

Human Rights Commission Meeting
October 13, 2010

Attendees: Frank Wolpe, Marianne M. Ferguson, Sona Petrossian, Peter Brown, Brenda Krasnow, Judith Fisbah, Jane A. Brown, Carol Y. Kelley, Nazik Kazimi, Susan Thomas, Vincent Farina, Ann Capoccia, Bruce Apotheker, Dianne Chilingirian.

Staff: Teresa Kett

Marianne Ferguson (MF) called the meeting to order at 7:32 p.m.

MF reminded those in attendance that per the new open meeting laws, if an item is not on the agenda it should not be discussed. But it can be added to the agenda for a future meeting.

The school representatives had not arrived, so the school report was postponed.

Bruce Apotheker (BA) said there have been no incidences of violence or hate crimes since the last meeting. He said October is Domestic Violence Awareness month and that he attended a press conference at Newton-Wellesley Hospital. Newton Mayor Setti Warren and District Attorney Leone were in attendance. He passed around a brochure for Second Step, who was also at the press conference. BA said Domestic Violence has changed a lot in a good way since he started in 1983, and that it used to be an issue no one talked about or called the police about because it was considered a family matter. Now with more awareness and laws with more enforcement powers, the issue is seen and a lot of progress has been made in 27 years.

MF asked if there are any corrections to the previous minutes. There were none. Brenda moved for the minutes to be approved, it was seconded, and unanimously approved.

MF asked that all committee chairs submit written reports for October to save time during the meeting.

Susan Thomas (ST) said she didn't know she was going to have to submit a written committee report, and that she wouldn't be continuing to make committee reports if this was going to be the permanent plan. MF said it wouldn't be a permanent plan. ST said she wanted to make a one sentence announcement. MF said to send an email to Linda Walsh with her announcement/committee report. ST said she didn't understand how people would know what is in the committee report if it is just emailed to Linda. MF said the committee report would be in the meeting minutes and that it is important to stay on topic to the published agenda.

MF said that last month during the commissioners meeting, Sheila Mondschein mentioned a video about a black community in Newton before the Turnpike was built. MF said that given that this group has done a lot of talking about Newton's past with respect to

slavery, she thought it would be good to bring it a little forward in time and see some of the effects on the black community once slavery was gone.

MF said the group would watch the video and decide if they want to do anything with it.

The video was played. It is about an area of West Newton that was known as The Village. The history and people of The Village are explored in the video that covers from around 1874 through the present, centered around Myrtle Baptist Church which was the epicenter of this community. 3 streets in The Village were eliminated in the 1960s when the Mass Turnpike was constructed. The video includes memories from many people.

When the video was over, MF opened the floor for discussion. Many people talked at once and said they liked the video and were moved by it.

Brenda Krasnow said she liked everything about it.

Carol Kelley asked if the group knew about MF's connection to the community. MF said she hadn't intended to share her family connection, but did because Carol brought it up. MF said he mother-in-law grew up in this community in the 1920s and both she and her father-in-law were very involved. MF explained that her mother-in-law was the first black nurse to graduate from the Boston City Hospital nursing program, and her father-in-law is believed to be the first or one of the first graduates of Boston College, which isn't something he often shared because it wasn't a positive experience for him. MF said she didn't want this video presentation to be about her family, but thanked Carol for making her share.

MF said the group recently has looked at slavery, and it has been said that if they're looking at slave owners, why not look at the slaves. She said the people in this video were all free, yet they had to endure reminders of slavery. She said her thought was that this video would bring the group closer to current day.

Brenda Krasnow said she thought the video covers current ramifications of slavery and how it affects life today. She said there are all different groups of people who get together today, but we still lead different lives.

Carol Kelley noted that when the people who were forced to move out of the Village many weren't welcomed in other parts of Newton and that sometimes that still exists today, but is not as common.

BK added to CK's comment that that happens with other groups of people too.

Ann Capoccia said she was struck by what happened to the people in the video and how they were forced out using eminent domain, and that there seemed to be a lack of respect and reimbursement to replace people's property. She said this happens today with immigrant populations. She thought the video was touching and was impressed by the sense of community exhibited.

Brenda Krasnow wondered if the white people who were displaced received different compensation than the black people.

MF said that was likely.

