

Progress in increasing civic participation of Lexington’s Asian residents – May 13, 2015

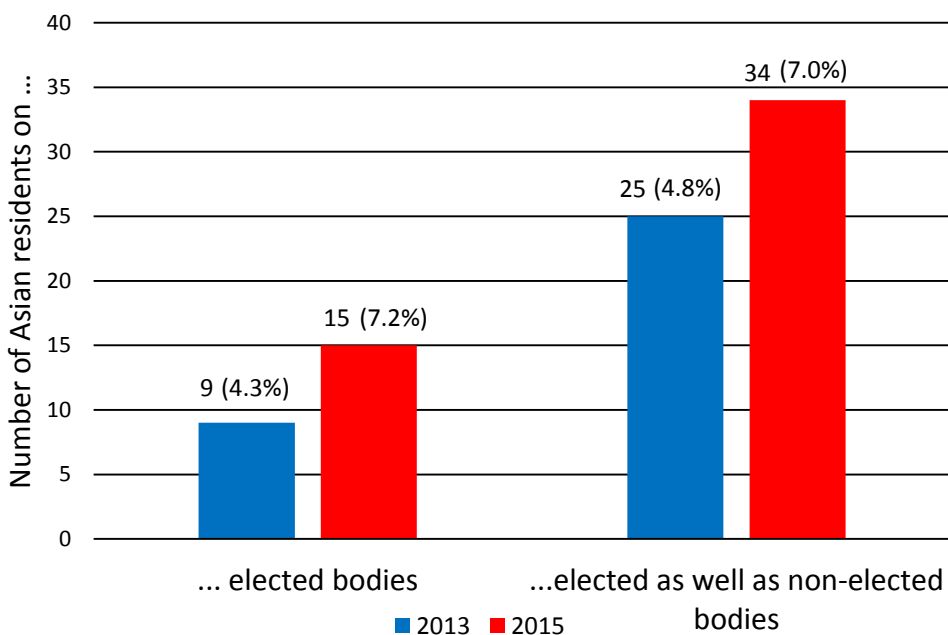
On May 13, 2015, the 20/20 Vision Committee held a special meeting to review progress on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the December 2013 report of its Subcommittee on Demographic Change. The report, entitled “Civic Participation by Asian Residents of Lexington: Experiences, Findings and Recommendations,” classified its recommendations into two broad categories: “pull” from Town government and PTAs and PTOs and “push” from the Chinese American Association of Lexington (CAAL) and the Indian Americans of Lexington (IAL).

Data presented at the meeting revealed that civic participation of Asian residents had risen substantially between 2013 and 2015. Although it would be inappropriate to attribute all of this increase to the implementation of the recommendations, it is likely that the recommendations stimulated much of the activity. This report summarizes how we, in Lexington, are doing in implementing the recommendations and describes plans for additional steps.

DATA ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF ASIAN RESIDENTS IN 2013 AND 2015

Figure 1 presents the data for participation on (a) Lexington’s elected bodies and (b) elected as well as non-elected bodies. Each data point shows the number of participating Asian residents and the percentage of the total number of filled positions on these bodies. The figure reveals that the percentages have risen substantially over a two-year period; however, they still fall well short of 18 percent, the fraction of the Town’s Asian residents over the age of 20 reported in the 2010 U.S. Census.

