

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 14, 2020

5:00 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos
William (Bill) Hay, Chair
Janis Manwaring, Councilor
Dr. Mohammed Saleh, Vice Chair
Nancy Salwen
Ritu Budakoti

Staff Present:

Andrew Bohannon, Parks, Recreation, and
Facilities Department Director

Members Not Present:

Dr. Shaun Filiault
Dr. Dottie Morris
Jennifer Carroll

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Hay 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. He called the meeting to order at 5:14 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approval of August 3, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Councilor Manwaring made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of August 3, 2020. Ms. Salwen seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Mayor's Call for Board and Commission Nominations

Mr. Bohannon stated that the finance report should have been an agenda item. He continued that nothing has changed. The City added the \$500 that they typically give to the HRC each year. The account balance is \$4,597.43.

Mr. Bohannon stated that at the last meeting there was some consideration and thought process about the Mayor's call for board and commission nominations. He continued that he met with staff from the Community Development Department, which is the department that does the majority of the City's meetings. This was something the Mayor wanted to promote and get moving on, to have more people serving on City committees. He (Mr. Bohannon) wrote to him (the Mayor) following the last meeting, making sure the HRC is a resource to all City committees, not just the ones with openings, which immediately places a barrier on the process. What he thinks, in talking with the Community Development Department and making a proposal to the Mayor, is that the HRC should look at barriers to becoming a City committee member. There are some challenges. If someone wants to serve on a committee such as the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee, the Human Rights Committee, Ashuelot River Park Advisory Committee, or another, they have to submit a resume about why they want to be a part of it. That can be a challenge for someone, or a matter of timing – if someone has been retired for 30 years, it might be a barrier for them to have to suddenly create a resume to serve on a committee that meets once a month. The HRC might want to discuss that. Also, the other piece is utilizing the HRC networks to recruit for and promote the various committees and discuss ideas for better recruitment methods. For example, could they use a hybrid model? Sometimes college students want to join committees but their class schedules may not align with the committee meetings, and those students may be better able to participate if the committees continue Zoom meetings or have a hybrid model. Those are some things for this committee to look at – the barriers of becoming a committee member, and bringing that thought process forward. Would someone be better able to commit to being a committee member if they did not have to be physically present? Those are some thoughts he had and he welcomes discussion about this.

Councilor Manwaring stated that the City's website has job opportunities listed. It is too bad they do not have volunteer opportunities listed. She continued that committees could post – or the Community Development Department could, since they have the most committees – and give a brief blurb about which committees need members and what a person might bring to those committees. She does not need to see the resumes; they do not mean anything to her. She wants to know why a person wants to be on a committee and what they think they can bring to the committee. Mr. Bohannon asked if she would prefer a cover letter stating why someone wants to join a committee, instead of a resume. Councilor Manwaring replied yes, and what they might bring to the committee they seek to join. Mr. Bohannon stated that there is a place on the City website for people who are interested in joining a committee; people can give their name, and that starts the process. He continued that City staff are now starting to put things out via MailChimp to get more people interested in the committee meetings. With that, a bullet should say "If you are interested in joining this committee, please click here," so it gives people an invitation and opportunity. Councilor Manwaring asked how to get to a "volunteer opportunities" section on the website. Mr. Bohannon replied that he will look for it.

Chair Hay stated that what Councilor Manwaring was talking about is usually what is included in a cover letter – why a person is applying for a job and why they think they are qualified. He

continued that it would be more of a narrative than a resume. Mr. Bohannon replied that he agrees; something like that would work. He continued that they could create it from a template on the website. Under “My City Government” on the City’s website there is a link that directs a person to click if they are interested in joining a City board or committee. He does not think a person should need to submit a resume to be a part of a committee. He asked if anyone believes a resume should be needed. Others replied no.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she would not have known this committee existed if she had not met people already involved with it. She continued that at the end of the day, parents are tired, and have so much to handle already – they are not likely to actually go to the City website and click on all those tabs. It would help to simplify it. The City’s website has the boards and commissions neatly listed. Maybe at the top there could be a generic message like, “Are you interested in joining?” They could also put that on the City’s Facebook page so people can see it and gravitate toward the commission or board they are most interested in. Retired teachers and educators could bring experience but do not know that these committees exist. It would help to have a simplified version, some simple thing to fill in. That is her perspective as someone just starting on this committee. Mr. Bohannon replied that that is great information. He continued that yes, those are the things they need to change. Staff can talk about this internally, but if it is expressed by a committee member, it carries more weight. It is important to hear perspectives like this.

