



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

Meeting Minutes
June 15, 2006 - 6:30 p.m.
Tufts Administration Building, 179 Holland Street

Present: Ben Echevarria, Susan Goldstein, Ralph Hergert (potential commissioner), Nathan Lemmon, Mary Lu Mendonca, Cesar Urrunaga, Yvette Verdieu

1. Administrative

Because only three commissioners were present at the beginning of the meeting, there was no quorum to approve the May meeting minutes.

Mary Lu posted the February, March, and April meeting minutes on the city website before they were approved at last month's meeting. There was a question about whether this was appropriate to do before they were approved. Mary Lu said that all documents put out by our commission are public records as soon as they are created. Cesar suggested that we follow the example of the Board of Aldermen, which posts minutes on the website with a disclaimer saying that they have not yet been approved.

Commissioner departures

Mary Lu passed out copies of Mike Koehler's letter of resignation.

New commissioner candidates and recruitment

Ralph Hergert introduced himself as a candidate for commissioner. Ralph has a long history of working on human rights issues in the city. He used to work for the Human Services Department under Mayor Capuano. He was in this position at the time the Human Rights Commission was created as part of a larger community response to several disturbing hate incidents. Currently Ralph is semi-retired, does some fundraising for the Democratic party, and acts as pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in east Somerville.

Mary Lu said that she was worried about the departures of Mike and Kevin, and suggested that we be more aggressive about recruiting new commissioners.

Susan thought that our numbers look good, and that it's an unfortunate fact that membership skyrockets only in response to something terrible happening.

Ben thought that having commissioners more actively involved in community events will spark interest in potential members.

Cesar suggested that we have information for interested applicants available in a trifold brochure like the one created for the HRC. Mary Lu will work on that. Mary Lu will also post meeting notices in the weekly "community notes" section of the Somerville Journal.

Eileen notes that on the HRC section of the city website there is a "get involved" link that doesn't work.

Eileen introduced herself as chair of the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities. She has spoken with Mary Lu about disability issues in the past, and thinks we could collaborate more in the future.

Susan reported that Paul Bockleman has agreed to be our School Committee liaison. We still need a high school student liaison. Mary Lu spoke with the president of the SHS Gay-Straight Alliance and asked for suggestions. Ben will also call some of the kids from his church and try to get some people interested.

Director's report

Mary Lu is working with Personnel and other commissions on instituting diversity trainings for city employees, and is researching training providers at this point. Several people suggested checking with the Anti-Defamation League, which may provide free trainers or grants to hire outside people. Other suggestions were: the Urban League; David Wright (Ben will speak with him); Horace Seldon or Paul Marcus at Community Change Inc. (Ralph's recommendation); resources from the Teaching Tolerance program at the Southern Poverty Law Center (Eileen's suggestion).

There was a small-scale distribution recently of two white supremacist leaflets. We held a meeting at Temple B'nai Brith and had a good discussion with attendees from the Police Department's gang unit. People from the community seemed to be glad to learn that the city takes incidents like these seriously.

Police-immigrant community meeting: we held the first of these on June 2. More diverse representation is needed. The hope is to hold quarterly meetings and develop relationships. Ben and Ralph will help out on this.

Mary Lu updated commissioners on the situation at Highland Creole Cuisine. She has been unable to get data from Traffic and Parking to find out whether the customers there receive a disproportionate number of tickets. She sent a letter to the owner letting him know of her progress and inviting him either to file a complaint or have us help by setting up a meeting with all interested parties.

Commissioner reports

Cesar reported on the recent conference put on by the Anti-Defamation League for communities certified as No Place For Hate. Mary Lu and Ben also attended, along with Aru Manrique and Elena Viveiros from the City. It was a great experience, with opportunities to hear from groups across the state and see what other communities are doing, and Byron Rushing as keynote speaker.

Nate reported that he hasn't had a chance to look at the immigrants' resolution, and he was unable to figure out what parts of it were objectionable to the Board of Aldermen. Ben heard that the aldermen wanted everyone to agree on passage even though they could have had a majority if it had been put to a vote. Aldermen Roche spoke out against it. Susan noted that there could be concerns that constituents wouldn't approve. The Speakout section of the Somerville Journal was in an uproar over it.

Nate thought it was a bit vague, but didn't find any of the language to be objectionable. He thought that the controversial part was probably a piece about not enforcing federal immigration laws. He thought it was more of a nice gesture than an enforceable reality and compared it to the "sanctuary city" policies other towns have passed. Mary Lu said that there is a "sanctuary city" resolution on the books in Somerville, and said that her understanding was that the current resolution will die in committee unless someone makes an effort to get it out. The mayor has said he will submit the language as a proclamation. Susan thought it was a possibility that we could encourage him to do this. There was some discussion of what kind of timeline we would have to work within, and whether something could be drafted for all commissioners to see before it is submitted.