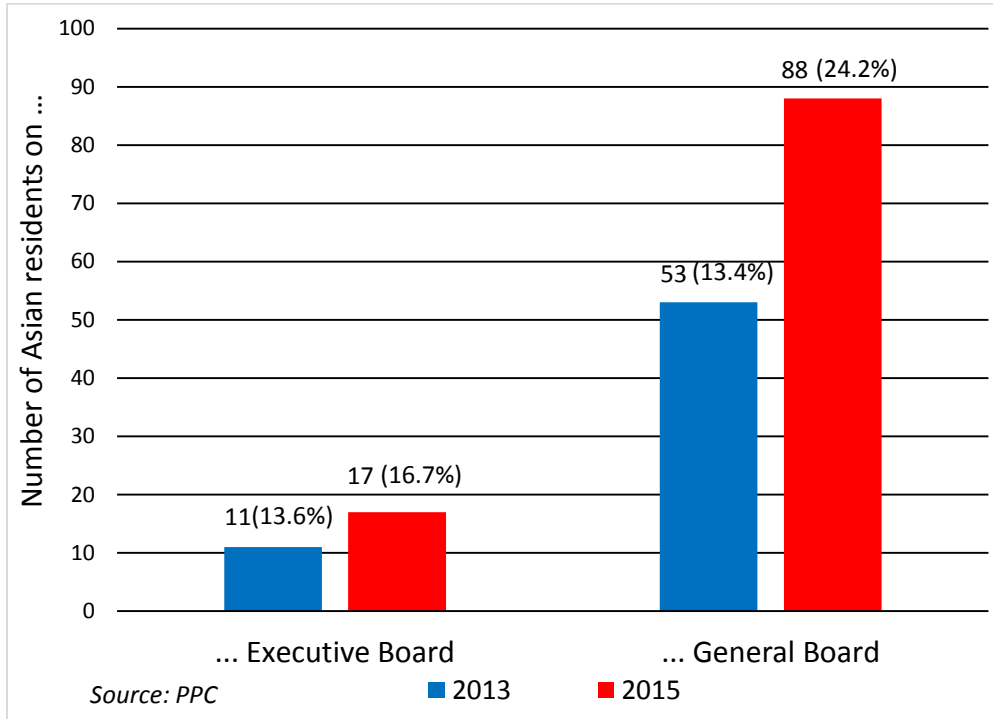
Figure 1 – Participation of Asian residents on Town boards and committees in 2013 and 2015



Source: List - Town Clerk's office; analysis mostly by surname

Data for the participation on PTA/PTO executive boards and general boards by parents of Asian origin, shown in **Figure 2**, also reveal that the percentages have increased over the same two-year interval. In fact, the participation on general boards now exceeds 22%, the percentage of Asian residents in the 30-to-59 age bracket.¹

Figure 2 – Participation of Asian residents on PTA/PTO Boards in 2013 and 2015



RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE²

The recommendations in the “push” category, aimed at the two Asian community organizations, may be summarized as follows:

- For CAAL and IAL
 - Establish/strengthen ongoing dialogue with Town leadership and PTA/PTO leadership.
 - Encourage civic participation, in part by educating members on how the “Town” works.
 - Provide support to those who commit themselves to participating.

The recommendations in the “pull” category were made to the PTAs and PTOs, Town authorities that appoint members to boards and committees and to the Board of Selectmen.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

² For details, please consult the report. A link can be found on the Subcommittee’s landing page on the Town web site: <http://www.lexingtonma.gov/committees/2020scdc.cfm>

- For PTAs and PTOs
 - Establish communications with CAAL/IAL to find out how to get more of the members of the Chinese and Indian communities involved in PTAs and PTOs.
 - Reach out to Asian parents already serving on PTA/PTO boards to learn how they can draw in additional Asian parents.
 - Longer term (2015): Try to identify the causes of the perception that some Asian parents do not feel welcomed on PTAs and PTOs, noted in the report, and seek solutions.
- For authorities that appoint members of Town boards and committees (Board of Selectmen, Town Moderator, Town Manager)
 - Ensure that boards and committees have clear statements of their missions and that they define criteria for membership to make it easy for those interested in serving to identify a good fit to their interests, skills and experience.
 - Find ways of encouraging short-term commitments to projects (2015).
 - Institute a more open process to publicize the work of the boards and committees and a more open recruitment process (2015).
- For the Board of Selectmen
 - Continue to promote inclusion of Asian residents, collaborating with other Town organizations as the opportunity arises.
 - Strengthen communications with CAAL and IAL so that it is possible to have truly candid discourse as the need arises.

PROGRESS REPORTS

At the May 13 meeting, brief presentations on progress in implementing the recommendations were made by representatives of four organizations – CAAL, IAL, the PTA/O Presidents Council, and the Board of Selectmen – and by the Town Manager. Their remarks are summarized below.

Chinese American Association of Lexington (Peter Lee, President)

CAAL members have been increasingly active, partly as a result of the organization's desire to have its members more engaged and partly as a result of "pull" from a variety of organizations and initiatives that have come to appreciate CAAL's responsiveness. There is also evidence that CAAL may now be reaching most of Lexington's Chinese residents: Its newsletter now goes out to about 800 email subscribers. Since there are approximately 1,100 Chinese families in Lexington, the newsletter would be reaching about 70 percent if all subscribers were Lexington residents.

