

# County's diversity panel reaches an impasse

## Disagreement over role brings calls to dissolve

By Bethanie Gengler  
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Winnebago County Executive Jon Doemel told the county board last week that he may repeal the Diversity Affairs Commission (DAC) that was established in 2020.

The commission, formed with a mission of embracing diversity, inclusion and belonging while encouraging the community to act in ways that help people thrive, is overseen by the county's UW Education, Extension and Agriculture Committee.

Diversity has become a divisive topic among political parties. In September 2020, President Trump signed an executive order banning diversity and inclusion training for all Justice Department employees and managers. On President Biden's first day in office in January 2021, he signed an executive order that rescinded the training restrictions.

At the DAC's September meeting, the commission discussed implementing a diversity leadership position for Winnebago County. DAC chair Jared Longsine said at the meeting that the DAC has no authority to implement a position and that recommending that Human Resources implement any position is outside the commission's scope.

The DAC discussed dissolving itself at its last two meetings, with Longsine citing the reasons as "a lot less political and a lot more fundamental and functional."

He said the DAC has repeatedly been

asked to do things outside of its bylaws or purview and that the only functional purpose of the group is to put on educational programs.

"The DAC has no teeth," he said, adding that the relationship between the UW Extension and DAC is unclear and the commission requires UW approval before moving forward on proposals.

Longsine read off a resolution to recommend dissolution of the DAC, contending the commission's bylaws, strategic plan and mission statement render it ineffective. The Education and Agriculture Committee has not exercised oversight of the DAC and the relationship has been called dysfunctional. The DAC voted unanimously to recommend dissolution of the commission.

The proposal was sent to the Education and Agriculture Committee, which discussed it at its Sept. 15 meeting. District 9 Supervisor Donald Nussbaum spoke at the meeting in support of dissolution.

"I think diversity is a wonderful thing," he said. "I think equity is a wonderful thing, and inclusion, but I think that the way we're using it is the way the Marxists came up with it," adding that it's similar to socialism and communism. Marxism is a political ideology that promotes a classless society where all people are treated equally.

District 26 Supervisor Conley Hanson also spoke at the meeting in favor of dissolving the DAC, citing the example of a

colleague who he claims was told she was "not black enough" to join a county committee.

"I wish I knew what that meant," he said. "I don't think she knew what that meant. That is certainly not diversity. That is not equity. That is not inclusion."

The committee will vote on the proposal at its October meeting. If approved, it will be sent to the Board of Supervisors for a vote.

At the Sept. 20 board meeting, Doemel commended Nussbaum for his comments at the earlier committee meeting and gave several reasons why he was considering repealing the commission.

The county executive said the employee facilitating the commission was promoted to a new position outside of Winnebago County. Doemel said he has struggled to maintain a full commission, appointing each position multiple times. He added that the DAC has become political and the seven commission members have been unable to "craft a message in unison."

"Instead of focusing on speakers, we need to be focusing on how we bring our

community together to celebrate our differences," he said. "We should be ensuring everyone has access to our services and focus on any issues that may be limiting anyone for any reason."

Doemel cited the example of a refugee from Nicaragua who came to the County Clerk's office for services but was experiencing difficulty due to a language barrier. Doemel said the office was able to find someone in the Register of Deeds Office to assist the woman in getting the services she needed.

"While we are arguing over a bureaucratic system there are actual services that we need to figure out how we can give to people that are left behind," he said.

He proposed replacing the commission with strategic goals and then reporting back on the progress of those goals a year later.

"Diversity is about loving your neighbor, period," he said. "We can serve the refugees, we can serve the poor and others without this commission or the political buzzwords that upset citizens and create divide amongst this board."



Doemel

## Stepping On classes focused on fall prevention

Stepping On classes are coming to the Oshkosh Seniors Center to help seniors with fall prevention.

Seven weekly, two-hour Friday sessions from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Oct. 14-Nov. 18 gives participants strategies for avoiding falls, including balance and strength exercises, home safety check suggestions and medication review.

Guest experts, including a physical

therapist, pharmacist and others, over the course of the sessions provide prevention information and strategies for avoiding a fall.

The workshop is designed for people ages 60 and older who have fallen or have a fear of falling.

To register for the classes, contact the Winnebago County Health Department at 920-232-3000.

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