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## **SOMERVILLE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

November 17, 2005, 2005, 6:30 p.m.  
Tufts Administration Building, 167 Holland Street, Somerville  
Meeting Minutes

Members present: Herby Duverné, Mike Koehler, Nathan Lemmon, Mary Lu Mendonca, Kevin O'Malley, César Urrunaga, Yvette Verdieu

Non-members present: Kerry Venegas, Rev. Benjamin Echevarria, Jr., and Yari Weaver

### I. Old Business

- Minutes from September and October meetings accepted.

### II. Director's Report – Mary Lu (refer to handout of Director's Report)

- City doesn't currently have an ADA compliance person is a Human Rights issue. Update on Disability Commission still looking for city documents on ADA issues, trying to meet with alderman, trying to get a full time Disability person.
- Housing issues – suggestion to merge Fair Housing Commission with Human Rights Commission.
- Police issues:
  1. Police Advisory Group Report recommendation that police badges have identifying numbers. The issue is pertinent to Human Rights Commission, it is important to be able to identifying police for positive feedback or negative (complaint). Boston and Cambridge has this HRC supports this recommendation. (Mary Lu will send Police Advisory Group Report to commission).
  2. Discussion: of email and letter re: removing police chief's position from civil service and supporting several additional recommendations (see Director's Report).

Herby – don't think this is a human's rights issue to have chief elected or appointed; I feel different about that issue because I don't think that system is really better than the other, better to have a check and balance combination of both – committee determines the three most qualified Nate – moving forward and being positive; almost seems like saying people are not being professional directly not so much between the lines.

Yvette – what can we do as the HRC and what is their expectations. (Kevin: Mary Lu asked to reflect on the issue and respond as a HRC person. Increased accountability in firing of the chief, and increased accountability for the city and the mayor for conduct of chief and police in general).

Kevin: no training for police, the manual has not been updated since 1995 ?. The police department is in dire need of training and moral. Commission on police recommended that chief be accountable to the mayor. Right now, the city is responsible and can be sued, but mayor is not.

Cesar – liked the letter, agree with removing job from civil service. In the letter did speak about other issues related to Human Rights. First read thought it was a political thing, not sure it was a human rights issues. I don't know if we need something completely glaring to say.

Mike – The issue for me was that we should vote on whatever gets proffered as a human rights thing. To be on the most solid footing we need to be in person in a public meeting.

Mary Lu – Better to do something rather than nothing. Have been other issues that have come up (Walnut Center union organizing). Learning what to act on or not act on.

Kevin – agreed with most things in the letter; what I disagreed with was that the letter spoke for the commission, but we didn't have a chance to vote on it. Better to speak as Director if the letter comes up again- take position as director, we can speak as commission.

Herby – must be some discretion in the job; it is good you take a position if it seems like one needs to be taken. Be careful of the perception that we are on one side or the other or taking side of mayor.

Yvette: sometimes she needs to make decision.

Kevin: Something has to be done and this is one way to do it.

### III. Process/Organization:

- Clear directive for Mary Lu:

Clear directive to act as Director of HRC in situations where immediate action is required, representing the response as coming from her office, and then informing the Commission of the action taken. In situations where immediate response is not required, the Commission will consider action and will choose how to represent itself.

- Changing the number needed for quorum:

Suggestion to make 51 % of the commissioners present this would be considered a quorum.

- Procedures to apply to be a commissioner:

Applications for becoming a commissioner. In the ordinance says commission to recommend to the mayor. History from Kevin: an application process was established, answered questions about potential human rights stuff, extended process. When Curtatone was elected he wanted a letter and a resume submitted to him and to commission so both have discretion. Do we want to keep this procedure? Yes.

- Commissioners Conduct: Cesar – How about commissioners acting or representing views as individual? Kevin – be really careful about using the words” I’m a Human Rights Commissioner” with respect to expressing personal views. Making sure to clearly identify when you are speaking as yourself, as a citizen vs. in your capacity as a Human Rights Commissioner.

- Enforcement Powers: (see section 2.76 Complaint Resolution Procedures of Cambridge HRC)  
Be wary of amending regulations

#### **Discussion:**

- ❖ Called the MCAD and no true information about our situation. The only difference with Cambridge is that MCAD refers all of the cases to Cambridge who investigates, etc. like we do and then if there is an actual hearing, Cambridge refers back to MCAD. Mary Lu's thought is that we could amend our procedures/ordinance. Kevin: question of standing. Benjamin: MCAD appoints an attorney/provides legal help, but does not represent themselves in the lawsuit. Commission cannot file a compliant. Need to look into this more before we consider any changes. Need to talk to folks in Cambridge to find out more about how this procedure works. Kevin: Let's say we find somebody in violation and fine them \$300 and they pay it, so what happens if the person victimized then wants to go to court and use and the fined party says I can't be tried twice. Does this remove power of the victim?