Progress the "push" front:

- Over the past two years, members of CAAL have assumed positions on the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF), the Tourism Committee and the Recreation Department.
- CAAL members are increasingly active on PTAs and PTOs, on the PTA/O Presidents' Council, on the LHS Council. A CAAL member also served on the Superintendent Search Committee.

- CAAL has continued to encourage its members to run for Town Meeting and to become members of Town committees. When an opening arises, it looks for candidates who would be a good fit.
- It has also highlighted the importance of keeping up with Town government by holding two candidate forums in 2014 and one in 2015.
- To stimulate further interest in serving the Town, CAAL is organizing a Mini Citizens' Academy to be held in June.
- In the past, CAAL has run a Chinese New Year dinner every two years. This year, having decided that it should organize some kind of event every year, it ran a highly successful Culture Day on January 24. In the afternoon, cultural demonstrations were held in the Cary Library. For example, visitors were given the opportunity to try out Chinese musical instruments and to examine the lion "costume" used for lion dances. In the evening, a more traditional cultural show was presented at the High School. In contrast to the Chinese New Year celebration, no admission fee was charged.
- CAAL's growth is leading it to establish subcommittees. In 2012, CAAL set up the Community Task Force. Now it has added an Education Committee to engage on issues related to the schools, students and parents. The priorities for this group have yet to be established.
- Having realized that its growing membership and importance requires a more formal organization, CAAL obtained 501(c)3 status in 2014.
- CAAL and IAL are exploring jointly sponsored events for the coming 12 months.

CAAL has also experienced "pull" as described below:

- It has continued to be invited every year by the Lexington Historical Society to participate in jointly sponsored events.
- Clarke Middle School invited CAAL to participate in two New Family Welcome events.
- Lexington Youth and Family Services (LYFS) invited CAAL's participation when LYFS noted that many of the students who turned up for counseling were of Asian origin. The outgrowth was the Lexington Asian Mental Health Initiative (LAMHI), a town-wide all-day session open to all, which was led by experts in mental health. This session spawned two small-group discussions, one for parents alone and one for parents and students.
- LEF, the PTA/O Presidents' Council and the Cary Library have all approached CAAL to have its members participate.
- Several Town leaders have requested opportunities to address CAAL: the Town Manager; members of the Board of Selectmen; members of the School Committee; and a member of the LPS administration regarding additional content regarding Asia in the schools' curriculum.

Indian Americans of Lexington (Archana Singhal, Co-President)

Over the past two years, IAL has been adding more formal structure to its organization. It now has a formal board and an executive committee, and is exploring the possibility of applying for 501(c)3 status. For the past two years or so, IAL has been reaching out to most of the Indian families in Lexington via biweekly newsletter. The effectiveness of this newsletter was demonstrated by the results of recent Town Meeting election.

With respect to "push," IAL has taken the following steps:

- IAL sought to increase the number of Indian residents on Town Meeting. It identified over 30 potential candidates for Town Meeting and invited them to participate in a mini Citizens' Academy whose purpose was to encourage them to run. It invited Joe Pato, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, to address the group. As a result of the meeting, six participants decided to run for Town Meeting, and all six were elected, bringing the total number of Indian members of Town Meeting to eight.
- Continued its tradition of organizing a Diwali celebration. IAL continues to select a group in Lexington every year and receive a significant contribution at Diwali. Over the years, IAL has donated to Lexington Food Pantry, Senior Center, FISH, communities within Lexington that provide valuable services to residents. This is to encourage a culture of giving within Lexington.
- Participated in the 300th celebration through a highly successful Dance around the World; the Patriot's Day parade; and Mock Town Meeting for Middle School students.
- IAL has been collaborating with the Lexington Historical Society for several years. In 2014, the jointly sponsored event consisted of learning about each other's cultures through dance.
- IAL also has a long history of collaborating with the Cary Memorial Library. In March 2015, it participated in Fairy Tale Ball with Indian story-telling, crafts and art activities. In September a mock Indian wedding will be staged in the Library. Residents will have an opportunity to participate as guests in the ceremony.
- IAL has collaborated with LEF and one of its members has taken a position on LEF's cultural group.

