

Statement from the Issues Committee of the Hamden Democratic Town Committee regarding Councilwoman Horsley's harmful actions

The Issues Committee met on April 11, 2021 to discuss Councilwoman Valerie Horsley's harmful actions toward Councilman Justin Farmer that began during a Finance Committee meeting for the Legislative Council and continued on social media. We offer the following thoughts regarding these incidents and recommendations for moving forward as Hamden Democrats.

On Monday, April 5, 2021, Scott Jackson, Hamden's Finance Director, answered questions about the Town's budget and audit for the Finance Committee. Councilmembers that are not on the Finance Committee were assured they would be allowed to participate and ask questions during the Finance Committee meeting, regardless of their membership on the Finance Committee, because they did not have that opportunity at the previous meeting, when Finance Director Jackson was not there. Councilman Farmer asked a question. As Finance Director Jackson began to answer, Councilwoman Horsley used a point of order which prevented Director Jackson from answering. Not only did Councilwoman Horsley prevent Councilman Farmer from getting answers to his questions, in doing so, she disenfranchised the people he represents in the 5th district. When Councilman Farmer addressed Councilwoman Horsley to respond, Councilwoman Horsley demanded she be referred to as Dr. Horsley. Councilman Farmer repeated the honorific of Councilwoman, a title bestowed by the voters of Hamden and appropriate for the context of a Council meeting.

The following morning, Councilwoman Horsley used social media to thank her "tribe" of women for supporting her demand for deferential treatment on a council of her peers. The lack of context provided by Councilwoman Horsley in her social media post encouraged many white women to publicly shame Councilman Farmer on social media. Councilwoman Horsley's actions are more than harmful, they have the potential to be dangerous.

Following an understandable uproar in our community, DTC representatives in the 4th district took swift action and sent the following letter to Councilwoman Horsley:

Dr. Horsley,

We are calling on you to resign from your position as Hamden District 4 Legislative Councilperson.

While we agree that everyone should be referred to by the title of their choice in certain contexts, it was oppressive for you to demand that Councilman Farmer refer to you as "Dr. Horsley" at a Legislative Council meeting last week, when he was already referring to you using the honorific appropriate to the context (Councilwoman). In addition, as a white woman, your subsequent public shaming of Councilman Farmer, a young Black man, on social media created further harm to both Councilman Farmer and the wider community, especially other people of color.

Such actions led to your colleague receiving a torrent of online criticism and attacks, and contributed to preventing the council from meeting amidst budget season.

The entire display was retraumatizing to watch given our country's racist and violent history of policing the bodies and voices of Black men and punishing them for failing to show "proper respect" to white women.

This is not a isolated incident - we have brought various actions you have made to your attention since your election, in hopes for change, and specifically in hopes for a more anti-racist commitment on your behalf.

Unfortunately, you have lost the trust of many of your constituents of color, as well as that of other political leaders of color in our town. At this point, we believe that you are not able to effectively carry out the responsibilities of your elected position, and we are calling on you to step down so that the Legislative Council can continue to focus on its important work for the town of Hamden.

Sincerely,
4th District Hamden DTC

Similarly, a group of intersectional feminists with advanced degrees wrote a letter to the Hamden community condemning the racism inherent in Councilwoman Horsley's actions. To date, the letter has been co-signed by approximately 200 members of the community. An excerpt of the letter is offered here:

“White feminism has a long history of serving the few at the expense of the many and continues to cause harm. Given Councilperson Horsley’s considerable organizing influence on social media and her voting power on the council, we are deeply concerned by her lack of self-reflection on the ways she upholds white supremacy in these spaces. When provided with feedback about the impact of her behaviors, lobbying, and votes, most importantly from members of the BIPOC community, she has not shown evidence of the self-reflection necessary to support personal growth towards intersectional feminism and antiracism. She has tended to dig her heels in and/or to retreat from discussion.”

Although we recognize that Councilwoman Horsley’s public apology was a first step in addressing this issue, we deem the apology to be insufficient because it failed to name racism as the harm that was committed. Further, the public statement on this matter offered by Mayor Leng, a few members of the Council, and two members of the Board of Education, is unhelpful because it implies that Councilman Farmer was partially responsible for the impact of Councilwoman Horsley’s actions in the meeting and on social media.

The consequences of Councilwoman Horsley’s actions extend to the whole Hamden community. Council meetings and budget deliberations were cancelled for 2 weeks. Hamden voters are losing trust in the Legislative Council to work effectively together and lead our Town. All members of the Legislative Council have been elected by the voters of Hamden. The honor and responsibility bestowed upon Councilmembers is to work collaboratively as the fiscal authority of Hamden.

The Issues Committee offers the following recommendations to rebuild trust in the Legislative Council and create a more professional environment.

Recommendations:

1. All councilmembers should be given the honorific title for which they serve (i.e., Councilperson).
2. Councilmembers should not weaponize Robert’s Rules of Order for the purpose of silencing fellow councilmembers or preventing relevant questions from being answered.
3. The Council should elect a non-partisan parliamentarian to ensure Robert’s Rules are used consistently and appropriately.
4. The Council leadership should run meetings efficiently and effectively without personal bias.

5. The Council, and particularly its leadership, should apologize for diminishing Councilman Farmer.
6. The Council should develop a code of ethics and require a commitment to professional discourse.
7. If Councilman Farmer is willing, the Council should participate in restorative justice practices to identify and address harms that have been committed.