



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

Thursday, July 20, 2006, 6:00 p.m.
179 Holland Street, Tufts Administration Building
Meeting Minutes

Commissioners present: Herby Duverne, Susan Goldstein, Nathan Lemmon, Cesar Urrunaga

Others present: Martha Costa (Somerville Police Department liaison), Sonja Darai (Somerville Commission for Women), Danielle Dreilinger (Boston Globe City Weekly correspondent), Eileen Feldman (Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities), Ralph Hergert, Mary Lu Mendonca, Susan Mortimer (Massachusetts Statewide Harm Reduction Coalition - SHaRC)

1. Administrative

Introductions

Cesar suggested that everyone introduce themselves. Susan Mortimer was interested in talking about the women's jail being proposed for construction in Somerville.

Minutes

Mary Lu passed out the minutes from last month. Susan moved to accept the May minutes as written, Herby seconded, and the motion was passed unanimously. Cesar moved to accept the June minutes, Susan seconded, and the motion was passed unanimously.

New Commissioners/Commissioner Recruitment

Mary Lu mentioned a couple of prospects. Eileen said that she contacted the City Solicitor to ask whether she would be permitted to serve on both the Commission for Persons with Disabilities and the Human Rights Commission, but never heard back. She has spoken with others in the city and heard that could be a problem, and Susan agreed that this was probably the case. Mary Lu mentioned that she knew of another example in which someone served on both the Recreation Commission and the Commission for Persons with Disabilities.

Ralph reported on his efforts to join the Commission. He spoke with the mayor many months ago and was told he would be approved on that end. He still needs to send his letter and resume to the mayor and will copy Mary Lu.

Susan asked about our liaisons to the Board of Aldermen and the School Committee. Mary Lu reported that Aldermen Bill White and School Committee member Paul Bockleman have agreed to join as liaisons. Mary Lu notified both of them about this meeting by e-mail, but did not get a response from either of them.

Director's report

- Trainings: Mary Lu is still working with others to put together and review materials on different trainers available to conduct a session on diversity and multiculturalism for city department heads.
- Know-Your-Rights workshop. Mary Lu distributed copies of a flyer advertising this event, which we are cosponsoring with the Haitian Coalition and the Welcome Project. Commissioners made positive comments about the flyer. Susan suggested notifying newspapers, and Mary Lu reported that she has notified the Somerville Journal and several Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish-language papers. Commissioners agreed that the event's location (the Mystic Activity Center) was good. Danielle asked about the impetus for this event, and commissioners responded with a discussion about the perceived climate of poor relations between police and immigrant communities. We have heard stories about local police pulling over drivers and asking about immigration status. Martha spoke about how the Police Department recently has been dealing with a flood of invalid international drivers' licenses and counterfeit licenses from Brazilian drivers. The Human Rights Commission has collaborated on two other Know-Your-Rights presentations focused on immigrant communities over the last several months. This one will provide information in the context of the current climate, and will include speakers from the Somerville Police Department in an effort to improve communication between those officials and immigrant communities.
- Budget: Mary Lu reported that her request for more staff time (an increase in hours from thirty to forty, which would have raised her salary accordingly from \$30,000 to \$40,000) was not submitted to the Board of Aldermen in the recent round of budget appropriations. Susan and Herby said that they plan to make an appointment with the mayor to ask for an increase in this budget item.

Commissioner Updates

Cesar brought up the issue of wheelchair-accessibility of buses in the city. Nobody was sure whether responsibility for this lay with the MBTA or the city. Eileen suggested he contact the city's ADA coordinator, Richard Tranfaglia.

Nathan announced that he and his wife, Commissioner Kerry Venegas, will be moving to Medford in September, so that they would no longer be able to serve on the commission. The Commissioners expressed disappointment, but wished them well. Mary Lu and Cesar recommended that they check out the Medford Human Rights Commission.

2. Program Planning

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Sonja Darai from the Somerville Commission for Women joined us for a discussion about collaborating on our annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day event. Sonja proposed that we continue to focus on producing an event with speakers and performances inside the auditorium while allowing the Women's Commission and others to set up tables in the outer lobby. We talked about the pros and cons of this idea. Sonja said that because our event draws such a good crowd, it is a premium opportunity for her commission and other groups wishing to share information about their services. Susan expressed concern that too much involvement by other groups would dilute the importance of what is our commission's signature event. Other commissioners were concerned that too much activity would dilute the very nature of the event as a commemoration of Dr. King's work and the civil rights era in general. Sonja pointed out that there are many groups that could make use of the tabling opportunity to publicize services and programs that honor this legacy. There was a question about what standards could be used to determine which groups would have tables. One suggestion was to confine participating groups to city commissions. Another suggestion was to involve only groups whose mission correlated to the event's theme. Others thought it would be best to use broad criteria and strive to be inclusive of a range of groups. Another proposal was to involve other commissions and groups in the service project component of MLK Day, rather than through tabling. The Commission decided that there needs to be more discussion of this, and that we need to select the theme at an upcoming meeting.

Proposal to build a jail in Somerville

Susan Mortimer spoke to the commissioners about her opposition to the idea of building a jail in the city. She explained that the prison system perpetrates many kinds of human rights abuses, including economic, social, and racial injustices. She argued that jail conditions are discriminatory to women and immigrants. She said that as more and more people are being jailed, prisons become overcrowded and this is used as an excuse to build more prisons. She said that this perpetuates a destructive cycle of increasing arrests. She said that many people are held for long periods of time simply awaiting trial, or for non-violent crimes. Susan Mortimer spoke about Jack Cole, a police officer from Medford who gave a presentation on the negative effects of jailing people for non-violent drug offenses. Jack can speak to anyone and can put it in terms of wasted tax dollars. She mentioned that one of the draws of building a jail in a given community is the money that is available. Susan distributed materials and referred commissioners to the website www.stopchicopeejail.org and to a publication entitled "Manufacturing Overcapacity". Susan asked about how the Somerville Human Rights Commission could help and urged us to "speak out" about the issue. Cesar suggested that it might be more appropriate for us to facilitate public discussion rather than take a position for or against. We could organize a town meeting or some other forum on the issue. Mary Lu said that there is a feasibility study currently being conducted to determine if the jail will be built, and that we could look into whether there would be a "public comment period."

Conversations Project

Mary Lu said that she has been working with an intern from the Tufts Active Citizenship Summer Program, Lillian O'Donnell, to begin planning the Conversations Project. After an initial meeting with former organizers and several commissioners, the decision was made to focus on the topic of "Youth and Young Families." Mary Lu said that we need commissioners to get involved by volunteering to learn about the program and go out to community meetings to publicize it and recruit participants. She suggested Tuesday, August 15, as a date commissioners could meet for a training on how to do this, but only Cesar will be available. Other commissioners are interested in participating, and can attend trainings and meetings after August.

Calendar items

The Commission selected October 21, 2006 as a tentative date for our annual retreat. This would be held on a Saturday morning at the same location as before (VNA building), if possible. Mary Lu will check on VNA availability.

Commissioners are encouraged to attend and publicize our Know-Your-Rights event on Thursday, July 27, 2006 at the Mystic Activity Center.

Commissioners are encouraged to volunteer time at the Mystic Community Barbecue Tuesday, August 22, 2006, where we will have an HRC table.

Mary Lu will work with Cesar and others to set up a Conversations Project planning meeting on Tuesday, August 15, at 6:00 p.m. She will contact individual commissioners who cannot attend to schedule future training dates.

NO AUGUST MEETING.