

Human Relations Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
August 19, 2020 5:00 p.m.

**Attendance:** Justin Carbonella, Brandie Doyle, Henry Fernandez, Ava Hart, , Precious Price, Debbie Ruimerman, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

**Excused Absence:** Howard Thody

**Absence:** Ed Ford and Sanji Lawrence

**QUORUM:**            *Yes:*   X          *No:*       

**Call to Order:** Chairperson Carbonella called the meeting to order at 5:07 p.m. Beverly Lawrence of the Middletown Racial Justice Coalition was also present. For the record, Chairperson Carbonella explained that he was not present at the last two meetings because he was on Family Medical Leave due to his child being born. However, he thinks the work that has taken place over the last two meetings is important.

**Public Session:** Jay Tulin was present from the public. He indicated that he does outreach work for the community and is interested in the work of the Human Relations Commission.

**Regular Meeting:**

**Approval of Minutes:** Vice Chairperson Doyle asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes for July 15, 2020. Commissioner Ruimerman motioned to approve the minutes. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The vice chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

**Old Business:**

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to the letter to the mayor regarding the UPSEU contract negotiation and the commission's recommendation. He explained to the commission that as Youth Services Coordinator, he is a member of the UPSEU union. Therefore, it would be a conflict of interest to engage in any conversation, debate, or vote in any discussion of negotiation of that contract. That being said, he indicated that he has concerns about how this recommendation fits more broadly into NCCJ's report. If the commission is amplifying one element, what is being done about the other components in NCCJ's report? Also, how does the commission amplify this component and do so in conjunction with community voice. Additionally, the commission needs to consider strategy and vision with regards to the urgency of this recommendation. He said the commission should look broadly at all the unions before making a recommendation for just this union.

Chairperson Carbonella then posed the question of what is the relationship between the Human Relations Commission and the new task force. He asked if the commission is still doing this work and carrying the recommendations out to the City, or is the report now being handed off to the task force for it to act on it. He said that the relationship between the two groups is very unclear. At this point, he

said he wants to step back from the discussion and asked Vice Chairperson Doyle to facilitate the conversation around this agenda item.

Vice Chairperson Doyle said that it was good to have Chairperson Carbonella back and congratulated him on the birth of his daughter. She said that he brought up a lot of points. She asked him to type the points in the chat so she could be sure that she addressed all of them. She then brought the letter up on the meeting screen so those who were on a computer could read it. She then provided some background on the recommendation. She explained that labor equity was listed as one of the points in NCCJ's report. This report was presented to the Common Council at its last meeting. There was concern expressed that they didn't want the report to come out and then no action occurs. Initiatives have been started in the past, and people have become frustrated that nothing comes out of them. One of the pain points, as emphasized in NCCJ's report, was the labor equity piece and the community's overall feeling that City Hall does not reflect the demographics of Middletown. She added that people feel there are barriers to people of color getting into City positions. She explained that it came to her attention that the UPSEU contract was expired and that there was a provision in the contract that gave preference for internal applicants within that union. This preference was established by the fact that open positions are posted internally first within that union. She said her impression was that anyone within that union who applied and was qualified was given the opportunity for the position and that the position would not then get posted externally.

Vice Chairperson Doyle said that she is not a member of the UPSEU union but that she is a member of the City workforce in her position at the Russell Library. Therefore, she has some familiarity with the various unions involved. She reviewed all the union contracts, and the UPSEU contract is the only one expiring this year. The others, for the most part, expire in 2022. Therefore, this was the only opportunity the commission had to take action on one of the major issues outlined in NCCJ's report, labor equity. Also, something that was brought up surrounding this issue is that people of color tended to be employed in the City in lower positions. This recommendation removes a barrier for people of color already employed within the City but are in another union. Positions in UPSEU tend to have a higher salary grade and potentially decision making in hiring, as well. She explained that it was an opportunity to strike while the iron is hot. These negotiations are happening right now in the City, and this is an immediate way to demonstrate a concrete means to address one of the larger systemic issues identified in the report.

Vice Chairperson Doyle then read the letter aloud for commissioners who were participating in the meeting by phone call.

Dear Mayor Florsheim,

I am writing on behalf of the Human Relations Commission to respectfully request your consideration of recommendations set forth in the Report on Anti-Racism Initiative in the City of Middletown (enclosed and hereafter referred to as “the Report”). Following focus groups and community conversations that engaged more than 100 residents of color, the Report concluded:

Most of the challenges on labor and equity surround hiring practices and opportunities for advancement in positions for the City of Middletown. The majority of people of color who are City employees are in the positions which have lower wages and low prestige, but even these positions can be inaccessible. Residents charge that positions are difficult to break into because those who are in charge of the hiring tend to hire people who they already know or have a connection to, which deepens existing racial dynamics and divides.

