

## **Nevertheless, We Persist.**

As three newly elected, progressive Democratic committee members, we were very excited to go to our first business meeting of the Piscataway Democratic Organization and represent our neighbors. In preparation, we held meetings over the summer with residents and knocked on doors in our districts to talk with our constituents in this overwhelmingly Democratic town about the issues of concern to them. In addition to local government transparency, safety issues like road repairs and street lights, and expanded service and recreational opportunities, many voters raised concerns about the impact of climate change. We came to the September 25 PDO business meeting prepared to ask questions in order to learn, to listen and to make motions to address the concerns that our constituents raised with us. We came to do the work our neighbors elected us to do.

Instead, we were prevented from doing our jobs, dismissed and threatened. What transpired at the meeting is difficult to describe, but we will try.

At the outset, PDO Chair, and former Piscataway Mayor, Ted Light refused to answer our questions about the minutes from previous meetings. When Staci Berger asked about the agenda and asked to correct previous minutes, she was shouted down by Piscataway Mayor Brian Wahler. Light threatened to have her removed for asking questions about the minutes, which incorrectly identified previous committee members and misrepresented their remarks at a prior meeting. This was the first of at least three times that Light threatened to have Berger removed from the meeting.

The Secretary announced that the PDO would have a pre-election Wine and Cheese event at the Holmes Marshall firehouse on November 1. The Committee was informed by Wahler that “only loyal Democrats, people who support us, would be allowed.” The comment was clearly directed at us. Laura Leibowitz, Kamuela Tillman and Berger all responded that we are Democrats, and were elected by the Democrats of our district. The meeting devolved into yelling, and Light, who had started drinking a beer while running the meeting, struggled to restore order. Barring us from this, or any other social event, is in direct conflict with PDO’s bylaws, Sec. 10, A. “All members shall have the privileges...of attending all social functions of the organization.” (p.5)

People in the back of the room repeatedly said they could not hear the comments from the front. No microphone was used, despite ADA guidelines that amplification devices be available. The Secretary announced that the Christmas Party is scheduled for December 18. In response to the suggestion that it be a non-denominational event, Light told Berger that she “just cares about minutia”. Piscataway is the seventh most diverse community in New Jersey. We believe in inclusion, as not everyone celebrates Christmas here in 2019. Our Party should too.

Elected officials from all levels of government then gave brief reports about recreational football and baseball activities and urged people to ask one other person to register to vote to help Democrats win in November. We provided voter registration forms to others in the room since none were available. The officials discussed the development of the community center (still no information about costs for residents), and leaf collection (which will begin soon and run through the end of December). Sen. Bob Smith (D-17) spoke at length about the environmental bills he has worked on, including the ban on single use plastic bags. We had prepared a series of motions, in resolution form, to support this bill and other environmental concerns in our community. On the heels of last week’s Global Climate Strike, the need for urgent action on these issues seems self-evident.

Under what seemed to qualify as new business (no physical or written agenda was provided or even verbally outlined, but the bylaws clearly allow for new business), we introduced a motion for the PDO to support Sen. Smith's bill to ban single use plastic bags and to encourage Piscataway's local government to adopt a bag ban program. Sen. Smith then took the interesting step of **opposing our motion**, telling Committee members to vote no, saying his bill didn't need our support and that legislation changes. He further stated that it is not the role of the Committee to take positions on bills or issues (we had four more environmental resolutions, including one encouraging them to use email and not paper). Smith told Chair Light that our motion was not appropriate and out of order.

Then, things got really heated, and undemocratic.

Other members asked if the Committee could discuss the resolution, while some folks were saying they still couldn't hear from the back. It was difficult to follow the proceedings. Light yelled that he didn't have to entertain our motion, despite both common sense and the PDO Bylaws, Sec. C, "Motions may be made during the business meeting by any Committeeman or Committeewoman attending the meeting." (P.2). Light ruled us out of order, adjourned the meeting (with a voice vote that included non-Committee members of the public and two School Board members, Sheila Hobson and Nitang Patel). Light threatened to have Berger removed again and told her that she would not be allowed to return, although he could not provide a reason for doing so. Light then offered to meet with us privately, but said the Committee wasn't going to change the way it does business.

Except that is exactly what our neighbors elected us to do. We have a mandate from and a responsibility to our neighbors. We were elected *precisely* because our neighbors want better representation locally and stronger voices in our Democratic Party. The Committee can object to the ideas we raise, and they can even vote down our proposals. But they cannot silence us. We have the same rights as all of the other Committee members, including the right to make motions and attend the meeting without fear of harassment, intimidation and threats. (Light threatened Berger with removal once again while she unsuccessfully tried to get the meeting minutes corrected after the adjournment.)

The Committee cannot abandon its own rules, shut us down or keep out opinions they disagree with, simply because they resent us for running in elections and having different opinions. They don't have to like us, but they do have to operate fairly. The adherence to the democratic process is at the heart of our civic society; Smith, Wahler, Light & Co don't get to make rules that suit their agenda or when it is convenient. That is the kind of behavior we expect from the current occupant of the White House, not the leaders of the Democratic Party. If they cannot govern following the basic principles of democracy and their own bylaws (with which they seem grossly unfamiliar and did not produce for two of us yet), other Party leaders must step in. We are asking the State and County Democratic Party leaders to review the bylaws and procedures for these meetings with Chairman Light, and to send an independent observer to future meetings to ensure the rights of all Democratic voters are preserved.

As elected representatives of our neighborhoods, we will continue to advocate for issues – be they big or small – that matter to our neighbors and to us all. We have a duty to speak up and a right to be heard. And we will persist.

Staci Berger, Democratic Committee Member, Piscataway Ward 3, District 2

Laura Lebowitz, Democratic Committee Member, Piscataway Ward 3, District 10

Kamuela "Nikki" Tillman, Democratic Committee Member, Piscataway Ward 3, District 2