communities of color. Not approaching communities of color with an agenda per se – a lot of the time that is what happens. Communities of color get told what the solution is, but then they get asked for input on the solution that was already predicated – no real involvement in creating what the solution is or what it should look like. Understanding where that discord began (i.e., 1928 plan being told where you were going to live) and understanding how it has played out over the course of Austin evolving. Acknowledging how Zilker was not inclusive, not in a way that is disparaging but in a way that is honest and wanting to be clear of not wanting that to be the direction for the future. Truly being welcome in terms of sharing perspective and culture. Not sure how that effects the ways in which the plan can be implemented (rigidity in construction, pricing, etc.) but as soon you can those conversations and include those voices, the better. Tapping into community advocacy groups and grassroots organizations, getting their perspective on the concepts.

- Mike Haynes

Implementing process – often that’s what we get also, here’s the plan now let’s think about the accessibility afterwards. Rather than making everything universally accessible. Thinking some of the parking issues would have to be solved first but I will have to review plans and get back.

Final thoughts or concerns

- T.J. Owens

Being inclusive of our voice and being inclusive of our perspective is super important. And even though this process has already begun, really tapping into a lot of those community groups, advocacy organizations, along with individuals important to make sure that this project considers our voice.