

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 1, 2020

5:00 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

William Hay, Chair
Dr. Mohammed Saleh, Vice Chair
Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos
Dr. Dottie Morris
Dr. Shaun Filiault
Nancy Salwen

Staff Present:

Andrew Bohannon, Parks, Recreation, and
Facilities Director

Members Not Present:

Jan Manwaring
Jennifer Carroll

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Andrew Bohannon read a prepared statement explaining how the Emergency Order #12, pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04 issued by the Governor of New Hampshire, waives certain provisions of RSA 91-A (which regulates the operation of public body meetings) during the declared COVID-19 State of Emergency.

Chair Hay called the meeting to order at 5:21 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approval of March 2, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Dr. Filiault made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of March, 2020. Dr. Morris seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Finance Report

Mr. Bohannon stated that there is nothing new. He continued that he did not put in the deposit that the Keene International Festival (KIF) put down on their tents for 2021, which is reflected in this year's budget. It does not really impact the committee's budget but he wanted them to be aware. KIF canceled the event but they kept the tent company in the deposit so they could have it through September 30, 2021.

Chair Hay stated that he is having technical difficulties/cannot hear very much. He continued that this report is accepted as informational.

4) Committee Discussion
a) Future Initiatives

Mr. Bohannon stated that there were two items he meant to put on the agenda – the first is that even though the City meetings are being held remotely, they have a proclamation that the Mayor will read in honor of June being designated in honor of the LGBTQ community. He put that request in and that will still happen. He continued that secondly, there was discussion in the meeting minutes regarding Project Home. He asked if anyone wants to give an update. He has heard positive news on that front.

Chair Hay noted that he is still having technical difficulties and not hearing everything that is being said, but he can give an update: Project Home is moving along better than anyone would have hoped. He continued that there are two families in town, one with one child and one with three children, and there is a good chance there will be another family coming in from Central America. Project Home just got 501c3 status, effective from the date they applied in October. They are very happy with the way things are going. Mr. Bohannon thanked him for the good news and update.

Mr. Bohannon stated that regarding “future initiatives,” they had talked about education and programming. This group is very in tune with what is happening nation-wide. It is appropriate that they have a meeting scheduled during this time. He does not necessarily want to get into political discussions but it is a bigger conversation that this group needs to have and figure out how it can help launch them into some action or education or programming that he thinks could be a result of this, because now more than ever, we need to be able to show some community.

Dr. Morris asked if the Mayor is thinking of issuing some type of statement. Mr. Bohannon replied that he can ask. He continued that sometimes Mayor Lane did that in the past. With a City Council meeting coming up on Thursday night, he can ask if that is something Mayor Hansel would be looking to do. Dr. Morris replied he could let Mayor Hansel know that she would be willing to help him craft it. Mr. Bohannon replied that that is a good idea and he will share that with Mayor Hansel. Dr. Filiault stated that he thinks it would be useful to have a proclamation passed from the Mayor and the City Council and yes, he thinks Dr. Morris might be the only one with the expertise in this area to craft something that is accurate and sensitive to the issues at hand. He continued that it would be incredible if she could propose some wording. Dr. Morris replied that she would be happy to do that, with others’ help, of course. It would not be political. It can be based on the ideals of this country without it being a political debate. Mr. Bohannon stated that sometimes proclamations also get guidance from the City Attorney. They can get the process rolling.

Dr. Saleh asked what the timeline would be. Mr. Bohannon replied that there are two City Council meetings this month, this Thursday and June 18. He continued that he will email the Mayor after this meeting and share that Dr. Morris can help craft the language and others can help, too. Dr. Morris replied that even if it is not until June 18, June 19 is Juneteenth so it would be fitting to say something on that day. If he needs information about what Juneteenth is (an acknowledgment, not a celebration), she could send him that.

Ms. Salwen asked how the committee members can be of help. Dr. Morris replied that anyone who is interested can help; they could create a subcommittee and work on the language. Ms. Salwen replied that she is interested in being part of it. Dr. Morris asked if the next step is to wait for the Mayor's approval. Mr. Bohannon replied that he cannot imagine Mayor Hansel would say no to this. Ms. Salwen asked if Mr. Bohannon can email them to let them know. Mr. Bohannon replied yes. Dr. Morris stated that then she and Ms. Salwen and anyone else who is interested can find a time to meet. Mr. Bohannon replied that he will reach out to the City Clerk's Office and make sure they are going about this in the correct way with regards to the creation of a subcommittee.

