

**NAACP Branch Meeting February 1, 2023
Berkshire County Branch**

6:04 pm

Dennis Powell (DP henceforth): Good Evening everyone. Welcome to our first general meeting of the Berkshire County Branch of the NAACP in 2023. I'm glad to see everyone here. I want to apologize for not being on camera but I learned today that my equipment that I've been using is a little antiquated like me, I just came from the cable company to find out why I was having so much trouble. So I think it'll work a little better if I'm off camera.

I'd like to open the meeting with a moment of silence. Reflecting on this sad day, the funeral for Tyre Nichols, a life lost. And again taking a moment to acknowledge the Berkshire Indigenous people whose land we occupy, the Mohican, Nipmuc, Pocumtuc tribes . . . And all other people deserving our attention and acknowledging the sacredness of the past. So much violence. . .

Thank you very much I want to turn the meeting over to our Political Action Committee Co-Chair, Helen Moon, who introduce our presenter this evening:

6:06 pm

Helen:

Thanks Dennis, my name's Helen Moon, I am the co-chair of the Political Action Committee because Kamaar has graciously agreed to be a co-chair with me. It's been a long time coming so we're very excited about that. I have the great pleasure of introducing our speaker for today, we have invited our State Senator, Paul Mark, to join us. He serves as State Senator for the 57 cities and towns of the Berkshire, Hampton, Franklin and Hampshire District- which geographically is the largest district in the history of Massachusetts covering an area bigger than the state of Rhode Island. Before his election he served as State representative for the 2nd Berkshire District. Before holding public office he worked as an outside technician Verizon and Bell Atlantic. He's a 23 year member of the Brotherhood of electrical workers union. I'm so happy to turn it over to our state senator who is going to share a little bit about the start of his Senate Career and then we're gonna turn it over for a Q and A from our membership so please put your question in the chat or raise your hand. With previous experience, I ask that everybody be kind and professional as we ask questions. Thanks

6:08 pm

Paul Mark: Thanks and please do be kind. Thanks to Helen for inviting me to be here and for the generous introduction and to be here to mark Black History Month. January 4th was sworn into the state senate for the first term. The census in 2020- showed a 2% decline in population. But the state of Massachusetts grew at a rate of 5%. They were maybe going to eliminate our district completely but we did not want our representation diluted any more so I ran and we were able to prevent that and preserve our district. It has been a great honor to be your voice in Boston.

- Told story of childhood - how his dad lost his warehouse job, how he worked for Bell Atlantic, and joined a union. Tuition assistance allowed him to acquire an undergrad, masters, law, and doctoral degree.
- His financial barrier was eliminated due to union.
- He referenced freedom fund and the gentleman who talked about doors- if you can make it through them, bring others through the door with you.
- You can get in touch with me, I want to be accessible.
- We will have fixed office on 773 Tyler Street in Pittsfield. I'll send Helen this info.
- We'll also have roving office hours- first and third mon in GB, first and third tuesday in north adams. . . .It'll be called "Refreshments and remarks."
- Thank you for all the work going on - the rally this past weekend.

6:21 pm

Helen: Thank you Paul. We are going to open it up for questions. Paul, firstly, can you tell us some of your key legislative priorities. It's important for us that justice, equity and inclusion is involved in their thought process. How can you move forward a progressive and racial just agenda.

6:22 pm

Paul Mark: I was in the house and have a relationship with all the senators and am coming in as part of a class of 5. We're from all over the State. We are a diverse group. I asked to chair economic development and higher education committees.

Helen: Do we have any questions from members?

6:22 pm

Kelan O'Brien:

Hi Paul thank you for coming. I would love to know in terms of priorities and prisons- I'm wondering what you fall on no cost calls and prison moratorium.

Paul: I voted for no cost calls and I think its an important element of a bill. Prison moratorium, you're talking about not building new prisons right? Yea, I think there's plenty of prison space out there. We don't want to create an incentive to fill spaces.

