

Selectboard vote means Windsor street will keep slaveholder's name

By [ALEX HANSON](#)



WINDSOR — In a divided vote, the Selectboard has decided against holding a public hearing on whether to rename a street bearing the name of a prominent early resident of town who purchased a Black woman and kept her as a slave.

The vote last week appears to bring an [end to a debate begun in June](#), when Selectboard member Amanda Smith and other Windsor residents called for Jacob Street to be renamed.

In a speech at the start of the Nov. 24 Selectboard meeting, Chairwoman Heather Prebish said the board [has debated the issue](#) for five months without reaching consensus. A recent survey found that 58% of respondents wanted to keep the name as it is, she noted.

"What I have witnessed as a result of this divide is a conversation that has become more and more polarized, with very strong ideas about what should happen," Prebish said. "It is my opinion that we take this conversation in a new direction and focus on how we as the Windsor community can come together and align on how to best meet this goal of celebrating and honoring this remarkable woman" who was enslaved.

The board voted, 3-2, with Prebish, Paul Belaski and James Reed in the majority, against a motion to hold a public hearing on the proposal to rename Jacob Street.

Amanda Smith and Chris Goulet were in the minority and voted in favor of the hearing, which would be required before the name of the street, which is downtown off State Street, could be changed.

Stephen Jacob, for whom the street is named, studied at Dartmouth and Yale, fought in the Revolutionary War and served in local and state political office, including as a Windsor selectman and state representative. He was Vermont's first United States Attorney and sat on the Vermont Supreme Court.

He also owned an enslaved person. A bill of sale shows he purchased Dinah Mason from a man in Charlestown in 1783, and town records indicate she lived in the Jacob household until 1800, when she was either turned out as too old and infirm to work or was allowed to leave.

There is little historical record of Mason's life, and what records exist are

legal documents. The town sued Jacob in an effort to recoup some of the public money the town spent to care for Mason after she left Jacob's home. Jacob argued that she couldn't have been a slave, since the Vermont constitution made slavery illegal. The two other members of the Vermont Supreme Court ruled against the town's effort to admit the bill of sale as evidence — Jacob had recused himself — and the town withdrew its lawsuit. Mason died in 1809.

The effort to rename Jacob Street sought to remove the name of a slaveowner from a position of prominence in town and to make space for discussion of Dinah Mason. In her speech, Prebish ran through a list of other ways to honor Mason, including signage; restoration of Jacob's historic house, which belongs to Historic Windsor, a nonprofit; school curriculum that teaches about Mason's life and slavery in Vermont; a statue; and a scholarship in her name.

"I believe that by reflecting on these additional ideas, we can start to generate a more positive and collaborative discussion that is representative of our community as a whole and meets the original intent of the initial conversation," Prebish said. "In that spirit, I want to state that I do not support moving forward with the public hearing or continuing the debate to change the street name."

Without further discussion, Prebish moved to set a public hearing, and the motion was voted down.

Spoken and written comments sent to the Selectboard by residents expressed dismay at the foreclosure of further discussion about the proposed name change.

"Changing a street name can be hard, but being told you don't belong by the town government is always, and significantly, harder," said Colin Moon, a

Windsor resident. "You are choosing to be on the wrong side of history, but more importantly, you are saying to the people who do not look like you that they are not welcome here."

"The message is, Windsor accepts misguided traditionalism over progress and equality," Cody Sullivan wrote.

Mary McNaughton, a [member of a working group](#) established by the Selectboard to study the proposed name change, wrote that the discussion had gotten off track and argued that residents who wanted to change the street name had made up their minds before the committee got to work. She cited the online survey, which was filled out by an estimated 7.4% of Windsor residents as an example of how proponents of changing the street name were ignoring the will of the majority.

"The fact is 60% of residents who participated were against the name change, does that make the results illegitimate?" McNaughton wrote.

The [committee's report](#) also outlines some logistical challenges with changing the street name.

Also at the meeting last week, the board voted unanimously to create a committee on justice, equity, diversity and inclusion and to name several volunteers to the committee, including Smith, who will be the Selectboard's liaison.

"I think this is Windsor putting action and work behind our values," Smith said. "And I think, especially given how much pain has been revealed and now mostly dismissed, I think this allows people some sense of healing and comfort, knowing that these conversations will continue and that there will be people that they can also reach out (to) if they now no longer feel directly comfortable speaking with the Selectboard, which is a shame."

Alex Hanson can be reached at ahanson@vnews.com or 603-727-3207.