

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
June 15, 2022 5:00 p.m.

Attendance: Tasha Edens, Henry Fernandez, Anthony Gennaro, Ava Hart, Sanji Lawrence, Debbie Ruimerman, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence:

Absence: Alicia Moody

QUORUM: Yes: X No:

Call to Order: Chairperson Hart called the meeting to order at 5:10 p.m. She noted for the record that there was a quorum present.

Public Session: None

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Agenda: Commissioner Gennaro motioned to approve the revised June 15, 2022 Meeting Agenda. Commissioner Edens seconded. The motion properly carried.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Commissioner Edens motioned to approve the February 16, 2022 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The motion properly carried.

Review of Informal Meeting Minutes: The commission reviewed the Informal Meeting Minutes for March 16, 2022, April 20, 2022, and May 18, 2022. There was no discussion.

Old Business: Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to revision of the working definition of Anti-Semitism for resolution to go before the Common Council. Director Jackson advised that the document the commission had in its package was the original definition. Because the resolution will come from the commission, the commission needs to be the one to edit it. She said it was in their package for them to revise and shorten. She also said they should look for guidance from Commissioner Gennaro, because as a council member, he is familiar with the resolutions council sees and their format. She indicated that the final document should reference the lengthier definition. Commissioner Gennaro said that Common Council Clerk Linda Reed was familiar with the process of taking lengthy text and condensing it into a format for a proper resolution to go before the Common Council. He said she's good at it and does it frequently. Chairperson Hart asked for a motion.

Motion: Commissioner Gennaro motioned to defer the document to Common Council Clerk, Linda Reed for resolution form and content. Commissioner Thody seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion properly carried through a unanimous vote.

Director Jackson said as staff to the commission she would follow up Linda Reed to get this part of the task done.

Chairperson Hart moved to the update on the discussion regarding Middletown Public Schools. She explained that at the commission's last meeting, there was discussion regarding correspondence from a Middletown parent who was concerned about unruly behavior at the high school and fighting. She said that she was given the task of contacting the school officials to get a better understanding of the general climate. She said that she spoke with Dr. Dawn Brooks of Middletown Public Schools and that there were notes included in the commission's package. She read the notes to the commission:

Notes from 5/19/2022 Discussion with Ava Hart and Dr. Dawn Brooks of the Middletown Public Schools

According to Dr. Brooks conditions have improved since school opening, in term of the frequency of physical altercations between students. Some of the challenges that the students had initially were attributed to them being isolated for such a long period of time during the quarantine and some students struggled to meet expectations related to boundaries during the transition back to school. Dr. Brooks went on to say that it is disheartening that negative behaviors seem to find there way to the internet despite the number of positive initiatives and good work that's done by the students and staff. She also related that, The Middletown Public Schools are aligned with the national average in regards to; Absenteeism, Physical Altercations, Vaping, Substance Use, Mental Health Challenges and Teacher Absence. The Middletown Schools are one of twelve school districts in CT that are currently partnering with the CT Rise Network. The Ct Rise Network is a community of educators working together to help Connecticut Students achieve success in and beyond high school. They all collaborate weekly to review and discuss best practices as they navigate the new landscape created by COVID-19. Dr. Brooks proudly shared that everything that is done at MHS is data driven, there may be a few areas of vulnerably in this regard, however, MHS has historically been highlighted by CT Rise as a district with innovative ideas and MPS is often a point of reference for other districts in CT.

Chairperson Hart said she agrees with the concerns expressed by Dr. Dawn Brooks regarding the fact that anytime something negative happens, that news is immediately on the internet. However, positive information is not handled in the same manner. She added that she happens to know that there is a lot of good in the Middletown Public Schools, in the students, the teachers, and the staff. She dislikes that the public becomes involved only when there is perceived problem. Commissioner Fernandez asked if the commission was talking about only issues at the high school. Chairperson Hart clarified that she discussed the middle school with Dr. Brooks, as well, and the answer was that there are the same issues due to the same circumstances, just a younger group of students.