Chair Hay stated that they all probably have their own versions of how they heard about this committee, like word of mouth. He continued that he was at a breakfast and a committee member told him about the HRC and said she was stepping down and asked if he wanted to take her place.

Mr. Bohannon stated that he will pass those recommendations on. He asked if anyone had questions.

4) Monadvocacy Continued Discussion

Mr. Bohannon stated he spoke with Pastor Nic last week. He continued that she is very interested in providing the HRC with an outline of what she could provide via the online platform. He agreed with her on that. She is not interested in driving to Keene anytime in the next six months; she is waiting for [COVID-19] to settle down travel-wise to minimize the risk to her health. She will provide an outline for the HRC to discuss at the next meeting. She has done a few online sessions with others and says it has gone well - although it is not the same as doing it in-person, it is still impactful. She recommends not having more than 15 or 20 people on a program, otherwise the screen of faces gets too small. Participants need to be able to see each other well enough. She will put together a proposal for whatever she needs, in terms of finances, webhosting, and so on and so forth. He does not know what that will look like but they can talk about it once they receive it.

5) Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Breakfast

Mr. Bohannon stated that the committee has to make a decision on how to do this in January. He continued that he thinks it will still be too soon to have the event in person, since they would not be able to social distance unless the room was very large, but they could have an online community forum via Zoom or Facebook live. It may not be as engaging or meaningful as hearing someone live, but having it online means potentially having greater access to a speaker from anywhere in the country.

Ms. Salwen stated that she and Dr. Filiault met and came up with ideas, but Dr. Filiault was the note-taker and she does not have those notes today. She continued that she was counting on him to present those notes today. They were definitely not thinking of doing anything in person. Dr. Morris was supposed to be part of that working group, too, but she was unable to meet when she and Dr. Filiault did. She has not received Dr. Filiault's notes yet. Mr. Bohannon asked if he should follow up with Dr. Filiault. Ms. Salwen replied yes and asked to be copied on that email.

Chair Hay stated that he agrees that it is not safe to have in-person events at this point. He continued that Mr. Bohannon is right, the sky is the limit, regarding who they could get to be a speaker for an online event, since the speaker would not have to travel or have lodging.

6) June Events

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she and other working group members met and discussed things they wanted the committee to weigh in on. She continued that first is the timing. The college had wanted to participate in a Pride event. The working group feels it is not necessary to have Pride in June. It can be in May, so the college can participate. Also, a lot of surrounding communities do June events, so if Keene's is in May, it allows for participation from people outside of the immediate community. Their idea was a May 1 launch date. Regarding activities, they thought of asking local businesses if they would be willing to hang a rainbow flag in their windows during the month of May. Dr. Filiault talked with the Director of the Rochester Pride event, Matt Wyatt, and he felt that this encouraged businesses to create their own Pride events, so it becomes a community-based, energized event. Another idea is a block party. Parades are great but not very feasible. The idea would be to have an online-only contingency if COVID-19 is still a problem. They considered asking the Mayor to read a resolution and asking the Library to do a curated display of LBGTQA books during the month of May.

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that the working group realized, in their discussions, that Juneteenth and Pride are very different and both deserve the full focus of a working group, so they feel that it should be two different working groups. Juneteenth should be planned independently. She and Dr. Filiault are not very familiar with Juneteenth practices. They need to be educated, and research ways of celebrating Juneteenth. She asked for committee members' thoughts on splitting into two working groups, and the idea of moving Pride to May.

Chair Hay stated that he likes the idea of bifurcating it, because Juneteenth is in June but Pride could move. He continued that it is a good idea to have it while the college is still in session. Ms. Salwen agreed. She continued that if the June Events working group says two working groups is better, she agrees with that, too.

Mr. Bohannon asked about the block party location. Were they thinking of Railroad Square? Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they thought of the Recreation Center or a City park. Mr. Bohannon replied that the park in front of the Recreation Center is great for that, or downtown at Railroad Square. He continued that it depends on what they want for visibility. Railroad Square is closer for KSC students to walk to. Maybe a downtown business would be willing to block off their parking lot or something to that effect, as they have done in the past.

Ms. Salwen stated that visibility is an important element and it makes sense to her to do it downtown. Councilor Manwaring stated that she agrees. She asked if they could talk to some of the folks on the Ad Hoc Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee (AHRJSC), and see if they have thoughts. Mr. Bohannon asked Chair Hay if it would be appropriate for the committee to ask Dr. Morris for a report on the progress or outputs from the AHRJSC, since she is Co-Chair of that. Chair Hay asked if he should talk to her about that. Mr. Bohannon replied that he will let her know it will be on the next HRC agenda.