The IAL has also experienced considerable "pull" and support from the community:

- Carl Valente, the Town Manager, has kept IAL informed of openings on Town committees.
- Lexington Youth and Family Services (LYFS) invited IAL to participate in the Lexington Asian Mental Health Initiative. The program is described in the report on CAAL, above.
- The Police Department asked IAL to help out with a program on cultural sensitivity.
- Following a string of burglaries at homes of Indian residents, the Police Department organized a meeting at the Cary Library to coach Indian residents on steps to take to avoid burglaries.
- IAL was invited to be part of the Superintendent Search Committee.
- A round table discussion with PTA/O, School Officials and Indian parents is being considered to encourage Indian parents to become involved in various initiatives by PTAs and PTOs.

PTAs and PTOs (Bettina McGimsey, PTA/O Presidents Council Chair)

PTAs and PTOs have established multiple pathways to engage parents of Asian origin, after recognizing barriers to their participation:

- lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system, the role of the PTAs and PTOs, and how and why it's important to get involved
- the challenges faced by dual-income working parents to find time for meetings for volunteer activities
- lack of confidence in their English language skills

Initiatives undertaken by the PTAs and PTOs to increase participation of Asian parents include:

- *Forums whose objective is describe how and why to get involved.* Although these sessions are open to all, there is marketing targeted to Chinese, Indian, Korean and ELL families. In 2014, the event, jointly sponsored by the PTA/O Presidents Council (PPC) and CAAL, was focused on the Chinese community. In 2015, the forum was sponsored by the PPC, the Site-Based School Council Roundtable, CAAL, IAL, LexFUN!, and the Lexington Special Education Parent Advisory Council and PTA.
- *Receptions for new families.* The Clarke Middle School has been holding two receptions annually where PTA board members and Site Council members answer questions for new families. Invitations are issued to CAAL and IAL, to English at Large, and to ELL staff.
- *Welcome packets.* Administrative assistants at all the schools have been asked to add brochures on English at Large, CAAL and IAL in their welcome packets.
- *Variety of roles to engage parents.* Project-based roles with well-defined tasks and timelines have been shown to work well for parents who are working full-time or who are not confident of their English language skills. It has been found that, as parents become more comfortable in working with the PTA/O, they often take on progressively larger roles.
- *Interpreters and translators.* Individual schools have drawn on CAAL and IAL members to serve as interpreters or translators as needed.
- *Announcements in preferred language.* Some announcements are now being sent out in Chinese, Korean and Japanese. This practice has met with a very positive response from some parents, who claim that they pay more attention to announcements in their preferred language.
- *Targeted marketing.* PTA/O events are being posted on the listservs of CAAL, IAL and other community groups.
- *Evening meetings.* Recognizing the time constraints of dual-income working families, PTAs and PTOs continue to hold meetings and events in the evenings whenever possible.
- *Survey.* The PPC is considering a survey to identify barriers to participation, volunteer interests, etc.
- *Plans.* In the future, the PPC expects to continue the dialogue and joint activities with CAAL, IAL and the recently formed Koreans of Lexington (KoLex), and to invite representatives to a PPC meeting in the 2015-16 school year. In addition, the PPC expects to encourage and support the initiatives described above.

Town Manager (Carl Valente)

Mr. Valente has long fostered the inclusion of Asian residents in the fabric of Lexington. He contributed very substantially to creating the charter of the Demographic Change Task Force in 2007, whose recommendations led, in turn, to the formation of the Subcommittee on Demographic Change; he was heavily involved in the work of the Task Force; and has championed exploration of successful models of increasing civic participation of Asian residents in communities across the U.S.

Mr. Valente's remarks cover both his own activities and the contributions of members of the Town staff.

- To expose members of CAAL and IAL to how the Town works, Mr. Valente asked his staff to alert the two organizations regarding the Fall 2014 session of the Citizen's Academy, which has proven to be one mechanism for encouraging residents to become involved in their Town government. As a result of this effort, 4-5 of the 25 participants were Asian residents.