Commissioner Fernandez said he disagrees. Beman has very different, more serious issues. He added that the School Resource Officers at Middletown High School have indicated that there are many problems at the high school. Chairperson Hart clarified that in her conversation, Dr. Brooks did not say that there were no issues, just that the issues were aligned with the national average. Commissioner Fernandez said another ongoing problem at Beman is the fact that many of the classes have long-term substitute teachers.

Chairperson Hart said she recently saw in the Middletown Press that a new Superintendent of Schools was appointed. She suggested that the commission consider raising these concerns with him.

Commissioner Gennaro added that from his perspective, a major contributing factor is a lack of consequences for bad behavior. The number of suspensions schools reports can negatively affect allocation of resources. This leads to schools letting behavior issues go so it doesn't hurt them financially. Another issue is the workload for teachers and administrators. The burnout rate was already bad; but COVID added to that. Consequences are key. Students need clear boundaries, rules, and consequences.

Chairperson Hart spoke on the importance of climate specialists and social workers in the schools. She said it's hard to get people with this level of expertise all at the table at the same time because there is a shortage in this field. Commissioner Gennaro agreed and said that the specialists in place are being pulled in multiple different directions. There was also discussion on the importance of security in the schools and School Resource Officers in the building. Chairperson Hart explained that funding being tied to the suspension rate caused a domino effect. When schools don't have the proper resources, they have to pull from other areas. This causes a shortage. The shortage in teacher and staff can then lead to behavior issues among the students. She said that perhaps this is a larger conversation for the new superintendent. She added that the number one predictor in student success in schools is parent involvement. The commission agreed. Director Jackson suggested holding discussions to include the students so they can hear from them as well as the families. Chairperson Hart asked for a motion for the commission to contact the new Superintendent of Schools to have a discussion about behavioral challenges in the district.

Motion: Commissioner Fernandez motioned to send communication to the new Superintendent of Schools and to invite him to have a discussion with the Human Relations Commission regarding behavioral challenges in the district. Commissioner Edens seconded. Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The motion properly carried through a unanimous vote.

Chairperson Hart said she would take on the task of reaching out to the superintendent. The commission discussed potential dates for the meeting with him. Director Jackson advise the commission that there is a conflict with the next meeting date. She will not be available on July 20th due to being out of state to attend the NAACP National Convention. Because she is staff, the commission will need to discuss rescheduling the July meeting or cancelling it. The commission would also have to decide if it wants to invite the superintendent to the next commission meeting. Commissioner Fernandez said that the timeline for doing this is tight right now. The superintendent is likely going to be preparing for the new school year starting in July.

Motion: Commissioner Thody motioned to move the July meeting and invite the Superintendent of Schools to the meeting on a date that is convenient for him, either July 13th or July 27th. Additionally, the commission could meet in person at the Board of Education building (Central Office) if that is more convenient for him.

Discussion: Commissioner Fernandez said that the timeframe suggested is one where many people may be on vacation. He recommended inquiring as to what dates the Superintendent is available. Director Jackson said the commission could put forth the dates of July 13th or July 27th but also inquire about dates convenient for him.

Amendment: Commissioner Thody made an amendment to his earlier motion. He motioned to communicate with the superintendent to set up a meeting on any date in July that is convenient for him, excluding July 4th and July 20th at a location that is convenient for him, as well.

Discussion: Director Jackson suggested that the commission stick to its Wednesday meeting because there are multiple other meetings that may cause conflict.

Amendment: Commissioner Thody amended the motion to offer the following dates: July 6th, July 13th, or July 27th.

Discussion: Commissioner Fernandez said that they would likely have to go into August.

Second: Commissioner Ruimerman seconded the amended motion.

Discussion: Commissioner Lawrence said that everyone's schedules are difficult right now with graduations, transitions into new grade levels, and other things that claim their time during these months. She said that the commission is being very presumptuous with the superintendent's time. She added that he is preparing for a new school year and entering a new position. She suggested the commission write him a nice welcome letter. In the letter the commission could indicate that it is on board with him and could be a possible resource and ally as he moves forward. The commission could communicate that it has concerns but not bombard him with the issues at this time. She added that right now, he is probably inundated with work, and everyone likely wants a piece of him right now. Realistically, the commission needs to give him some time to unpack and acclimate.