Mr. Bohannon stated that Ms. Carroll had had an opportunity to talk about bringing in some photos and discussion boards and placing them around the Library, City Hall, or Recreation Center. He continued that he does not remember the name of this project, but they have done this in the past. A few years ago Gail Zachariah at the Library did this – brought in photos of 50 people from around the country, with write-ups of each individuals and what civil rights meant to them. There might be interest in doing it again. Ms. Carroll was working on that through the Historical Society and the committee could hop on board with this and help sponsor it, which would not require a financial commitment. It would begin to raise awareness. He wants to see this group do educational programming or find a way to communicate some type of information via this format. Dr. Morris agreed. Chair Hay indicated that he is still having technical problems and is unable to talk.

Mr. Bohannon asked for other thoughts. He continued that people have been reaching out to him across the country asking what this committee does. He shared the purpose of the committee with them. Lots of Recreation Departments around the country do not have what the City has with this. This is a good opportunity. Maybe they say the proclamation is good enough and that is fine, but are there other ideas?

Ms. Salwen stated that it seems like most people will not even know that the proclamation is happening. She continued that the public might not get it. Is there a more public way to say where they stand as a city? Or is that not okay to do? Maybe they could say where they stand as a Human Rights Committee. She is not sure what their options are.

Dr. Filiault replied that he toyed with the idea of a public forum but that might just invite chaos. He continued that it could be a constructive discussion or might not be. People might just be screaming at each other in a non-productive manner.

Ms. Salwen stated that in some way, this committee is supposed to be a voice saying the City has a certain set of values. They speak for the City to some extent. She wonders if they could post a statement on social media or share a statement in the Keene Sentinel. Or can the group have a presence at the next rally? Can they be that active? Dr. Filiault replied discussion on social media could turn toxic, as could presence at a rally; the committee should be in complete control of whatever they do. He does not know how other than a forum. But he totally agrees that they have to do *something*. This used to be the Martin Luther King, Jr./Jonathan Daniels group, after all. He agrees that having just a proclamation seems lukewarm. They have to do something.

Dr. Saleh stated that given the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hard to think of ideas that can involve an audience. He continued that yes, social media can be toxic. The Mayor is doing an excellent job in having a daily forum in the morning with local business leaders, and there is great communication there. It is a big forum where they have social community leaders connected. They could make a request that local businesses issue their own proclamations, internally. For example, like Timken [?] has done. Maybe it is interpreted as just symbolic but it means a lot, to see businesses saying they value fairness and strive for the equal existence of everyone. They can ask the Mayor to talk to the business owners.

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that if they are interested in educational programming, she mentioned a while back having someone like Adam Foss some speak – he was the progressive prosecutor in Boston and now runs a non-profit educating prosecutors about the inequalities in the justice system. He was expensive but that is one thought. She continued that listening to Ms. Salwen and Mr. Salweh, she likes the idea of the business community making statements. In terms of visibility, she is not sure that would be any more visible than the Mayor's statement. What about a visual statement? Asking businesses to post a symbol on their door to express solidarity and the sentiment they are trying to get across?

Ms. Salwen stated that she suggests “Black Lives Matter” – that is the slogan that speaks to solidarity at this point. Maybe they could make a sign like that that also says “City of Keene Human Rights Commission” on it, or some other phrase. Then it is a statement and people notice it and know where the City stands. Dr. Filiault replied he agrees that it is effective to get things into business windows. He continued that the founder of Rochester Pride found that getting stuff in businesses' windows was effective. “Black Lives Matter” might be a hard message to put out there. He personally agrees with it but the words can draw ire from certain political segments. Maybe they need different wording, although it is hard to know what other words to use. Maybe they could figure out a way to say black lives matter without saying black lives matter. Ms. Salwen replied when you get too euphemistic then you are not really saying it.

Dr. Morris stated that especially since the area has so many small business owners, the concern is that business owners might be concerned about the “provocative” message having an impact on their businesses. She continued that they could consult with Phil Suter (of the Chamber of

Commerce) to see what he thinks. He understands the culture of the business community. They could ask him how they could have an impact and get small business owners on board.

Mr. Bohannon replied that is a good idea. He continued that he can share that back to the Mayor. A visual statement can be really powerful. Maybe they could get the Sentinel and some businesses in town to sponsor a full page ad or something like that with a message of solidarity from our community. They have done it in the past. He knows there are people here in town who would sponsor that type of ad.

