



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE  
MAYOR

**Thursday, May 17, 2007, 6:30 p.m.**  
**167 Holland Street, Tufts Administration Building**  
**Meeting Minutes**

Members Present: Ben Echevarria, Susan Goldstein, Barry Rafkind, Yvette Verdieu

Members Absent: Ralph Hergert, Christopher Hope, Ify Mora, Cesar Urrunaga

Others Present: Mary Lu Mendonca

Minutes:

Mary Lu distributed minutes from our April meeting. We did not have a quorum and could not vote on whether to accept them.

Union Square Zoning (Taken out of turn from agenda):

SCC contacted us a few days ago to ask whether we could testify in support of more affordable housing at a hearing tonight about zoning changes in Union Square. Mary Lu tried to ensure that enough members would be present here so that we could vote on a statement and send someone over to deliver it, but several members were not able to attend. SCC sent us a template letter to use as a model.

Commissioners present were generally in support of our sending testimony. According to Jesse from SCC, written comments are also important. Ben will draft a statement based on the model letter and circulate it to members via e-mail before sending it out to the aldermen.

Director's Report:

Mary Lu went over the director's report. Several items initiated discussion:

- Foss Park gangs/labor – A recent BOA order calls for a meeting to discuss “recent incidents around Foss Park, including gang activity and day laborers”. Mary Lu corresponded with Aldermen Roche, who clarified that while day laborers’ presence at the park is not seen as a problem, there have been specific complaints by nearby residents about incidents involving some laborers “disrespecting” the neighborhood. Mary Lu asked to be included in the discussion and will be notified when the meeting occurs. Yvette and Ben also want to be present at the meeting to represent the HRC.
- Conversations Project – The Congress on May 11 was a huge success, and commissioners thought we had done a great job with the project as a whole. This was also a good public relations opportunity for us, and several people expressed interest in joining the commission. Our next step is to put together a report of all the

recommendations from the groups. Mary Lu needs lots of help with this and will contact members via e-mail to set a meeting date for planning and assigning tasks.

- City Involvement in Civil Rights Lawsuits – Mary Lu contacted City Solicitor John Gannon to remind him that we should be informed of any civil rights lawsuits involving the city. Although he has agreed to do so in the past, Gannon did not inform us of a recent First Amendment suit brought by a Somerville Police Officer against the city. Gannon characterized the lawsuit as an internal personnel matter because the allegations underlying the suit were that the officer was denied a promotion because he participated in public demonstrations supporting a police union contract. Mary Lu reminded him that the filing of a lawsuit is public record and pointed out that we learned of it through articles published in the local newspapers. There was some discussion of whether we should continue to pursue the matter with the solicitor. Since he has refused to notify us of lawsuits on several occasions in the past despite our repeated requests, however, it was felt that further communication would probably not be fruitful.

### Commissioner Updates

Yvette reported on the series of meetings she has been attending on immigrants' issues. This working group is one of several organized by SCC as part of its East Somerville Initiative. Yvette said that there has been a lot of participation from representatives of the Brazilian and Spanish-speaking communities. Discussion has centered around the job situation for immigrants in East Somerville. The group wants to support job growth measures that would prioritize hiring Somerville residents and opportunities for immigrants to get involved with unions. They are interested in connecting with the HRC to see how we can help.

Susan was interested in getting more involved, and noted that she sees a clear need for more legal representation for immigrants in the city. Mary Lu is interested in attending meetings also.

The group meets Saturdays at 11:00, typically at the East Somerville Stop & Shop. Their next meeting is on Memorial Day weekend. Members weren't sure who could attend, but we will try to make future meetings. The contact for finding out more information is Lisa Gimbel from SCC.

