

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
March 17, 2021 5:00 p.m.

Attendance: Brandie Doyle, Henry Fernandez, Ed Ford, Anthony Gennaro, Ava Hart, Debbie Ruimerman, Howard Thody, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence:

Absence: Sanji Lawrence

QUORUM: *Yes:* X *No:*

Call to Order: Chairperson Hart called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m. She took attendance and noted for the record that there was a quorum. She then advised the commission that Jay Tulin emailed to explain that he wouldn't be joining the meeting tonight. She said that he indicated that Sean Cardwell does intend to contact the commission regarding joining the statewide forum.

Public Session: Chairperson Hart welcomed Nick Guertin and Akash Kaza of DesegregateCT.

For the record, the recording of the meeting was not started until some time after the presentation had begun.

They thanked the commission for inviting them to the meeting. They explained the goals of DesegregateCT. Nick Guertin spoke of the importance of zoning reform. He said that restrictive zoning makes housing unaffordable. Businesses can't attract the talent they need. Prime land near transit and main streets goes undeveloped. Also, restrictive zoning prevents walkable communities. He then spoke on a report from the National Association of Homebuilders showing the impact of generating 1,500 units of affordable housing in Connecticut.

Income: One-Year Impact – \$271.2 million / Annual Impacts – \$65.5 million
Revenue for State and Local Gov.: One-Year Impact – \$39.8 million / Annual Impacts – \$16.4 million
Jobs: One-Year Impact – 3,198 / Annual Impacts – 921

Nick Guertin went on to explain that reforms to zoning can raise property values. Research from Hartford University indicates that allowing different types of housing increases the value of nearby property. Also, allowing accessory dwelling units can increase property value by 50%. He then spoke on the environment. He explained that carbon emissions are twice as high in areas with restrictive zoning. Additionally, multi-family homes are more energy efficient than single-family homes.

Nick Guertin explained the zoning atlas, which shows how outdated zoning laws make it hard to build diverse, affordable housing. The interactive map uses the zoning code and the map showing how the rules are applied for the 169 municipalities in Connecticut. In Connecticut, there are 180 zoning jurisdictions and 2,622 zoning districts. Throughout Connecticut, there is a varying degree of

accessibility and transparency with regards to the zoning guidelines. He showed the commission a map that demonstrates a significant disparity in where a single-family home can be built without going before a planning and zoning commission and where a four-family home can be built. The map illustrated that there were very few areas where a four-family home could be built with only a building permit and no other approval from a zoning commission. He also showed a similar map indicating where two-family homes could be built without a public hearing and where three or four-family homes could be built without a public hearing. He pointed out that there is a direct correlation between the racial demographic in the communities and the types of housing allowed in those areas.

Nick Guertin went on to explain DesegregateCT focuses on equity, economy, and the environment. He indicated that the state is segregated and has been since 1970. Seventy percent of Connecticut's black population and people of color live in 12 different towns out of the 169 towns in Connecticut. He explained that there are three issues to consider: housing diversity, housing supply, and the process. The proposal is that there is an increase in transit-oriented development. They would like to see 50% of the area within a half mile of any train station be zoned as multi-family or mixed use. Also, more than ten units or ten percent should be affordable. For Main Streets, anywhere where there is a main commercial area, zoning should allow for the development of two-family and four-family houses. Local government can still control how the housing looks. Another proposal they have is that accessory dwelling units can be developed, through permit only, for up to 30% of a dwelling area as attached, detached, or renters. At this time, many municipalities allow accessory dwelling units, but there are strict guidelines on how they can be developed. DesegregateCT is also proposing that parking rules change to incorporate a cap on parking mandates. Parking drastically drives up the cost of building housing, and that cost gets passed onto the tenants. This proposal would mean that a developer would not be required to provide a certain amount of parking spaces per housing unit. However, if the developer wanted to do so, it could. Akash Kaza added that the benefit of this is that developers can decide what type parking they want to provide based on the needs of the residents instead of the requirements of the government. Parking drives up the cost of housing.

Nick Guertin said another proposal is that municipalities be supported by the State to adopt different types of zoning if they want to. This proposal would allow for communities to improve architectural character in their developments. Lastly, other proposed improvements would be newer sewer standards, trainings for commissions, and measuring traffic by Vehicle Miles Traveled. At this time, the process for developers to measure traffic impact and demonstrate compliance with sewage requirements is onerous. He went on to explain that Raised S.B. 1024 is DesegregateCT's bill. It was introduced to the Joint Planning and Development Committee of the State Legislature the week of March 8th 2021. There was a hearing on it on March 15th. It ran for 24 hours straight with no breaks. Approximately 350 registered to testify. Eighty-five people were able to testify during the hearing, and of that, 70% of those who submitted verbal testimony were in favor of the bill. At this time, the bill is in committee. He added that there was a separate bill before the same committee that dealt with fair share priorities put forth by the Open Communities Alliance. DesegregateCT is focusing primarily on zoning and land use.