Helen: Can you explain what no cost calls are?

Paul: Yes, the calls for people that are in the prison are quite expensive. It's a barrier to people who are being rehabilitated. We passed legislation to make those calls free. It ended up not becoming a law so we are going to be pushing for that again.

Helen: Calls cost prisoners money in jail for those of you who don't know. . . Meg Bossong please unmute

6:29 pm

Meg Bossong: I have a question about the healthy youth act which I know you were a sponsor of last session. This bill really has a concrete impact on resources available to youth in Berkshire County. Some of the reasons its not passing are procedural issues. What can you do to move this bill finally out for vote?

Paul Mark: First thanks for your work on that. As ridiculous as it sounds, there's an overwhelming deference to the executive branch. I don't think governor Baker wanted to sign this bill. Possibly a political thing. I'm hoping the new Governor wants to sign this and that the barrier is gone.

Helen: Question in the chat from Tommie and Al- what can you do to ensure the flag and state seal gets changed to honor our indigenous people.

Paul Mark: The commission is working on this. It's going slowly. I think it's important that we express what the new flag might look like? I voted in favor

6:33 pm

Catherine Grubs: The prior Berkshire DA took part in a research project out of Duke regarding racial bias. What's your position on racial bias with the criminal system and is there anything on the agenda that will look at race, equity and criminal justice reform?

Paul Mark: We are doing a lot of work on this. This conversation can never end. . . . I'm joining criminal, justice caucus.

Helen Moon: Can I follow up on that and ask what your position is on raising the age for people being charged from crime. From 18 to 22 or 25. Because science tells us that brains don't develop until 25.

Paul Mark: I know we raised it to 19 and I would be supportive of more. Mental health ACES. Regarding extending adulthood to 21- This isn't about being soft on crime- its about learning and development.

Britany Polito: How can you protect democracy>?

Paul Mark: Civic education is very important. Teaching teachers how to implement this education in schools. Events like this- being approachable.

6:41 pm

Jeff Turner: Can the commonwealth implement Pell Grants? Our own version?

Paul Mark: Yes. I think we call it mass or adams grant. Trying to do this at the state level is a part of the plan. Plan to make Community college free. And a bill called Cherish where we fully fund public higher education. Taking away need to take on debt.

Linda Kelly: I've worked on addressing the cliff effect. I live in the west side and my neighbors work 2 jobs just to make ends meet. What are your thoughts on that?

Paul Mark: The cliff effect is that the more I work the less benefits I receive. I'm being punished to go back to work . . . I strongly support this.

Kamaar: There's a bill in the senate related to language inclusion. (Kamaar read bill). Do you support this bill? How do we get this passed.

Paul Mark: There's a lot of talk about this yes. We have multiple senators from bilingual households so this is important. If people have bills that they care about, send them to me.

Kamaar: I sent a link in chat, the bill is called the act to provide housing opportunity and mobility through eviction ceiling. Evictions fall wildly heavy on people of color. Many landlords rely on consumer reporting systems. . . . so the bill seals the records. Are you familiar with this? How can we make this bill a law?

Paul Mark: I will go back and look at this. . I put my email in there for you and anyone. Please remember to send me a quick email. I am always happy to look back and do research into this bill.

Kamaar: another question about district courts. . .

Paul Mark: will look into it. . . supportive of needing counsel of this kind of case

6:54 pm

Helen: Any bills for rent control?

Paul Mark: I know the city of Boston is looking to do something. A bill for local options. Another conversation to have. . .

Kamaar: Is there any effort to extend funding for emergency rental programs?

Paul Mark: Yes- as well as low income heating. These are a priority. A bond to make money flow and a supplemental budget. . . .

Kelan O'Brien: question about Aces bill. Is it looking to fund responders within police department or outside

Paul Mark: The bill is intended to be an alternative. . . . away from police.

