

Committee in boro: Addressing diversity issues a challenge

By Mike Neavill

NEW PROVIDENCE — It was only 32 months ago that Mayor John Thoms formed a Diversity Task Force to assess the cultural climate within the borough and to create a framework for inclusiveness and unity within the community.

At last week's Borough Council meeting, co-chairmen Rabbi Stuart Gershon of Temple Sinai in Summit and the Reverend Murdoch MacPherson of Faith Lutheran Church in New Providence told the governing body they were pleased with initial results, but that much more work is necessary.

MacPherson said that identified diversity challenges were actions

and words that were anti black, anti Latino, anti Semitic, anti Christian and anti gay and lesbian.

"At the same time, one of the strengths we discovered is that New Providence is far more diverse than it has ever been," the pastor said. He added that diversity is generally unknown to the community and, sadly, is regarded as objectionable in many quarters.

The cultural climate in the borough discourages some residents from publicly identifying themselves, expressing grievances and fully participating in community life, MacPherson said based on an extensive task force assessment.

The task force represented a broad cross-section of the commu-

nity. Members included municipal officials, Board of Education members, police, leaders of sports organizations, high school students, the Anti Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and many other individuals. If gaps on the task force existed, additional members were actively recruited, MacPherson said.

Gershon recommended the establishment of two permanent standing committees to carry forth the initial Diversity Task Force charter. He proposed a diversity committee that would meet monthly to process issues, revisit diversity attitudes, make recommendations and develop programs.

Gershon also urged the formation of an advisory council that would meet quarterly with the mayor and council president. The council would serve as a forum for issues of concern, involve community stakeholders in diversity matters and educate opinion leaders about diversity issues.

"Having two different groups will provide numerous benefits to the borough," the rabbi said.

Since its inception, the task force has delivered several recommendations that have been enacted.

The first recommendation in November 2007 addressed the issue of municipal observance of holidays. Those recommendations

were unanimously adopted by the Borough Council.

The task force next addressed diversity in the school district, presenting recommendations to the Board of Education in early 2008 after six months of research and dialogue. "Most, if not all, of those recommendations have been adopted by the board," MacPherson said.

Addressing the issue of bullying, the task force met with various sports organizations in town and developed a set of recommendations.

In addition, the task force has held numerous meetings with municipal employees and members of the police department, with an ad-

ditional set of recommendations now under consideration by the Borough Council.

Now numbering 22 members, the Diversity Task Force includes people from a diversity of religious and non-religious backgrounds, from various races, ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations, MacPherson said. He added that the group included young and old, and people new to the community as well as longtime residents.

MacPherson was quick to point out the valuable contributions made by Dr. Judith Springer, who served as a regular consultant and helped facilitate the group's process.