

Human Rights Commission and Advisory Council minutes

Wednesday – September 14, 2011

7:30 pm – Newton City Hall – Room 202

Present:

Jane Brown, Peter Brown, Marianne Ferguson, Dianne Chilingierian, Sheila Mondshein, Bruce Apotheker, Lillian Backman, Samuel Glass, Viviana Planine, Frank Wolpe, Judy Fischbach, Carol Kelley, Brenda Krasnow, Sona Petrossian, Susan Thomas, student representatives; Jordi Batler, Fio Lamberti
Guests; Dori Zaleznik, Phil Gordon

Absent:

Ann Capoccia, Carleton Merrill, Susan Rosenthal , Norman Lazarus, Joan Rubin, Nazik Kazimi

Meeting called to order at 7:35pm

Introductions

School updates

Students from NSHS gave report about activities at the high school. The novel 'Zeitoun' by Dave Eggers was assigned as summer reading as part of the 'One book/two schools' program and discussed in classes at the start of the year. There will be a panel discussion about the book on September 23rd.

Anti-bullying programs have been established at all Newton schools . All students and teachers have had mandatory education about bullying in an effort to decrease the incidence of bullying an increase understanding the ways to identify and address the problem.

Viviana announced a new club that has formed at NSHS called 'creating a caring majority'. Their first meeting will be Oct 15th and already has 100 students signed up.

Another new club will be working with Habitat for Humanity to raise funds for the organization that helps to build houses for the needy.

Bruce Apotheker will be on a justice panel at the high school.

Approval of Minutes

Minutes from May 2011, June 2011 and July 2011 were approved without corrections.

Several members of the group said the program about the Myrtle Baptist church was wonderful and wanted it clearly reflected in the minutes. The program was excellent and successful with outstanding panelists and brilliant speakers. Some panelists have been previous HRC award winners.

Hate Crime/Incident Reports

No hate crimes reported since the last meeting.

Bruce noted that the 'Touch a Truck' event sponsored by the Newton Partnership will take place on September 25th.

There was some discussion on issues of domestic violence. Bruce said the idea of a central location such as a justice center is still being considered but no plans have been made for this idea in the short term. Linda and Bruce spoke about the different departments, task forces and committees that address issues of domestic violence and identify the underserved and needy in the City. Many of these groups meet weekly or monthly to work collaboratively to help Newton residents.

Updates

Housing

Sheila reported that the architectural access report was finalized the end of June and sent to all involved departments and the mayor's office. It is also available on the fair housing website. The report has many recommendations of action. The fair housing committee is working on prioritizing these action steps. One recommendation is for Newton to have a city-wide accessibility coordinator. Further recommendations from the fair housing committee will be forthcoming.

Marianne asked about recommendations for the HRC. Sheila said there were a couple of suggestions. One was to consider becoming a FHAP agency to have formal enforcement powers. Another suggestion was for the HRC to do more education programs focused on persons with disabilities in the area of housing, employment or sensitivity training.

MAHRC

No report

HRC Award nominations and vote

There was a lengthy discussion about the 2 nominations: Bruce Apotheker and Rob Caruso/Girard Plante. Some members of the group expressed concern about nominating/voting for a member of the commission (Bruce). Marianne said the only stipulation is that the nominee live or work in the City. Some felt that we would be honoring our own and that would not be appropriate. Others felt that Bruce went above and beyond his given role and should be recognized for that. It was then suggested that all 3 get the award. Some felt that would not be the right thing to do. There was discussion about a separate award and questions about the mayor's office giving an award. Linda said there used to be an employee award given from the human resources department but that has not been done for many years. Some members of the group thought that the HRC could suggest an employee award be given by the City but that the HRC should honor Bruce in a special way. After further discussion Frank made a motion to vote on a special award for Bruce. The vote was taken; 4 in favor, 8 opposed with 1 abstention. The motion did not pass.

Marianne proceeded with the vote for the 2011 HRC award recipient. Paper ballots were distributed with instructions were given to place signature next to chosen recipient. Tally of vote was decided to take place at end of meeting.

HRC organization and goals

Dori Zaleznik, Commissioner of Health and Human Services, attended the meeting to listen and to share Mayor Warren's plan for the commission. Dori said that one option (to address the expired terms) would be for commissioners to remain active by rotating to the advisory council. Since this item was discussed at the July meeting and no one expressed interest in rotating, it is believed everyone wants to remain as commissioners.

Dori explained the process going forward. Commissioners should send a short resume and a statement on why you want to stay on the commission. The next step would be for Dori and Sarah Ecker to meet with each person individually. Once those meetings have taken place the mayor will schedule a 15 minute meeting with each person. A decision on re-appointment would be made by the end of the calendar year. Since the group has decided to vote on a chair in January, this timing should work out.

Dori said the mayor wants all commissions to actively continue their work during this time. Linda read the names of commissioners who had already submitted paperwork and those who had not.

Carol asked if there are any people currently interested in being appointed to the HRC? Dori said that Sarah has 2 people that have submitted letters of interest from the community.

The deadline for submitting the paperwork to Sarah will be no later than the end of the first week of October.

Marianne asked about the process to fill open advisory slots. Dori said the first pass will be to fill open commissioner spots then address the advisory council membership. General discussion continued about the make-up of the commission and the relevant ordinance. Several people commented on the length of time this has taken and the fact that the advisory council and commissioners work together and vote as equal partners. Dori talked about changing the ordinance if the group thought a different make-up would work better. This could be something decided in the future as the group decided on future goals. The discussion continued about the value of being an advisory council member first (to learn about the commission) before being considered for the commissioner slot.

Some members of the group expressed frustration about the length of time this process has taken. Commissioners with expired terms have asked about their status for a long time. Dori acknowledged that this process was long overdue and explained that the mayor could not get to every task immediately but this new timeline has been set in motion and should be complete by the end of this year. Linda said the commission should continue to work as usual, as one group, with commissioners and advisory council members working together.

Dori suggested advisory council members also submit a letter of interest to Sarah Ecker and gave Sarah's email address secker@newtonma.gov.

Carol said she would like the mayor to give this group his vision and goals for the City.

Sam asked if there is any funding for the commission. There is no funding at this time.

Dori said she would bring the comments and suggestions back to the mayor.

The votes for HRC awardee were tallied.

10 for Rob and Girard

1 for Bruce

2 abstentions

Rob Caruso and Girard Plante will be the 2011 award recipients. The award night will be planned for the 2nd week of December

Other Business:

Viviana announced a program "Beyond Belief" to be held at Boston College on Sept 21st at 6:30. She also suggested the HRC members read the book *Zeitoun* as a group.

Marianne said the next meeting will begin with discussion on HRC organization and goals. She also wants to discuss what committees would make sense going forward.

Next meeting will be Wednesday Oct 5th

Meeting adjourned 9:45pm

