

Press Release
York Diversity Forum Addresses Controversy of Thin Blue Line Flag
York, ME July 25, 2019 — For Immediate Release

This week an article appeared in the York Weekly with the headline “Blue Lives Matter flag debate: tribute or racism.” The first paragraph of the article implied that the York Diversity Forum (YDF) was responsible for the flag being taken down. In fact, we did not ask for it to be taken down.

Because of our reputation for organizing a variety of diversity focused community events, another advocacy group contacted us about the flag’s presence. They reported that they had heard from a York resident their concern that the flag could have unintended reactions by residents or visitors due to its presence in the right of way. The group offered to partner with us if we wanted to help the community understand the symbolic nature of the flag.

Our Chair, Susan Kepner, and board member, Chris Hartwell, thought a visit to Town Hall might be a good first step before deciding what, if anything, we might recommend to the YDF Board. We contacted York Town Manager, Steve Burns, for an appointment.

We sat down with Steve Burns and YPD Chief Charles Szeniaowski on Monday morning. We explained we had come on a fact-finding mission; we were not looking for the town to take any specific action. We asked if they knew who had hung the flag and why it was on one of the utility poles in the right-of-way. Mr. Burns reported that he had heard from someone already about the flag and they had raised similar concerns about it being in the right of way rather than on someone’s private property.

Since the article appeared, the York Diversity Forum has been getting negative comments on Facebook and accusatory emails and online messages. York Diversity Forum is proud of the work we have done in our community. Our mission is to be a visible, peaceful, active voice and resource that promotes understanding, acceptance and respect for people of all races, cultures, religions, sexual orientations, ages and abilities. We realize our mission by presenting programs that foster understanding of diverse populations and also respond to specific instances of prejudice and discrimination in York.

We hope this statement will assure the York community that we have not acted contrary to the purpose of our organization.

- 1) The only people we talked to were Chief Szeniaowski and Town Manager Burns to do some fact-finding on a situation brought to York Diversity Forum’s attention.
- 2) The Town Manager told us he was aware of one person who had written a letter to the editor and had spoken to him of the same concerns we had heard about. He also said a newspaper article was in the works.
- 3) We asked what was known about who put up the flag in the right of way and why. They explained what they had learned. It was clear the flag was not put up with any malicious or racist intent.

- 4) The conversation included discussion about the use of the brackets on the utility poles for personal displays. Should there be limits or a process for displaying anything other than the American flag or others preapproved by the town for special events.
- 5) We are supporters of our men and women in blue. At no time in that meeting did we ask for the flag to be taken down once its purpose and intent was understood.
- 6) We told the Chief and Mr. Burns that we hoped the anticipated article would address the reasoning as to why the flag can mean something beyond its original use.
- 7) We have no information on what motivated the family to take down the flag. We are deeply saddened by the hurt felt by the family around this loving attempt to honor their family member.

York Diversity Forum regrets the inaccurate portrayal of our role and position on this matter as reported in the York Weekly article. The Blue Lives Matter flag is a political flag. It means different things to different people. Based on the comments in local social media, perhaps a community conversation is in order.

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More information about YDF, including a listing of our past and upcoming events, can be found on our website: YorkDiversityForum.org

The York Diversity Forum envisions a community that is integrated and accepting – where everyone feels safe, welcome and at home.