



A Seat at Whose Table?

Actualizing Equity in Advisory Committees

Centering the expertise and lived experiences of those most impacted is fundamental to actualizing equity around any issue. Thanks to generations of tenacious leaders, institutions and government bodies are increasingly integrating community members in more advisory committees around policy and decision-making. Still situated in structures built by and for white supremacy, how can community leverage these openings to build power and reorient priorities, rather than extract uncompensated intellectual and emotional labor in service of incremental change?

At our October 2019 Actualizing Equity event, **Chai Lee**, Metropolitan Council Member and Program Manager for the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute at Nexus Community Partners; **Ashwat Narayanan**, Executive Director at Our Streets Minneapolis; and **Tia Williams**, Co-director at the Frogtown Neighborhood Association shared their experiences and strategies to participate in and change these processes to instigate real and lasting value for our communities.

Considerations before joining an advisory committee

Serving on a commission or advisory committee can be an avenue to speak community voice and expertise into policymaking and government processes — as well as an opportunity to learn and build personal and organizational power. But, given entrenched power dynamics and white-dominant structures, panelists shared some of their considerations in applying to or accepting an invitation to an advisory body.

Consider the make-up and balance of power on the committee. How many directly impacted community members and/or leaders of color are part of the group?

Attend a committee meeting to observe the process and culture. Meet with a member or staff to ask candid questions.

Are there important voices or communities missing from the table? If so, should you step back to make space for members of that community?

If you do serve, will you feel solidarity and support from others who share your worldview or lived experience — and will you have real power to move your ideas?

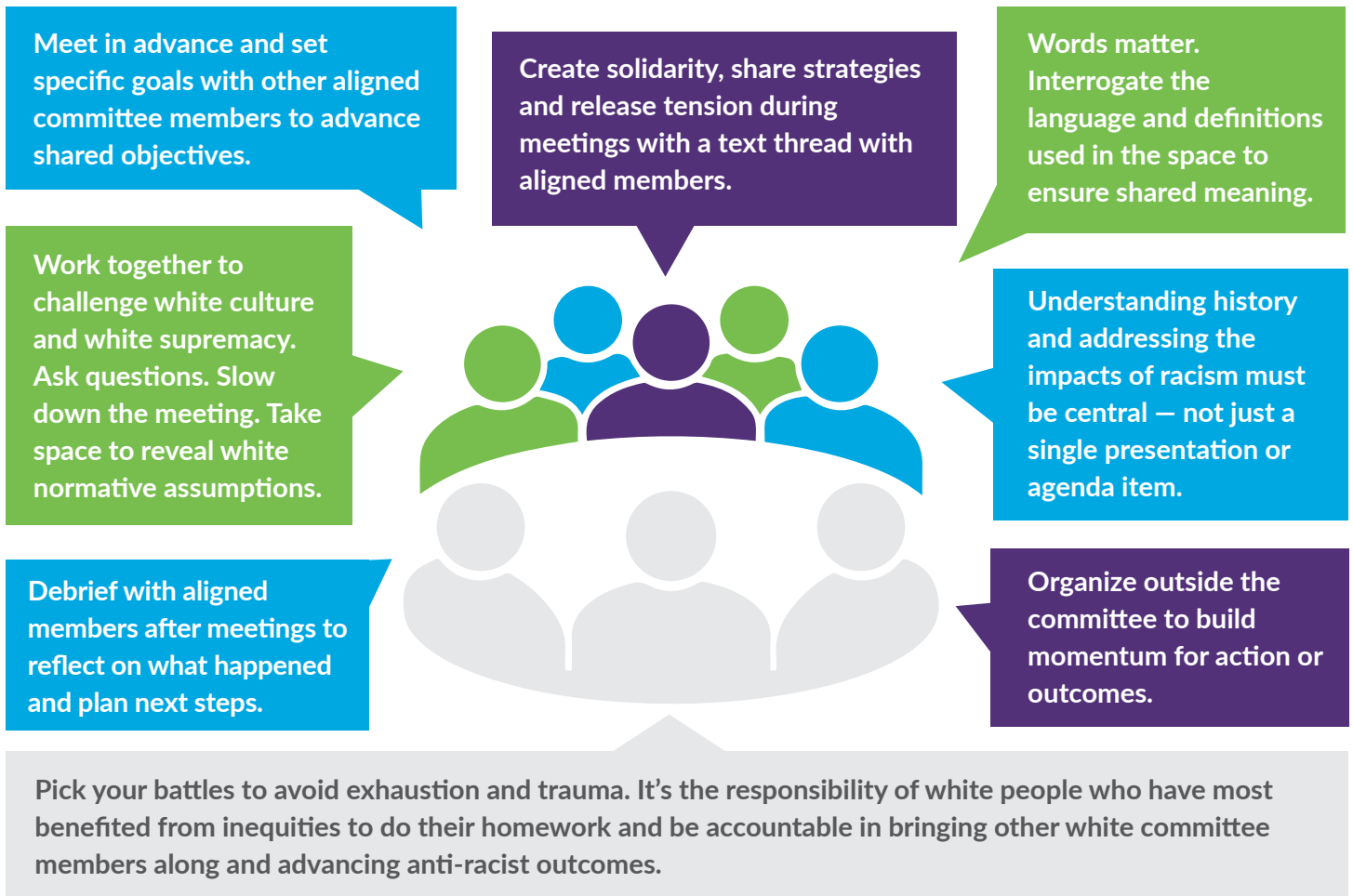
What is the explicit work or charge of this committee? Will the outcomes or ongoing work have real impact for your community?



RESOURCE: Nexus Community Partners' [Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute](#) supports, trains and helps place people of color and other underrepresented community members on city and county publicly appointed boards and commissions that influence and impact equity in the Twin Cities metro area.

Strategies to build power and have impact on advisory committees

Many community members are denied seats when they apply or face transportation, childcare or work conflict (among many other) challenges if they are invited to participate. Despite many barriers, panelists shared some of their strategies to advance the priorities of their communities without being tokenized.



Advancing outcomes from advisory committees

Fair Housing Advisory Committee

For Tia, having fellow leaders from the Equity in Place table on the committee created solidarity and power to integrate new priorities and language into a key regional document addressing fair housing. It also made clear the need for white stakeholders to learn more about white supremacy and instigated members attending an Undoing Racism training.

Capital Improvement Budget Committee (CIB)

For Chai, serving on the St. Paul CIB was an opportunity to change the way millions of public dollars are allocated by interrogating the process of the city and committee, ultimately making it more equitable by creating intentional avenues to encourage greater community input and engagement throughout the process.

Vision Zero Action Plan Advisory Committee

For Ash, serving on a City of Minneapolis advisory committee for the Vision Zero Action Plan was an opportunity to voice opposition to increased police enforcement, and instead focus on creating better infrastructure. When the plan did not reflect that input, Our Streets MPLS publicly shared its opposition to that outcome.