Sona Petrossian (SP) said there are still people in her neighborhood today, mostly those over 50 who have great animosity for the highway department because they live close to the Turnpike and experienced when it was built.

Peter Brown said that from a municipality's standpoint, and he was involved in an eminent domain process for a school construction project in a Caribbean neighborhood, no one was happy. Court cases resulted in the 1990s. He said there are 2 forces in action, progress and need, and you're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

SP said things happen when communities get organized and learn how to work within the system. She noted in the video a great sense of community values, welcoming everyone, respecting all, and accepting all.

Susan Thomas wondered if better laws are in place now to help people if this were to happen today.

Jane Brown was impressed by the spirituality in the video.

Frank Wolpe said the law and justice are different, and unfortunately whenever property is involved, you have to talk about fair market value. And that's different than personal value. Fair market value can be a cruel approach, but it's the best one we have. He said perhaps fair market value and other things could have been taken into account in this situation.

MF noted that if you're traveling eastbound on the Turnpike, you can't get off at exit 16 because the people of the church fought to save it and succeeded.

MF asked what should happen next with the video.

Carol Kelley said she attended Myrtle Baptist church and didn't know how they are planning to use the video, but she could find out.

MF said she got the video from the videographer.

CK said the first time she saw a picture of Alderman Jefferson was when she came into the room where the meeting was held. And if you look closely at the pictures, there are few black faces. She didn't know there had been a female black alderman, as was mentioned in the video. She suggested doing something with the video at the schools.

Sona Petrossian said she got an update from one of the students at South and there have been 3 activities there.

MF asked Carol Kelley (CK) to follow up with the church about using the video.

Susan Thomas said she wanted to make a comment for the minutes because others had made comments and she wanted something in the record. She said others have made comments that the HRC has just been looking at black people from the perspective of white slave owners, and as one of the people who has been trying to run the program, it is not intended to be from the perspective of white slave owners.

MF said she agreed.

Carol said she didn't think the program is about white slave owners, but she felt there had been too much emphasis on them and that part of Newton's history. For her, she said, it's not about them and her interest is not from the slave owner's point of view.

ST asked if CK had seen the film and that without the facts, it's hard to speculate.

CK said she doesn't think she's required to review the film to understand and that she doesn't think the group should show preference for one point of view over another.

Peter Brown asked if they were talking about Traces of the Trade, which ST and CK acknowledged they were. Peter said he was blown away by that video.

CK said she felt the perspective of Traces of The Trade was only of one point of view.

Peter said he didn't get that out of Traces of the Trade.

Brenda Krasnow said Traces of the Trade is one program the group has done, and they wanted to show the impact slavery has had on Newton. She added the group also talks about the Holocaust.

CK said that when the Holocaust is discussed, it's not generally from the point of view of the Nazis.

MF reminded everyone that the agenda topic was the Myrtle Baptist video, not Traces of the Trade.

Frank Wolpe said he had a comment about the video. He thought it was very appropriate for the group to do something with because it's about Newton people, Newton situation, civil rights, human rights, the past, the present, and that's what endears him to this film more than others. This one talks about the here and now, and that's what HRC is here for.

ST asked if it was appropriate to distribute postcards about a program at Myrtle Baptist the following week.

MF said no, that is not the agenda topic.

A guest Vinnie asked how many people knew about the video's topic before having seen it. Many people raised their hands, but not all.

Frank Wolpe (FW) said he knew nothing about the film, the church or what happened, and he was delighted to learn through the video.

MF commented that if there were people in this group who were unfamiliar, there are likely more people who don't know the history.

Finnie commented on well known black athletes who came from that area of Newton.

FW said he thought it would be wonderful to show the video in the schools.

Sona Petrossian said she didn't think it would be hard and that she would work on getting information from her contacts in the schools about doing that.

Bruce Apotheker suggested NewTv could maybe show it.

SP added that perhaps the History Museum would be interested in using it too. Or the Clergy Association.

The meeting adjourned at 8:49 pm

MF shared some event announcements including a Pro40B, a slavery and race program at Myrtle Baptist, an Islam program, and the special HRC meeting to be held on 10/26 to choose a HRC Award recipient. She said people should fill out a nomination form from Judy and get them to Judy or Linda. Copies would be distributed to members before 10/26. Frank asked that the nomination form be emailed.