### Issues

We began by revisiting a couple of issues brought up at our April meeting:

- Arlington/SHS incident and investigation review: the Investigatory Committee met to discuss this, and agreed that there is not a lot of action for us to take. We will request a copy of the final investigative report from the Arlington HRC and contact the School Department to commend them on their thorough investigation and to follow up with a few questions about how they plan to proceed in the future.
- Same-sex marriages statement: Mary Lu distributed template press releases that the HRC can send out as a quick response to what we see as either a negative or positive development. There was some discussion about whether it would be worthwhile to issue a statement on same-sex marriages at this late date. Barry will draft a statement on this issue, using the model release, and to send it out to commissioners for consensus.
- Gender and Hate Crimes bill: Mary Lu contacted Rep. Sciortino's office to express our support for the bill and to ask why the "transgender" category is not specifically included in the bill. Sciortino's aide was not certain, but suggested that this was because "transgender" has no definition under law. Barry wanted a more definitive answer. Mary Lu thought that

New issues that have come up since last month included:

- Guardian Angels – Dennis Fischman of CAAS contacted us about a recent article in the *Somerville News* which announced the arrival of the “Guardian Angels” in Somerville. This is a crime-watch group that has been active in Boston and other cities. Susan thought that it seemed like a positive group, but wondered if they are more of a crime-watch program or a group of people out for vigilante justice. Barry pointed out that they don’t seem to be armed. Ben said that while they are not armed, members do get trained in physical combat. Other cities, including Boston, have objected to the group’s presence. Mary Lu expressed concern about the lack of accountability of a private group acting as law enforcement. Commissioners agreed that we should try to find out more information.

Attendance Policy:

Mary Lu passed out a table showing the attendance records of commissioners at our meetings. Barry and others had expressed concern in the past about the inactivity of some members. It was pointed out that Chris Hope in particular has missed a number of meetings. The question was raised of whether to take some action enforcing our attendance policy.

Susan thought we should contact Chris and ask about his intentions with regard to the Commission. She thought enforcing the policy would be harsh and unrealistic, since we should be happy to have any participation at all. Ben thought that we should at least insist on prior notification where a member has to miss a meeting. Barry thought that being a commissioner takes commitment, and pointed out that when a member misses lots of meetings it negatively impacts the ability of the whole commission to act. Mary Lu pointed out that it is difficult to conduct business when we rarely have a quorum at our meetings. Yvette noted that people have legitimate reasons why they cannot attend meetings, but thought there should be some consequences. It was agreed that Mary Lu will talk with Chris, remind him of his responsibilities, and ask about his intentions.

Retreat:

Our retreat will be held on Saturday, June 16 from 9am-3pm. Tentative location is the Visiting Nurses Association, 259 Lowell Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Conference Room. We put together a list of the following agenda items:

- (Procedural item) Set time limits for each item at the beginning of the meeting and stick to them!
- Convening an Outreach/Communications Committee
  - o possible first project: plans for a No Place For Hate ceremony in Somerville
  - o focus on bringing in new members
- Review of by-laws
- Review and evaluation of the Conversations Project and the results of the Congress
- Select a theme for the upcoming year
- Review past activities
  - o financial report
  - o events, programs, number of people served
- MLK Day planning
- Elect new co-chairpersons
- Fundraising and grants

Susan will not be able to attend, but said she would support immigration as a theme for the upcoming year. Mary Lu will send out several documents so that Susan can weigh in ahead of time. Attending Commissioners should also look over materials in advance so that we can have as productive a meeting as possible. Mary Lu will send out:

- By-laws
- Congress report
- Financial and program reports
- MLK task list
- Minutes from our last retreat

There was some discussion about whether to actively outreach to potential members for the Retreat. Commissioners thought that the retreat is not the best way for new people to get a sense of what we do. The meeting will be long, with a focus on brainstorming and strategic planning rather than discussion of specific issues. We agreed that while we will of course comply with open meeting posting requirements, we will not actively reach out to invite new people to the retreat.

Upcoming events:

Mary Lu reported that we will be profiled at the upcoming No Place For Hate Conference for our organization of the Immigrant-Police dialogue series. Commissioners who went last year said they enjoyed the conference. Ben will probably attend this year as well. At the conference we will receive a NPFH sign to be erected in the community and perhaps should begin thinking of planning an event around that.

Miscellaneous:

Ben has a new e-mail: [Pastorben1@gmail.com](mailto:Pastorben1@gmail.com)

Next Meeting:

June 21 (after the retreat!)