- ❖ The powers of the Cambridge commission come from the Ordinance and not from MCAD. The city goes to court when a violation is found. Mary Lu: their ordinance is very long and specific. Before we do this, we need to really compare Cambridge ordinance with ours and figure out how to proceed. We cannot currently find probable cause – it is better for a person to go straight to MCAD because we currently have no cause. (Homeless issue so agency on behalf of homeless person may not want to be making waves.)
- ❖ Need to further investigate the two; we need a committee to assist Mary Lu. Mike: we will be identifying the things, such as this, that we want to work on and divide up duties. Tabled until Saturday.

### III. New Commissioners:

- Chris Hope – met with mayor and submitted to Alderman. Hasn't called him in to subcommittee on appointments. Should get it shortly.
- Rev. Ben will be applying for commissioner position.
  - ❖ Long time resident of Somerville – lived here his whole life. Works with at-risk youth. Advocates for youth. Sees many different issues, especially that people don't know where to go for help or supports. Spends a lot of time speaking for or helping parents and families in schools and court. Wants to make positive changes on a larger scale; to be part of a force that is trying to make changes in this community. Ordained for about a year. Also operates a catering company through the ministry – By Storm Ministries – international and non-denominational. He is Bilingual. Pastoral staff of 4, serving over 75 children on a weekly basis.
  - ❖ By Storm Ministries information: Type of services- holistic approach to help mind body and soul, bible study and prayer, also work with mediation/resolution services, job search and job skills, in schools. The other part is working with the family to bridge understanding between youth and their families. Moving into more formal life skill classes, have a counselor, etc.
  - ❖ Mike: when you look at commission what can it do for the city. Rev. Ben: get involved with the police situation and the way city handles things- lack of languages, racial issues. As a commission, it holds more weight. Looking to move more into homeless issues. Many at-risk youth are homeless and does see discrimination.

### IV. Retreat:

1. Setting an agenda for the year - Have a big calendar and brainstorm of the what and when we want to this and discuss how to accomplish this. Figuring out what we want to accomplish and what committees we need.

- Writing of a yearly reports (figuring out the metrics of how to measure this)
- Grants
- Movie series
- No Place for Hate
- Human Rights Trainings for Businesses
- Etc.

2. Processes – such as how to apply, changes to definition of a quorum, adding liaison members, filing complaints as a commissioner, (return of certified letter because no one to sign for problem), issues of bias – actual or appearance, voting on supporting something that could be a ballot question, Mary Lu's role and expectation, etc.

- We need someone to bring an easel (Kevin) and newsprint/Post-Its (pick up from Mary Lu), Markers (Mary Lu and Kerry)
- Copies of the Report on Surveys and the list of all the things we want to do (Mike will bring both)
- Budget discussion about how the money is earmarked and can be used (do we have this knowledge? Nope, so table it for now)

### 3. MLK, Jr. Day Celebration

#### IV. Grants and Grant Applications:

- Random grants that are available, for example the Anti-Defamation League (question about eligibility)
- The grant application for tomorrow: Tuft's Neighborhood Service Fund – maximum \$2000. Deadline is 5:00pm. May not be possible this year. Cost for 75 dbl. sided copies, 1000 brochures at 10 cents x 2 sides
  1. Funding for MLK, Jr.
  2. Money for promoting HRC- printing and distribution cost, and door-to-door neighborhood walk – Community Outreach
  3. Health-Dental care (already being done)
- Create a grants folder and put grants on the agenda for Saturday for discussion

#### V. No Place for Hate –took a look at it and put on the agenda for Saturday

#### VI. MLK, Jr. Day Celebration

- \$1000-1200 spent last year. In previous years, schools have covered more costs.
- Mary Lu has a spreadsheet of tasks – this year no support from mayor's office because we have director.
- Student or staff sitting on HRC – suggestion to also pursue liaisons from school system and police to sit on commission.
- Meeting with Somerville Superintendent
  - ❖ Supportive of the event
  - ❖ Need to change venue due to heating concerns. Suggested SHS or Healey School.
  - ❖ HRC will have to contact city for custodial and security; will check that we provide

#### VII. Health Issues:

- On the agenda by accident, Kevin mentioned this with respect to grant writing to support access to services. Yvette will be supplying information on Boston Interfaith Initiative on health care access. Suggestion to have Commission support health care access by voting on this and issuing a statement with our stance.

#### VIII. Housing/Homeless Issues:

- Questions about where homeless people fall under discrimination laws
- Training for businesses with respect to dealing with homeless people
- Brochure on "Your Rights as a Homeless Person"
- Mayor's Taskforce on Homelessness – they want someone from the commission to sit on their task force in developing a 10-year plan.
- Need to investigate other communities' responses