Newton Human Rights Commission Committee Reports 10/13/10

Education Committee:

We are working with Newton North High School to find a staff member who is willing to join the HRC as liaison. I have spoken to the principal and she is will discuss this idea at her staff meeting. Due to the opening of the new NNHS, we might expect that this appointment may take a bit more time to materialize. We are also hoping to have 2 student reps at our October meeting.

Newton South High School is also beginning their programs and we hope to have a second HRC rep. this month.

Education Committee: Sona Petrossian

Membership Committee:

The HRC welcomes Carol Kelly as our new Commissioner. She has already begun to take an active role in our deliberations.

As for new members, we await communication from Mayor Warren and his administrative staff as to their decisions about renewing terms of present members and bringing new members on board. We will work in a cooperative spirit with the staff to broaden participation within the city.

Membership: Jane Brown & Sona Petrossian

From Diane: The next MAHRC meeting will be Friday, Nov. 19 at 9:30. The day was moved due to the holiday. Here are the minutes from the last meeting.

**Massachusetts Association of HRCs
Medford City Hall
Medford, Massachusetts**

Minutes

October 15, 2010

Present

Stephen Bressler, Karen Fischer – Brookline; Carmen Negrón – Cambridge; Diane McLeod – Medford; Suzy Q. Groden – Melrose; Jeff Stone – Milton (Greater Boston Civil Rights Coalition); Peter Brown – Newton; Niel Orlando – Norfolk DA's Office; Ed Grogan – Quincy; Anna Buxton, Sandy Thompson – Winchester.

Diane opened the meeting at 9:37 a.m.

Public Participation

None

May Minutes

Carmen moved and Steve seconded approval of the May 14, 2010 minutes. The minutes were approved unanimously.

**Reminder that all approved MAHRC minutes are available on-line at:
http://www.brooklinema.gov/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=600&Itemid=94**

Old Business – Summer Catch Up

Carmen said that at the initiative of the Cambridge HRC the Cambridge School Committee has voted to close the Cambridge Public Schools on the Muslim holiday of Eid starting in the 2011-2012 school year. The closing is in honor of and out of respect for the holiday.

In response to a question from Anna, Diane said that she has two of the BRIDGES DVDs on Homeland Security referred to by Shahin Shahin at our May 2010 meeting. These DVDs are available to MAHRC members.

Diane went to an Iftar dinner to celebrate Ramadan and said that it had been a wonderful experience. She noted that at the dinner a DVD was shown that involved a Catholic priest, an imam and a rabbi, who each talked about the history of his religion. Diane remarked on the similarity among the three religions. She also commented that there will be a series of lectures on comparative religion to take place in Medford, though she did not have any further information on this. Peter urged people to read Karen Armstrong's book A History of God, which details the development

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of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Suzy lamented how various civilizations murder each other wholesale. She recommended that people read Huston Smith's works on comparative religion.

Steve added that the Merrimack College Center for the Study of Jewish, Christian, Muslim Relations does quite a bit of inter-faith programming.

Diane said that Shahin has extended an invitation to all MAHRC members to attend BRIDGES meetings.

Jeff commented on the flap about Wellesley Public School students "praying" at a mosque earlier this year, which he said he did not believe actually happened. Subsequently, the American Jewish Committee urged schools to adopt guidelines on student participation when on field trips to various religious institutions. Jeff wanted to know whether any communities have adopted such guidelines. No one was aware of any communities doing so. Diane said that she thought that the whole matter had been blown out of proportion. Steve agreed. Sandy noted that Harvard University comparative religion professor Diana Eck writes about the need for all of us to understand each other's religion.

Jeff talked about belonging to a Muslim-Jewish dialogue group based at a Jewish temple in Malden. The Muslim members of the group were mainly Moroccan (Muslim American Civic Cultural Association) and the Jewish members were also mainly of Moroccan descent. Jeff commented on a visit to the new large mosque in Boston, same one as the Wellesley students went to, and how when a religious service was announced the hosts said that the visitors could participate if they wanted to – and Jeff said that he did want to. He noted that men and women prayed separately, as do Orthodox Jews. Jeff noted that he prayed a personal prayer silently and bowed when the Muslim men bowed, though he explained that he was using the Muslim prayers. Jeff said that he believed that the students were going through the motions as he did. He said that the Wellesley students' situation has been distorted to appear as though the students had been recruited to pray to Allah. Jeff says that he believes that the mosque does have tours and urged people to go and so demystify Muslim practice. He suggested that perhaps such a tour could be arranged by the MAHRC.

