

Members of Bexley City Council

Bexley City Hall

Bexley, OH 43209

Dear Mayor Bexley and City Council Members,

I am writing to request your leadership in improving quality of life in Bexley by convening opportunities to learn together about race relations.

The new Giant Eagle coming to Bexley is generating lots of excitement. As a “foodie,” I fully appreciate such a store right here on Main Street. But the anticipatory conversations also surfaced a long-simmering issue: that so many Bexley residents are uncomfortable going to the Main Street Kroger’s, in part, because of who else shops there. I’ve heard people caution against going there because it’s “dirty” or even “dangerous” – both highly subjective perceptions. And, earlier this week, a conversation broke out on Bexley Buzz about the merits and flaws of our Kroger’s and the possible racial bias involved. It’s an uncomfortable exchange, because it’s spontaneous, but the issue is real. We need a carefully facilitated, constructive learning conversation instead.

We live in a highly segregated society, both by race and socio-economic status. Entering a store with so many Black people - literally from the other side of the tracks – causes discomfort, even trepidation, to people not used to diverse settings. I get it. I grew up, in the 50’s and 60’s, in an affluent Long Island suburb, where most Black people I came in contact with were live-in maids, just like in the movie “The Help.” Only as an adult did I start confronting my cluelessness and discomfort by getting to know African-Americans who grew up in a vastly different reality than mine. Several years ago, as executive director of a nonprofit organization, I brought in a consultant to help our diverse staff talk openly about race, including our own experiences. Everyone, Black and white, felt the process enabled us to create a more open, safe environment; I learned a great deal. Yet, I still catch myself forming ingrained assumptions or concerns about African Americans I don’t know. That’s implicit bias, and unless we recognize it, we can’t ensure that it doesn’t color our judgment.

Bexley is not immune to racial bias. More than a few Black Columbus friends joke about “driving while Black” in Bexley (whether that’s based on current or past experiences, I don’t know). Most Black parents, wherever they live and regardless of socio-economic status, teach their children how to behave with police officers in the hope they won’t be arrested – or worse – for the offense of being Black, and have to put up daily with indignities and stressors, small and large, that I can’t begin to fathom. We can’t be good neighbors if we don’t understand this.

Bexley is a welcoming community. I love living here. But I think we could do better by inviting those residents who are interested in doing so to learn about implicit bias and how we can reduce it in ourselves and in our city policies. That doesn’t mean we start calling people “racist” or make people feel bad. It’s about learning and listening.

I’m proposing that City Council form a committee to address how to make Bexley more welcoming to African Americans and other people of color, starting with facilitated conversations about race. The recent Bexley Buzz exchange shows a hunger for such conversations. Franklin County has resources to assist us. For instance, OSU’s Kirwin Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity offers programs to help communities unpack our implicit bias and enable us to live as better neighbors and members of civil society. I attended a Kirwin program last year, organized by Columbus Public Health (health department) as part of greater efforts to do health planning. The biggest discomfort comes in realizing things we’ve all thought, said or done, usually without malice, that’s perceived with discomfort by African Americans.

I'd like to request that, as community leaders, you set in motion the means to bring such conversations to Bexley. Maybe then, more of us can enjoy our Giant Eagle *and* our neighbors across the tracks.

By the way, after reading and participating in the Bexley Buzz exchange, I toured the Kroger's. Contrary to claims, I found the produce to look just fine and the store wasn't dirty, except for a few things on the floor (which occur during stocking shelves and produce). The store is outdated, but I've read that a major renovation is in the works. Let's do the same for race relations in Bexley.

Thanks for considering this request. I am happy to help in any way I can, including discussing this further.

Thank you very much for your commitment to Bexley.

Yours truly,

Cathy J. Levine

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Cc: Mayor Kessler, Members of City Council



**Discomfort with Kroger rev 8-17-16.docx**

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