Director Jackson said that in a lot of cases, these bills get passed but there is limited funding to get the work accomplished. She added that Connecticut is receiving stimulus money and that some of it needs to be set aside to build affordable housing. She spoke on the tearing down of Long River Village and the fact that the federal money was not used to build affordable housing to replace it. This issue was brought up repeatedly to William Vasiliou of Middletown Housing Authority. Instead, Westlake was

built, but that is not affordable housing. They displaced many people and did not deliver on the promise of affordable housing. Commissioner Doyle agreed and said that affordable housing in Middletown has thus far been an un-kept promise. She asked what the commission could do in its advisory capacity to help along the effort to develop more affordable housing. She added that she is interested in the nexus between DesegregateCT's work and the work of Open Communities Alliance. She said that she looked at Open Communities Alliance's Fair Share Housing model report. She summarized that the idea is that all of the towns in given regional areas would split up affordable housing into a manageable number of units. It indicated that Middletown's fair share would be to add 360 units of affordable housing. Middletown will be spending 55 million dollars in development around Main St. She asked if the commission could help the City approach that goal of affordable housing, considering the stimulus money and bond money available. She added that there are many components of DesegregateCT's plan the commission could bring to the attention of Middletown's Planning and Zoning Commission. She said that one of the actionable items she identified was the Accessory Dwelling Units. Some of the more problematic requirements DesegregateCT identified exist in Middletown's code. She added that parking is an issue in Middletown, and parking guidelines are likely causing major limitations.

Nick Guertin clarified that most of what DesegregateCT is proposing doesn't cost any money to implement. The idea is to get the State to enforce accountability with municipalities in terms of changing planning and development regulation. That's not something that requires dedicated funding. It's something that decision makers need to change. When implemented, these changes will remove a barrier. Director Jackson agreed and said identifying barriers to equality and equity in any area is the first step. Once the barriers are identified, they can be dismantled.

Chairperson Hart asked if the commission had any other questions for DesegregateCT. Director Jackson asked if she could get a copy of the PowerPoint presentation. Nick Guertin said he would have to speak to his team but that it shouldn't be a problem. He added that he put a link to their website in the chat, and the website has more information on how to submit testimony to the Joint Planning and Development Committee. Commissioner Ford said he appreciated the thorough and wonderful presentation. He then asked what DesegregateCT's response is to the complaint that these changes are impeding on the control of local planning and zoning. Nick Guertin has said that this complaint has come up. He said that there is a relationship between the State and local municipalities, and the State is enabling the barriers in the zoning regulations of local municipalities. He went on to explain that these laws and regulations were created and that from time to time, everything should be re-examined. Circumstances that communities find themselves in warrant the tweaking of these laws. Additionally, the regulations they are proposing set a benchmark for cities to meet; however, the City has the autonomy to decide how it meets that benchmark. The State is not coming in and pointing to a specific block and saying what needs to be built. For example, with the idea that 50% of the land near a train station needs to be multi-family or mixed use, the City can decide what 50% should be developed into that. Akash Kaza added that there is a shortage of housing supply, and it's an artificial shortage. It's not happening naturally. It's happening because a lot of localities are restricting the market's ability to decide to the detriment of everyone. He added that homeownership is endgame, and for decades people of color have been denied the ability to own homes. He added that a key part of this is that they are missing middle housing, but driving down the cost of multi-family housing allows for people to reach homeownership.

Commissioner Hart thanked Nick Guertin and Akash Kaza for their time and the thorough presentation. She added that she hopes the commission can call on them again in the future.

Regular Meeting: Chairperson Hart returned the meeting to the regular order for the commission agenda.

Approval of Agenda: The chairperson called for a motion to approve the meeting agenda. Commissioner Thody motioned to approve the March 17, 2021 agenda. Commissioner Doyle seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Approval of Minutes: The chairperson called for a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Commissioner Thody motioned to approve the February 17, 2021 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Doyle seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Old Business:

There was no discussion on next steps.

New Business:

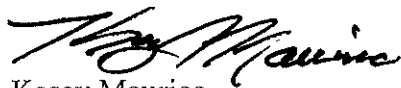
Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the commission vacancy. She said she submitted a nominee to Director Jackson's office but she is unsure of the process. Director Jackson said the name of the nominee will be submitted to the Office of the Mayor. The nominee will be appointed to the commission at the April Common Council meeting. Once appointed, the person can be sworn in and then is able to participate in April's meeting of the commission.

Review: The commission reviewed the 2021 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be April 21, 2021. Commissioner Fernandez said he would not be in attendance at the April meeting.

Adjournment: Commissioner Fernandez motioned to adjourn. Commissioner Doyle seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The meeting was adjourned at 6:08 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III