

Somerville Human Rights Commission
June 18, 2009
Monthly Public Meeting
167 Holland St., Somerville

Notes

Commissioners in Attendance (quorum was achieved with 75% attendance)

Barry Rafkind - Chair
Cesar Urrunaga
John Robinson

Commissioner(s) with An Excused Absence

Ashraf Hegazy

Others in Attendance

Sonja Darai - Acting Director of Somerville Commissions
Anthony Holloway - Somerville Police Chief
Nancy Murray - Director of Education, MA ACLU

Membership / Recruitment

- The HRC currently has only 4 serving commissioners and there are 8 unfilled seats. We need to recruit more commissioners to fulfill our mission. Other commissions are facing similar and more extreme membership struggles. The following are some recruitment ideas:
- Send out email blasts to our networks
- Put together a year-round recruitment strategy, similar to what the Women's Commission is and has been doing successfully with events throughout the year which Sonja can help us organize (perhaps a cook-out, as John suggests).
- Ask community groups to nominate someone. Make membership seem like an honor.
- Hold a recognition dinner and honor a community activist.
- The HRC will have a presence at ArtBeat this summer and that is a good opportunity to educate the public and recruit new members
- Increase publicity of the HRC's work, with letters-to-the-editor, press releases, etc...
- We discussed our frustration with the amount of work we put into the annual MLK Day event and the lack of recruitment it generates. Perhaps we have not been emphasizing recruitment enough at the event.

DHS Surveillance Cameras

- Thanks to SPD Chief Holloway for presenting the program and answering our many questions!

- Thanks to ACLU MA Director of Education, Nancy Murray, for presenting the ACLU's concerns and answering many questions!
- City Solicitor John Gannon and Health Director Paulette Renault-Caragaines were unable to make it tonight.
- The central question for the HRC is whether the security benefits of the camera system outweigh the resulting erosion of privacy rights.
- According to Chief Holloway:
 - Seven cameras were installed around Somerville for two purposes, outlined in the original DHS grant, (1) assist with traffic management in case of an evacuation from Boston, and (2) prevent and solve acts of terrorism
 - There is no legal expectation of privacy in public spaces.
 - The cameras, which are part of a Boston-area network, are not monitored regularly by Somerville officers, although the live streams are displayed in the main station and sub-stations.
 - Some of the cameras watch the community path while the rest watch major traffic intersections.
 - By default, the continuously recording cameras do not have high enough resolution to identify faces, but they can be zoomed in upon special order from Chief Holloway.
 - The camera recordings are saved for 21 days and then wiped clean.
 - There are weekly internal audits to check on the camera control activity (commands issued by SPD officers) to ensure the cameras are not being misused.
 - The SPD officers are not regularly monitoring the cameras, but they would use them if they get a call reporting an incident-in-progress, or if they wanted to look back at previous recordings for evidence of criminal activity.
 - Any member of the public may purchase a DVD of any recordings, if the start and end times are specified in the request. Chief Holloway thought this would be an expensive thing to do, although no one has requested copies yet.
 - The camera system operates on a high frequency encrypted wireless network that is password-protected and only select SPD officers have the credentials to log in.
 - The Public Health and Safety committee of the Board of Aldermen held a public hearing last month about the cameras and have requested Chief Holloway to issue a report around the end of 2009.
 - Because of the pending BOA report, Chief Holloway was unable to discuss the effectiveness of the program thus far.
 - The chief expressed his confidence in the ability of the system to solve crimes and considers this program an important crime-fighting tool.
 - Before any new DHS cameras or equipment might be installed (there are no plans on the table for this yet), updated DHS rules would require Chief Holloway to seek approval first from the Board of Aldermen.
- According to Nancy Murray, Dir. of Education for the MA ACLU

- The cameras were installed secretly, and were only discovered in Aug 2008 by a reporter for the Somerville Journal.
- She passed out a flyer outlining the ACLU's concerns about the proliferation of surveillance technologies in society and the creep towards a police state and loss of liberty. [note to self: ask for the electronic version]
- She also handed out copies of the article:
 - The cities of Cambridge and Brookline have decisively and overwhelmingly rejected the cameras.
 - Expressed skepticism that the cameras would be useful during an evacuation.
 - Noted the government's on-going Total Information Awareness program, Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) program, and the related data fusion centers. These programs integrate many types and sources of data. Nancy pointed out that large databases of data often contain inaccurate data, as is widely know to have happened with the TSA No Fly List.
 - Posed the question about what kind of society we want to have and how much liberty are we willing to sacrifice for security or the sense of security.
- The commission will issue a press release detailing its concerns about the surveillance camera program, including:
 - The central question of whether the security benefits of the camera system outweigh the resulting erosion of privacy rights... and the related question of the program's effectiveness towards (1) traffic management (2) counter-terrorism (3) crime solving and prevention. Also, the lack of scientific research to support its effectiveness.
 - The letter will be drafted via email and presented for a vote a the July HRC meeting.

Director's Report

- Sonja handed out copies of her director's report.[note: ask Sonja for electronic versions]

Miscellaneous

- Barry is henceforth unavailable on Thursday evenings, so he requested consideration for moving the HRC monthly meeting date (which is currently the 3rd Thursday of the month). He, John, Cesar, and Sonja agreed that Tuesdays are fine. We will ask Ashraf for his input and then try to settle on a day that works for all.