Dr. Morris suggested that Chair Hay write a letter to the editor. Chair Hay replied yes, they could collaborate on a letter. He continued that he gets livid when he thinks about this stuff. When will it end? It is just unacceptable. Most people in this country have absolutely no idea what it is like to have dark skin and live in this country. He has no idea. It gets up on a scale that is a quantum leap of scales of where it must be. The irony of this cop on his knee [on George Floyd's neck], and Colin [Kaepernik] taking a knee and losing his whole career because he stood by it... change has to come.

Mr. Bohannon stated that he has gotten some good direction here. He continued that the committee has talked about talking to the Mayor, seeing about a proclamation, having the Mayor do something on his weekly show, getting local businesses together, bringing Phil Suter into the conversation to try to get a visual statement for businesses to use, and through that process, maybe all of that could help give content to a letter to the editor.

Dr. Morris asked, if the Mayor agrees to the proclamation, can it be published somewhere? In the newspaper as an ad? Mr. Bohannon replied yes, that is kind of what he sees as the visual. That is a good idea. Chair Hay replied that he does not want it to be just a gesture, just people saying some nice words and that is it. He continued that what they do has to be bigger; it has to be huge.

Ms. Salwen stated that she thinks if they want to be effective they have to be not worried about being provocative. She asked, if they are not being provocative, then what's the point? That is what is going on right now – people are really trying to draw attention to this issue.

Mr. Salweh stated that even though it is an ongoing issue the timing is critical. If they want businesses to help sponsor the ad, he is not sure how long it takes to get the ducks in a row, but can they use some of the committee money that they have saved? Publishing the proclamation seems like a good thing to use it for. Mr. Bohannon replied that is a good thought.

Dr. Filiault stated that if they are trying to be provocative, maybe it would be better to have the proclamation come not from Mayor Hansel but from the Keene Police Department. He continued that it could be suggested by the Mayor and City Council. Other communities have started doing this. If the committee wants a genuine, sincere motion, that would be the way to go. Rather than having it come from a political branch, it would be coming from those seen as more

directly involved. Ms. Salwen replied that it all sounds good. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that it does not have to be either/or – they could try to have something from the Mayor to put in their windows, and a statement from the Chief of Police.

Mr. Bohannon stated that Chief Russo has definitely been in a lot of conversations about this statewide. He continued that he would probably agree with the direction the committee is going in. There might be a way for the Mayor to read the proclamation to the Police Chief. Chief Russo might say no, but he understands there are a lot of police departments out there showing solidarity and that is very important. We are fortunate here in Keene – he personally thinks Keene has a great police staff. He will formulate all this information and pass it along and update the committee, if the committee agrees.

Dr. Filiault stated that it sounds good to him. He continued that it seems like they are trying to go in many directions at once. Mr. Bohannon replied they should not try to bite off more than they can chew, but what they are doing is an appropriate amount. He continued that if Chair Hay tells him this is the direction the committee wants to go in and tells him to go for it, he (Mr. Bohannon) can report back. They should meet in July and go from there. A lot will happen between now and then. He asked if everyone agrees with that.

Ms. Salwen replied they are talking about things that are happening way before July. She asked how things can happen, if they are not meeting again until July. Mr. Bohannon replied that they will see what the business community and the Mayor come up with. He continued that unfortunately, the committee's next meeting is not until July. He knows there is a lot that could happen between now and then but it would be unprecedented for the committee to meet again in a couple weeks.

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos asked, what about the idea of observing Juneteenth? Would that be for next year? Mr. Bohannon replied that they tried to think of something to do in June around that and that was one of their target goals and then 'everything really happened.' They planted a seed and now that seed has multiplied and it is time for them to water it and make it happen.

Dr. Filiault replied that they were trying to do something in June for Pride, but Juneteenth is separate. He continued that it is not impossible to do both but it would be something to figure out for next year. It is unfortunate that Pride was completely derailed [by COVID-19]. They should look at it for next year.

Chair Hay asked how committee members can communicate with each other, given the City regulations about that. Mr. Bohannon replied he will work with the City Clerk tomorrow to set up the subcommittee. He continued that Dr. Morris, Ms. Salwen, and Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos wanted to work together to create language for proclamation. Chair Hay stated that he wants to be involved, too. Mr. Bohannon replied that he can join if they do not have an actual quorum of the full group.

Mr. Bohannon asked if everyone is satisfied with the direction they are going in. Everyone 'raised a hand' via the Zoom application and/or said yes.

There being no further business, Chair Hay adjourned the meeting at 6:06 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Respectfully edits provided by,
Andy Bohannon, Parks, Recreation & Facilities Director