

No Place for Hate Leadership Forum Ideas Include Youth Center, Welcome Wagon

By Nate Leskovic
Times staff

About 80 people at a No Place for Hate diversity workshop earlier this week showed enthusiasm for starting initiatives such as a "welcome wagon," youth center and an expanded web site as ways to promote civic involvement and civil discourse among all residents.

"I think the workshop fulfilled all our hopes for attendance, participation and energy from all the participants," said No Place For Hate Co-Chair Jeff Stone. "I think momentum was created for positive action."

The participants worked in small groups brainstorming ideas to ensure all residents feel informed, invited and welcome in all aspects of the community and to encourage participation in civic, social, recreational and educational opportunities.

All three members of Selectmen were there, along with three School Committee members, Police Chief Kevin Mearn and Milton High School Principal Dr. John Drottat.

"When you get in a focus group like this ... it validates what people are thinking," said Mr. Stone. "It can produce momentum for actually implementing things."

Mr. Stone said he hopes to see new task forces form and start work.

"This is bigger than No Place For Hate. Really, we're a catalyst in this process," he said.

Other recommendations included ways to bring residents together through new cultural, artistic and musical activities; a "Town Center" or other social gathering space; starting a "sister neighborhood" program; and ending geographic divisions for sports teams.

Some wanted to make sure residents with special needs were included in the discussion. A recommendation for improving awareness and social skills around those with special needs was popular.

"I think that when we think of diversity, most think of race or religion," said resident Sharon Bacci, who pointed out there are over 600 students in town with special needs.

The workshop featured two speakers who discussed issues of diversity and civic engagement.

Carole Copeland Thomas, a diversity and leadership consultant and former resident, said in order to avoid



About 80 people turned out to participate in the workshop.

a "different worlds, same space" community, there must be diversity in social networks and civic engagement. Without this presence, people tend to opt out.

David Crowley of Social Capital Inc. spoke about the "value of who we know." He said the number of people who know the names of their neighbors is the best indicator of crime rates. His company focuses on reaching out to people who are not already participating in the community to bridge gaps.

"Democracy is not a spectator sport, but we are increasingly on the sidelines," he said.

Some were concerned the workshop is less effective because those who attend are already proponents of diversity in town.

"We're not trying to change anyone's point of view," said Mr. Stone in response. "It's a coalition of the willing."

Mr. Stone said repetition and persistency will hopefully cause others to warm up to the mission and help build a movement for positive change.

"I hope that we will leave this room with the sense of accomplishment and that everyone will go out and meet their neighbors," said resident Ricka Marsh.

The results of the session will be analyzed and presented in a public forum on Wednesday, Nov. 29.