- Mr. Valente requested an opportunity to meet the CAAL executive board. At this meeting, the idea of the Town collaborating with CAAL for a Chinese Cultural Celebration was raised. Library Director Koren Stenbridge and Human Services Director Charlotte Rodgers followed up with CAAL on this program, and a very successful event was held on January 24th (there first day of a three day blizzard!), with the Town making available the Library and High School facilities at no charge.
- When vacancies arose on the Recreation Committee and Council on Aging, Mr. Valente alerted CAAL and IAL. As a result, one of CAAL recommendations (Ruixi Yuan) is now a member of the Recreation Committee.
- Mr. Valente reported that, so far, he has not been successful in identifying shorter term task-oriented projects that may be of interest to Asian residents.
- Mr. Valente reported that the Town has expanded its recruitment outreach, particularly as it relates to the Community Center staffing, a soon-to-be high visibility Town program. The Town was successful in recruiting an Indian American for the Senior Services program director (Hermali Patel) and was very close to recruiting a Chinese staff person for the Youth Programming position but, unfortunately, her work visa expires in September 2016, and there were no assurances it would be renewed.
- The Town continues to struggle with increasing the diversity of its public safety staff. In the Police Department this is largely the consequence of Civil Service, an outdated concept that severely limits the Town's ability to recruit a workforce reflective of its resident population. The Police Chief has, however, with the support of the Board of Selectmen, received funding in FY16 for two additional Police Cadets. These positions are outside of Civil Service rules. The intent is to offer these paid part-time positions to high school students, specifically targeting our Asian-American youth.
- The Town Meeting approved funding (\$15,000) to continue the work of 20/20 Diversity Task Force, specifically to examine how other municipalities have successfully integrated their diverse populations into the community and municipal government.

Board of Selectmen (Joe Pato, Chairman)

- Joe began by stating the Board of Selectmen seeks inclusiveness for all residents, and endorses efforts to promote inclusiveness such as this special meeting of the 20/20 Vision Committee, as well as the town-wide open conversation on race, diversity, and justice convened by Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association (LICA) on April 30.
- In 2014 the goal-setting process for the Board of Selectmen included two elements of the Subcommittee's recommendations:
 - More regular and candid communications with CAAL and IAL.
 - Review the work of committees with the objective of clarifying missions and reducing overlap and redundancies

However, the departure of Deb Mauger, which left a vacancy on the Board, delayed their implementation. The two goals will be included in the 2015 goal-setting process.

- Mr. Pato participated in a forum organized by the IAL to acquaint some of its members about running for Town Meeting. The meeting may have contributed to getting six IAL members to mount successful campaigns in March 2015.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the numerical growth in civic participation in Town bodies and PTA/O boards as well as the variety of pathways being followed to increase participation are very encouraging.

As shown in Figure 1, participation by Asian residents on Town bodies has grown over the past two years. However, since the numbers are still small, they are sensitive to single events, and can thus be expected to fluctuate in the future. For example, almost the entire increase in the number of Asian residents elected to Town bodies can be traced to an IAL initiative described above. By contrast, the results for PTA/O boards, summarized in Figure 2, can be ascribed to a variety of initiatives undertaken in all 9 schools.

Some – perhaps much – of the recent success in engaging Asian parents to participate in PTA/O activities is the result of increased collaboration between PTA/Os with CAAL and IAL. If this is indeed the case, it demonstrates the effectiveness of coordinated “pull” and “push.”

To achieve high participation rates on Town bodies will take more effort and time. In contrast to PTA/O boards which turn over annually, Town bodies – elected and non-elected – turn over less frequently. Moreover, there are fewer leaders available to manage the “pull.” This suggests that the effort to stimulate civic participation at the Town level, will require careful planning and management. One of the suggestions growing out of the May 13 meeting is for Town leaders to market participation on Town bodies to PTAs and PTOs.

NEXT STEPS

1. As recommended in the report of the Subcommittee on Demographic Change, the 20/20 Vision Committee should continue to monitor the progress on civic participation and on the implementation of the report’s recommendations.
2. The success of the special meeting suggests that it should be repeated at regular intervals; every six months was proposed at the meeting.
3. Leaders of Town bodies should consider recruitment for Town boards and committees by working with the PTA/O Presidents Council and with leaders of PTAs and PTOs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The 20/20 Vision Committee is grateful to Peter Lee, Bettina McGimsey, Joe Pato, Archana Singhal and Carl Valente for participating in the special meeting and for making available their meeting notes to assist in the preparation of this report.

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