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Diane mentioned that at the Iftar dinner she spoke with a Sikh woman who was very outspoken. Diane asked her whether she might be interested in meeting with us, and the woman had said yes.

Suzy said that she has been very disturbed about comments made by the national director of the ADL, Abe Foxman, regarding the building of a mosque near the site of the destroyed Twin Towers, comments which she believed were in contradiction of the principles of the ADL and No Place for Hate – and this on top of the ADL's position on the Armenian Genocide. She said she wanted to do something, but was not sure what that might be.

Steve said that he recollected that there had been a meeting between national and local ADL members here in Boston and that a number of local ADL people took issue with the national ADL stance on the building of the mosque near the Twin Towers site. Steve said that he would advise to just let it go. He offered that the ADL is a private group with a particular viewpoint and that it has been already publicized in the press that members of the ADL, and others, disagree with the national ADL on this matter, and that if their own membership could not dissuade the national board on the issue, then others would probably have no impact either.

Diane noted that after the Armenian Genocide controversy the Medford HRC sent a letter to the ADL explaining that they disagreed with the

organization on the matter and as a result suspended Medford's membership in No Place for Hate for three months, in the hope that the ADL would come forward to rectify the matter. The ADL ignored the letter. Suzy said that when the Armenian Genocide issue arose, Melrose had decided not to interrupt its membership with No Place for Hate.

Sandy commented that she was unfamiliar with the current controversy in New York. Steve said that there are a lot of mosques in New York. He explained that a group calling itself the Cordoba Initiative wished to build a 14 story mosque (Jeff corrected and noted that it was to be an Islamic Cultural Center and that one floor would be used as a prayer space), a couple of blocks from, but overlooking, the site of the Twin Towers. He noted that the site was in a seedy area of the city. Steve went on to say that, as he understood it, opponents of the project say that the Islamic Center would be used by radical Islamists, who are driving Islamist extremism around the world, to serve as an Islamist triumphalist monument to 9/11. Diane said that there is a lot of fear mongering about this going on. She added that the site of the proposed center is not hallowed ground, but had been formerly a Burlington Coat Factory.

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Jeff said that the ADL has said that while the developer has the legal right to build an Islamic Center on that site, out of sensitivity to the families of the victims of 9/11, and possibly others who might find the building of a center there to be offensive, they should find another site. Jeff said that people are upset at that rationale because they believe that it is catering to people's prejudices, sensitivities and fears. Jeff concluded that the ADL is supposed to be a human rights organization and their stance on the Armenian Genocide was misguided, even understanding that the organization was concerned about any negative impact on the relationship between Turkey and Israel. Diane agreed and said that the ADL is supposed to stand for religious freedom.

Suzy commented that the local ADL is very productive and positive in their work. Jeff agreed, especially as regards No Place for Hate. Suzy noted that the ADL will have their annual meeting at the end of the month and said that she would like to do something, but did not know what. Peter said that it will have no effect. He noted that the Newton HRC dropped out of No Place for Hate after the Armenian Genocide controversy. Because of the strong working relationship between the Newton police and the ADL the police were asked what impact the withdrawal from No Place for Hate would have on that interaction, and the police said no impact at all. The Newton police are still active with the hate crime fighting aspects of the local ADL. Jeff explained that the local ADL had resisted the national

policy on the Armenian Genocide and the director, Andy Tarsi, had been fired, then re-hired, and then quit. Cutting the tension, Peter commented that the hardest part of leaving No Place for Hate was that at their annual meeting they had great hors d'oeuvres!

Diane said that she ran into Marty Walsh from Wellesley and he sends his regards to everyone.

Winchester Official Status

Sandy explained that they are at a preliminary stage at deciding whether to become an official HRC. For twenty years the Winchester Multicultural Network has been an independent private group. They are currently doing some long range planning with the assistance of the Executive Service Corps. She was interested in learning about the pros and cons of being an HRC. She was concerned about the open meeting law, since currently the open meeting law does not impact them. She said that their response team works under strict rules of confidentiality and would not want to have that independence and freedom to operate be curtailed or restricted.