Mr. Bohannon stated that it was great for the HRC to form working groups to get things moving, but technically they are supposed to be open to the public. He continued that he will find out more information about that and they will hear from him at the next meeting.

7) New Business

Chair Hay stated that at one of the Black Lives Matter gatherings at Central Square, a number of people spoke. He continued that it seemed like every time a young person of color spoke, alongside of the point they were making, they would also refer to the bad experiences they had in school, right from the get-go. Even in elementary school - they talked about the racial harassment they experienced from other students. It seems like schools are not handling this well. It is a form of bullying. There ought to be a curriculum. Even if it makes teachers uncomfortable, they have to deal with this. Since racism is based almost entirely on bad information, it seems like a great teaching opportunity, to teach students, "No, [that] isn't true, and [that] isn't true, and [that] isn't true." Listening to these young people of color, he wondered if schools are aware that this is an across-the-board issue.

Mr. Bohannon stated that he is not a teacher but has many friends who are teachers, and yes, this is a problem. Some teachers know how to deal with it better than others. Perhaps there is some educational (initiative) to do. He would not want to speak for all the teachers out there. Chair Hay replied yes, maybe sometimes teachers just do not know what to do, and a curriculum would help.

Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if there are teachers on the HRC. Ms. Budakoti replied that she teaches middle school. Ms. Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that there are curriculums out there. She asked if the HRC should do research on the best curriculums and best practices elsewhere. Ms. Budakoti stated that she just joined the middle school last year. She continued that what the middle school has is: they put together yearly themes that staff roll out. They do professional development around the theme and then teachers break the theme down to the level of their students and bring it into the classrooms. Through different activity groups and in focus study groups, they run the theme, every day. Last year's theme was "sense of belonging." Teachers approached that from many different perspectives. This year they are using the theme "Ubuntu." It is African and means "I am because we are." It is being applied in advisory/homeroom, and community-related projects, like the after school social justice club. The students come up with magnificent ideas for how to roll projects out in communities. The middle school does not have a set aside curriculum for social justice and human rights but teachers are bringing in those components, in different ways, through how they do things.

Chair Hay stated that he was talking with a young woman part of a group called STAND. They were talking about the history. He knows people with doctorates who never heard of the incident in Tulsa, which is a huge event. It is not enough to have Black History Month, which is actually the shortest month of the year. Does that mean the rest of the year is white history? Let's incorporate it into the rest of the year and have it be ongoing, and talk about reconstruction, and the migration from the south to the cities, and have Black history be woven into history. He did not hear about a lot of this stuff [in school]. It was more like "Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., *next*." He heard these students talking about it and began thinking about what the HRC can do. Ms. Salwen replied that she does not know right now what the HRC can do but she is glad Chair Hay brought this up.

Mr. Bohannon asked if what Ms. Budakoti is talking about happens in the high school, too, and across the elementary schools, or if it is school-focused. Ms. Budakoti replied that she thinks it is school-focused. She continued that her daughter goes to the high school and her son is in elementary school. She hears that they do things from time-to-time. She does not think it is SAU-wide and does not know what the themes are.

Mr. Bohannon stated that this is a good discussion and they can add it to a future agenda. He continued that maybe it becomes part of the conversation that they try to roll out at the breakfast and push the information out to the schools. They could have endless number of people on a Facebook live event and this might be a great conversation piece. Chair Hay replied that the young woman from STAND is a Keene native and could maybe come to the next HRC meeting. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, he should tell her about this committee. He continued that this is partly what the Mayor wants – for the HRC to use their networks and try and bring people in, whether to this committee or others. Chair Hay asked if there is room on this committee. Mr. Bohannon replied that there is an opening for an alternate. He continued that some members' terms will be expiring in December, so they will need new members. It would be great to have

new people come to meetings for a while instead of jumping in cold on issues. Chair Hay stated that he will invite her to next month's meeting.

Mr. Bohannon asked if anyone from the public had comments. Hearing none, he asked Chair Hay to continue.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting is Monday, October 5, 2020

Chair Hay stated that the next meeting is October 5, 2020. Brief discussion ensued about Zoom. There being no further business, Chair Hay adjourned the meeting at 5:59 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Edits respectfully submitted by,
Andy Bohannon, Staff