7:00 pm

Helen: Thank you for all of your time. If you want to get ahold paul.mark@masenate.gov

7:01 pm

DP: Thank you Helen and Paul for your presentation and your commitment and involvement. I want to apologize for Sunday by the time I realized who you were, the rally was over. But I appreciate the fact that you were there. . . In times like this invitations do not have to be extended. . . . standing with the community. . . We have a serious problem with policing in this country and we need everyone's voice. I appreciate the fact that you were there Paul. Am I breaking up? I'm sorry this is the problem, it's clearly on my end. I'm going to jump around and ask Shirley, race relations to speak.

7:04 pm

Shirley: Good evening everyone. As Dennis stated, we have not had a break in terms of address complaints that we are receiving from community members. Discrimination, white supremacy. . Almost every system that exists, these complaints are constant. So I am happy to share that there have been some conversation with race relations and legal regress and how we are going to publicly address this. We have gathered information and Antony, our chair of legal redress that we are sending out Friday if not before. After the Op Ed is sent we are making plans to hopefully make systematic changes.

Jeff Turner: I had heard SROs are back.

Shirley: Yes, they are back in the schools. . . . we are having a meeting to discuss this.

Kamaar: Re: SRO's - they have an updated memorandum of understanding. . . more than ½ of students of color said they actively didn't feel safe around SRO. There's a safety committee that has been meeting. It could be a place if you are a resident of Pittsfield to go work in small working groups. Jeff I have your email I'll send info.

Shirley: We will keep you abreast when op ed is released and our next steps are released.

7:12 pm

DP: Is Dr. Sneed here? No, ok. I want to put this out- we need a treasurer for the NAACP. (DP breaking up) We need everyone's help. Anyone that has any ideas, please contact me directly through email. It's really crucial and I would appreciate the help.

Abbie von Schlegell: When you send out updates can you include all of us? I'm not a member

Darcie: If you are interested in joining I can send you info.

DP: Thanked everyone for the Freedom Fund event. . . .still hoping to raise more money for this event. We hit a lull since George Floyd in terms of giving. We have two committees, Juneteenth and Freedom fund that need talented people.

7:19 pm

DP: Spoke about NEACC- the president has resigned.

Another save the date, 6/24 Jacob's Pillow Gala. Thasia can you speak about April?

Thasia: In April the Urban Bush Woman, a dance company out of Brooklyn, has been working in the Berkshires for a while, are premiering a work called haint blue at Mass Moca in April. It's almost a 2 year process. (Spoke more in depth). . . The EC approved funding to support an evening of Haint Blue that will enable up to 50 people to attend this event. Tickets are also on sale.

DP: We are going to sponsor opening night at MCLA. It's an amazing experience and we have partnered with them. . . to see this project come to completion. . . to be in community together via this event. It will move you spiritually.

7:27 pm

DP: I think thats it, I'll open it up

Darcie: Make note that their education survey is up on the website right now for families to fill out. It'll be out for the entire month of February. If you know families, please fill this out.

Caterina: Is the survey only in English?

Darcie: Good point, we need to translate it. . .

Abbie von Schlegell: mentioned a translation app
Arlene

Caterina: we pay a local translator

Darcie: will share survey link in chat

DP: Anyone else?

Darcie: Just want to say that Derick Johnson the president of NAACP reshared the video I had made

7:32pm

DP: I appreciate everyone coming out tonight. I promise I'll have great internet service by the next meeting. . . We are really in difficult times in Berkshire County, especially the aggression

towards our youth. . . .We have a lot of work to do. We may find ourselves doing the old fashion picketing work to really highlight and bring the message across. We can't go backwards with all of the progress we've made. We owe it to our community and we owe it to our youth. I'm grateful for this organization and we are going ot do some important work together

I will entertain the motion

Shirley: So moved, goodnight

Darcie: Seconded

DP: All in favor, say bye!

As recorded via watching of zoom video by Marisa Massery