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Diane explained that the open meeting law was not a problem. She explained that the public comment section of meetings was a way to control comment from non-HRC persons, especially disruptive individuals such as people from neo-Nazi groups who had been attending some HRC meetings. Such persons would be allowed to speak for a couple of minutes under public comment and then, if they were disruptive, they could be removed. Diane also noted that the HRC could go into executive session if the matter so warranted. Also, cases can be discussed without mentioning specific names of persons.

Jeff said that one of the positives in becoming an HRC is that the work becomes validated by the city or town. A possible negative is that since members are appointed by a mayor or board of selectmen there is always the possibility that membership could become politicized, instead of being a grass-roots group. Diane and Peter talked about how their commissions set up vetting processes to interview applicants to the HRC and then make recommendations to their mayor. This could be replicated with a board of selectmen. Applicants may also be encouraged or required to attend several HRC meetings as part of the application process to determine whether a person's interest could be maintained over a period of several months, and whether the new person would be a good fit. Steve noted that each HRC is set up differently and suggested that Winchester look at several HRCs' establishing by-laws or ordinances. Diane agreed. He also

suggested that Winchester review various HRCs' agendas and minutes to see what issues were on the table and how they were dealt with. Ed referred Winchester to the Department of Justice Community Relations Service material on establishing an HRC.

It was noted by several persons around the table that an official HRC becomes the mayor's or board of selectmen's HRC. They can appoint members and they can either be supportive of an HRC's work or not.

Diane commented that the Medford HRC and Disability Commission are being merged.

Diane talked about the benefits of having members who are connected to the school committee, public housing authority and police, so that the HRC may cover a lot of different issues.

In response to a question from Jeff, Sandy talked about the growth of the Winchester Multi-Cultural Network and range of activities and the closeness of working with their town manager, who is now the Brookline Massachusetts Association of HRCs

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town administrator. Diane commented that the Medford HRC does not do cases, rather it engages in education and outreach. Steve said that Brookline essentially does the same, and refers complainants to the MCAD or other state or federal agencies. Carmen said that Cambridge does cases. Peter said that Newton has taken on cases also.

Jeff advised that the MAHRC should publicize meetings and establish collaborative relationships with like-minded organizations. Suzy suggested having the MAHRC meet around the state to encourage outlying communities to attend our meetings. Diane explained that the MAHRC has an extensive mailing list including HRCs in various communities as well as non-governmental organizations, and that we actually do have working relationships with many other groups. Also, over the years we have held meetings in Brookline, Framingham, Newton, Worcester, and Hyannis. Other than when we sponsored regional programs the numbers at those regular monthly meetings that were held outside of Medford did not warrant holding our meetings elsewhere. Jeff volunteered to help spread the word about our meetings. Diane will send him material.

Local Updates – Cambridge

The Cambridge HRC produced a summer newsletter and new brochures, copies of which Carmen handed out to everyone.

Cambridge HRC Executive Director Marlyssa Briggett resigned in September and has been replaced by Colleen Johnston as Acting Executive Director.

On August 11 there was an event at Cambridge City Hall celebrating India and Pakistan's independence days. The program featured dance, music, poetry and food.

On September 30 there was a brown bag lunch on Native American Heritage. There was an art presentation by artist Robert Peters who talked about his heritage and his art work.

On October 6 the Women's Commission sponsored a domestic violence vigil at Cambridge City Hall.

On October 19 in celebration of National Disability Employment Awareness Month there will be an event with a panel presentation and brown bag lunch on "The ADA Turns 20" at the City Hall Annex.

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Cambridge was named a fourth time winner as One of the Nation's 100 Best Communities for Young People by America's Promise Alliance and ING.

Local Updates – Winchester

Winchester Reads has chosen Hope's Boy, a memoir on growing up in foster care, by Andrew Bridge. The author will be speaking at an event on October 21.

Winchester is working to defeat the anti-40B referendum so as to support affordable housing for seniors and working families. Niel noted that this is something he is really concerned about also, especially as it affects less affluent people.