Nate will draft a letter of support and e-mail it to people so that there is a chance to review it before our next meeting.

2. Program

Rapid-response network

Susan wasn't able to find any old materials. Kevin never responded to Mary Lu's requests to look for old materials. Mary Lu passed out an outline that was distributed at the ADL conference and suggested we use it as a model. Cesar suggested that we put this topic on the agenda for a future meeting to have a chance to focus on it properly. Ben asked if we had designated a subcommittee to deal with this issue at our last retreat. Mary Lu will check the notes and convene the committee if this is the case.

Conversations Project

Mary Lu reported that she has spoken with Alex Pirie and Mark Neidergang, former organizers of the Project in the past. Ralph commented that he was one of the founding organizers when the project began and that he has a box of old materials that might be helpful. Commissioners agreed that we need to set up a meeting to discuss only this project. Cesar, Ralph, Susan, and Ben would like to be involved in the planning. Mary Lu will contact them via e-mail to set up a meeting. Tuesday and Thursday nights are best for Susan. Weekends are also a possibility.

Martin Luther King Day 2007

Although it is early, one of the main challenges in organizing the 2006 event was that we began planning too late. Mary Lu reported that the directors of the Commissions for Women and Multicultural Affairs are interested in helping out with the planning for next year. They proposed having informational tables in the lobby outside the event, as we did this year, but with more groups represented.

Susan worried about having other city groups involved in the planning of the most visible event we do all year. There are fears that we would be unable to maintain our independence and that the event would be co-opted.

Ben agreed that we need to start planning soon, and pointed out that we could apply for grants with enough advance time. He thought that we should have more volunteers and create a committee to start the planning process now so we can have the rest of the Commission join them in November or December.

Susan thought that finding a speaker would be most important, but pointed out that this might be dependent on the chosen theme. Nathan suggested we think of a theme, and commissioners proposed picking a "hot topic" like immigration.

Cesar thought that MLK Day should be on every agenda from now until the end of the year. Susan suggested that everyone come to the July meeting prepared to share ideas for a theme and/or speakers.

Retreat

There was a suggestion that that we also pick a date for our annual retreat at next month's meeting. Commissioners agreed that the VNA was a good location, and that having decaf coffee was a terrible idea. There was a unanimous vote in favor of having caffeinated coffee at our next retreat. Mary Lu will send the minutes from that retreat to Eileen and Ralph.

Upcoming events/projects

Mary Lu mentioned some upcoming events. The Commissions for Women and Multicultural Affairs would like us to share a table at the ArtBeat festival on July 15. Commissioners volunteered to staff the table for part of the day (Susan, Nathan, Ben only - Cesar and Ralph will be away that week). Ben can bring the HRC banner from home. Ben will also sit and flyer at the city's Field Day this weekend. Mary Lu distributed information about an upcoming "Deportation and Detention" training put on by the ACLU and other organizations. She will send out the application form via e-mail.

Eileen distributed a list of possible projects on which the HRC might collaborate with the Disability Commission. Right now they are focusing on community outreach. Everyone agreed that issues of accessibility and interpreters should be included in our Human Rights Report. Eileen also noted that if we collaborate on civil rights/accessibility trainings for businesses, there could be opportunities to get grant money. Cesar suggested that Eileen consider joining the HRC, and there was some discussion about whether individuals are permitted to serve on more than one commission at the same time. Eileen will check with the city clerk about this.

Jennifer Doe, a representative from Jobs With Justice, told the commissioners about an upcoming project they would like us to collaborate on. Jen said that Jobs With Justice is helping in-home daycare/childcare workers who currently don't have the right to form a union. Jen said that these women are classified as independent contractors, and that out of 12,000 in the state 4,000 have signed union cards. Jen said that there are various legislative measures underway but that at this point their main priority is to educate people about the workers' situation. She asked the Commission to co-host a forum on what's happening with providers in Somerville on June 29th.

Susan didn't feel comfortable putting our name on the event without more information. Ben wasn't sure that we would get a good turnout and asked what we would be expected to do as co-hosts. Jen said that Jobs With Justice would do all of the flyering and outreach, but that we could be responsible for helping them find a location. Susan thought we needed more literature about the campaign and noted that she was not familiar with Jobs With Justice as an organization. Cesar said that while we agree with the underlying principle of the forum, we are probably not ready to cosponsor something at this point. Ben motioned for a vote, but Susan said that she did not feel comfortable voting. Cesar said that we would encourage commissioners to attend, but that if we are uncomfortable lending the name of the HRC he would prefer to err on the side of caution.

3. Elections

Cesar and Ben announced that they both wished to run for co-chair positions. Nate had arrived late, so we now had a quorum. Cesar motioned that we vote, the motion was seconded, and all members voted unanimously in favor.

Ben motioned to adjourn the meeting. Seconded and passed unanimously.

Next meeting: July 20.