Director Jackson also mentioned that the newly appointed Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Jada Waters, conducted a climate survey across Middletown Public Schools. She'd like to see the final report from that survey. Commissioner Lawrence suggested first reaching out Jada Waters for a potential meeting.

Director Jackson said the discussion has gone in multiple directions. However, she likes the idea of the commission sending the superintendent a welcome letter letting him know that it is an ally to him and looks forward to working with him. Director Jackson said either she or Chairperson Hart could draft out something that at the least welcomes him. The letter could also indicate that the commission would like to meet with him and the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Chairperson Hart said she doesn't want to think for other people. Perhaps he is available in July, and maybe he'd like to meet with the commission on his own. Director Jackson agreed and said the commission members need to let the superintendent tell them his schedule. She said that the motion on the floor has been amended more than once, and there has been a great deal of discussion. She suggested the commission vote it up or down and then start with a new motion.

Vote: Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The commission's vote was six nays and one yay. The motion did not pass.

Chairperson Hart asked for a new motion.

Motion: Commissioner Gennaro motioned that Chairperson Hart and Director Jackson draft a letter to the new Superintendent of Schools welcoming him and inviting him to meet with the Human Relations Commission at some point in the future. This letter can be followed up with a phone conversation to determine what date works best for him. If the commission and the superintendent can work together to find a date in July or August to meet, then they will do that and invite him to the commission's meeting. If it doesn't work for him to come to a regular commission meeting, perhaps the commission can have a quick special meeting with him, if necessary.

Second: Commissioner Fernandez seconded the motion.

Vote: Chairperson Hart called for a vote. The commission's vote was six ayes and one abstention. The motion properly carried.

Commissioner Thody explained that he had abstained from the vote because he had difficulty hearing Commissioner Gennaro. Director Jackson repeated the motion for Commissioner Thody and explained that the commission carried it by six votes, so it passed. Commissioner Thody repeated that he had abstained but now has a question. He asked if the letter would still request a meeting in July. Commissioner Gennaro clarified that the letter would indicate the commission's request to meet with him in July or any future date he can make it. The superintendent may respond back with two potential dates or five. The commission can't anticipate his schedule or availability.

Commissioner Thody said he understood and would like to change his vote to yay. It was noted for the record that the motion passed with a unanimous vote.

New Business: Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the resignation of Commissioner Ford. Chairperson Hart indicated that Commissioner Ford sent a letter saying that he would be resigning from the Human Relations Commission effective immediately. She said he has been gracious with his time for years and that it has been lovely working with him. She added that Commissioner Ford made the decision to resign because he is expanding his family. He is streamlining his obligations to prioritize focus on his family and new baby and furthering his post-graduate education. Director Jackson added that, as reported in the Middletown Press on June 15th, Commissioner Ford is also stepping down from the Middletown Common Council.

Chairperson Hart indicated that the commission now has a vacancy. Commissioner Ford was from the Republican Party.

Chairperson Hart said that the commission has discussed the fact that it cannot meet on July 20th. With regards to when the next meeting will be, she asked that the commission members watch for a notice in their emails because its date will be determined by discussion with the Superintendent of Schools.

Commissioner Thody suggested that the Human Relations Commission send a card to Commissioner Ford expressing gratitude for his time and good luck and best wishes for the future. Director Jackson said she would buy a card and have the chairperson drop in the office to sign it.

Review: The commission reviewed the attendance. Chairperson Hart thanked the commissioners for making an effort to be in attendance. Director Jackson thanked Chairperson Hart for her leadership. Commissioner Thody thanked the commission and the staff for their effort in making sure he got the meeting package.

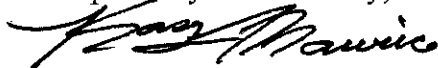
Announcements:

The next regular monthly meeting of the commission will be August 17, 2022.

Adjournment:

Commissioner Lawrence motioned to adjourn. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The meeting adjourned at 6:27 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III