There will be a series of programs on the theme of One Winchester, Many Traditions. Anna and Sandy gave out a sheet describing the programs.

Winchester will also be sponsoring programs under its International Connections project. Anna and Sandy gave out a sheet describing the events. These programs have been successful in the past.

Local Updates – Jeff

Jeff passed out a concept sheet outline of a cross-cultural program (Black and Green in Boston) he is involved with at the Irish Immigration Center in

Boston. He noted that this program is a model for a single meeting that may be utilized successfully with other ethnic groups also.

Jeff also recommended the DVD “Rolling” about wheelchair users. He said that the film gives great insight as to what it means to be a wheelchair user and hoped that we could show the film at one of our meetings.

Local Updates – Melrose

Suzy said that the Melrose HRC is actively engaged in education and outreach and helps with the vastly increased diversity that the community is seeing.

She noted that the HRC works closely with the mayor, who wants it known that Melrose is unwelcome to persons who commit child abuse. Several trainings for the community have taken place and more are planned.

The HRC is working with the Melrose Alliance Against Violence.

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An International Welcome Reception is being planned for November 4. The HRC is working closely with the schools on this event. She noted that there are 257 children in the school system for whom English is a second language. She also said that there are 37 different languages spoken among students, with the largest numbers being Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Melrose is working closely with the clergy on the Martin Luther King Day of Service. The HRC has an active clergy liaison.

The HRC has started a collaboration with the high school. The Global Education project continues.

Once a month, an HRC member writes an article with a human rights focus that appears in the local newspaper.

Local Updates – Norfolk District Attorney’s Office

Niel reported that the DA’s Office is focusing on domestic violence prevention as well as on financial scams.

Local Updates – Quincy

Niel said that the Quincy HRC is working on an Educational Freedoms package where the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are discussed in the Quincy public schools.

Ed talked about a Southern Poverty Law Center Teaching Tolerance DVD about bullying, especially as it relates to gay and lesbian students. The package has a viewer's guide. For more information go to www.tolerance.org.

Ed attended a bullying program sponsored by Facing History and Ourselves. He mentioned a bullying law public notice period and urged people to read up on the new state bullying law. The ADL is having a workshop on the bullying law on October 28 at UMass/Boston.

Quincy is planning a pot luck breakfast for Martin Luther King Day.

Local Updates – Newton

Newton had three programs related to Traces of the Trade. On October 21 the black Myrtle Baptist Church is sponsoring a program in Newton. He discussed the history of the church and black residents in Newton and their political power.

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The Newton HRC is co-sponsoring a program on Islam with the Needham HRC on October 17.

Lastly, Newton sponsored a program on 40B at the end of September with a discussion pro and con on the forthcoming referendum. The Commission is now supporting No on 2.

Local Updates – Brookline

On May 24, the Brookline HRC sponsored its annual youth awards honoring 35 students at a packed program at the Brookline Public Library. The event was covered by Brookline Access Television.

Steve produces and hosts a cable television show called "Fair Housing Conversations". Two shows have been done thus far and a third focusing on housing accessibility issues for persons with disabilities will be taped in a couple of weeks.

Steve has been working with the Brookline Domestic Violence Roundtable, most recently discussing cyber bullying, and producing and appearing on the monthly television show, "The Safety Net". The next show will be

recorded next week with State Rep. Peter Koutougian on bills before the house related to domestic violence, dating violence, and bullying.

Work on the 2011 Martin Luther King celebration is moving apace. Steve and Karen and Rita are members of the planning committee. The program will take place on Sunday, January 9 at the Coolidge Corner Theater.

A vigil on domestic violence was held on October 5 at the Garden of Remembrance on the grounds of the Brookline Health Center. The vigil was sponsored by the Jennifer Lynch Fund Against Domestic Violence, and Steve is on their board.

Local Updates – Medford

Medford is discussing doing a film series with one of the local churches.

Diane reported that the HRC is continuing with Stories of Medford, which is getting near its end stage at this point.

Diane is doing a needs assessment on persons with limited English speaking ability and a needs assessment on persons with disabilities.

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Medford is also working on its analysis of impediments to housing report.

Next Meeting

Meeting date has been changed to Friday, November 19, 2010.

The meeting adjourned at 11:09 a.m.