

# OPINION



## Your Turn

Jens C. Boemer  
Guest columnist  
Kitsap Sun

# Equity awareness and technical competence are not at odds

We live in a time when a mere question about “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” is, by some, considered a distraction at best, and perceived as a threat at worst. Joe McMillan’s recent guest column for the Kitsap Sun, in which he challenges the City of Bainbridge Island (COBI)’s policy to ask applicants to citizen advisory committees about how DEI could inform their advice, recently reminded me of the peculiarity of this time.

I had the privilege and joy of serving on COBI’s Climate Change Advisory Committee (CCAC) for two consecutive terms (2019–2025), have a PhD in electrical power systems, and am currently working as a technical executive of an international energy research institute. My career has been built on hard data, “best available science,” and rigorous technical competence. Yet, unlike Mr. McMillan, I do not find an open-ended interview question about equity to be irrelevant, a “political litmus test” or even a threat to freedom of thought.

In fact, the column’s anxious tone suggests a common misunderstanding of what modern technical consulting and public service require. Any qualified applicant to a city advisory committee — whether analyzing streamflow data for the Environmental Technical Advisory Committee (ETAC) or vetting zoning codes for the Planning Commission — should be capable of responding to these questions constructively. When the CCAC, for example, provided advice during the drafting of COBI’s Climate Change Action Plan (CAP), we used equity as one of the key criteria for evaluating actions in order to help determine which to prioritize.

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To suggest that technical data and analysis exist in a vacuum separate from human populations is simply bad science. Environmental policies, water management, and urban infrastructure directly impact people. And to put it mildly, they have not impacted everyone equally. From subsidies for roof-top solar that narrowly benefit homeowners but leave renters with little opportunities to increase their energy efficiency, to siting practices for hazardous facilities that exclude the voices of people of color and lower-income individuals, to flawed transit planning based on commuting patterns of a majority demographic that leaves residents in areas where unemployment is high with insufficient public transportation to essential services, there is no lack of evidence of what can happen when equity is not built into decision-making. Understanding how infrastructure decisions interact with diverse community needs is not a “contested political ideology”; it is a practical requirement for comprehensive data analysis.

Furthermore, Mr. McMillan’s far-fetched invocation of the Supreme Court’s 1943 *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* case — comparing a routine, open-ended interview question to a forced, state-mandated pledge of allegiance — resembles logical acrobatics. COBI is not forcing a “confession of faith.” Asking an applicant how they might ensure their technical expertise serves the *entire* community, or how they perceive systemic challenges, is standard governance practice designed to build inclusive public boards. It is an invitation to share perspective, not a demand for ideological uniformity.

Ultimately, the critique presented in Mr. McMillan’s column, in my view, lacks awareness of potential biases that any expert can internalize unconsciously. I was born in Germany, and while I am personally not responsible for them, I am still acutely aware of the atrocities committed by my people in the first half of the 20th century. This humility makes me certainly hope that every current and future member of COBI’s advisory committees demonstrate their willingness to reflect about how their technical advice could impact all members of our community.

After living on Bainbridge Island for more than a decade, I fortunately find Mr. McMillan’s opinion represents a highly niche perspective among our residents. Most of the community members I had the privilege to meet, recognize that true technical excellence and a commitment to equitable public service go hand-in-hand. But, if the national politics of the day teach us anything, it’s that we must meet these fringe viewpoints with solid, researched, unwavering rebuttal at every turn, lest they move the needle even further.

*Jens C. Boemer, Ph.D., is currently with an international energy research institute, previously served on the City of Bainbridge Island’s Climate Change Advisory Committee, and lives on Bainbridge Island with his family.*