It came to our attention that the United Public Service Employees Union contract is currently under negotiation. Said contract contains a provision - Article XIX Section 2A (excerpt enclosed) - which requires internal posting of vacant positions and only opens them for public competition if no qualified internal candidates apply. The Report found that residents of color feel City Hall lacks representation, especially in higher-level positions, due in part to such exclusionary hiring practices.

As the City negotiates its contract with UPSEU Local 6457, we recommend that Article XIX Section 2A be amended or eliminated to allow for a broad and diverse candidate pool beyond that already found in the City’s ranks. Doing so will not only signal a good-faith effort to address barriers identified by Middletown citizens as part of our anti-racism initiative, but also ensure that the City can choose from among a highly-competitive pool of talent which better reflects the demographic composition of our community.

We believe this recommendation is in line with your ongoing - and much appreciated - efforts to achieve greater equity in Middletown. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Yours,

Brandie Doyle  
Commissioner, Middletown Human Relations Commission

CC: Justin Carbonella, Chairperson, Human Relations Commission  
Henry Fernandez, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Councilman Edward Ford, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Ava Hart, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Sanji Lawrence, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Precious Price, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Debbie Ruimerman, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Howard Thody, Commissioner, Human Relations Commission  
Councilman Gene Nocera  
Faith M. Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management  
Justin Richardson, Director of Human Resources

Vice Chairperson Doyle asked if there were any comments about the letter. Director Jackson said she had a comment, not specifically about the letter but about its intent. She said that this letter will give UPSEU something to think about, and it will open up opportunity for 466 members to apply for management positions, and that group is much more diverse than UPSEU. It opens up opportunity for 466 and for members of the public. She said this is well within the charge of the Human Relations Commission which is to “ensure equality of opportunity for all individuals.” She added that department heads have complained that there is very little diversity in the applicant pool, which limits their ability to hire a person of color. She said that this is a barrier, and they have an opportunity to open the applicant pools to a broader group of people. The City will be opening the door to greater opportunity for all individuals. She added that the commission’s charge is not going to change. The task force is still being formed. The work of the commission can still continue. If it wants to take pieces of the report and use them to make recommendations for change in the City, it can still do that.

Vice Chairperson Doyle thanked Director Jackson for her comment and asked if anyone else had a comment about the letter. Beverly Lawrence said that if the concerns came from the community, then the community should have input on the letter. She added that she didn’t think this was a thoughtful process in regards to what the community has recommended. Director Jackson said this is a way for them to address one of the major concerns voiced by the community. People want to see things move forward. She said that she doesn’t see this recommendation as a hindrance in any way to the future work of the task force. Beverly Lawrence said there’s no clarity of what the commission should be doing, and there should be a conversation with the mayor about the work of the task force. Director Jackson said she understood they wanted more clarification on the task force; however, the development of the task force does not mean the commission cannot do its work and follow its charge.

Vice Chairperson Doyle said that one of the reasons this was her first recommendation was because it aligned precisely with the recommendations in NCCJ’s report, which was written based on community input. Beverly Lawrence said that it was not the whole recommendation from the report. It’s a piece of it, but not the whole part. Vice Chairperson Doyle said that it sounds like they are getting into the strategy conversation that was brought up by Chairperson Carbonella. In strategic planning, things need to be addressed in stages and increments. Beverly Lawrence said the community should be a part of this letter. Commissioner Hart asked Beverly Lawrence to clarify her concerns. Beverly Lawrence said her concern is that the community is not being involved in this recommendation. Commissioner Hart asked in what capacity the community could be involved, and Beverly Lawrence said members of

the community should be asked for input on this letter. The community members don't even know about unions or the different types of unions at City Hall.

Commissioner Hart said her understanding was that the commission was given its charge. It hired a consultant, which facilitated focus groups and community conversations, collected information, and compiled a report. The commission has been educated and informed. Now, it is the commission's responsibility to take that data and make recommendations. That is what this letter is.

Director Jackson added to Commissioner Hart's comment by reading from letter E of the commission's functions as outlined in the City ordinance: "To make such studies as in the judgment of the Commission will aid in furthering the aims of this article." She explained that the commission hired a consultant to conduct a study. It now has the information and is acting on information from that study. This recommendation is simply the commission saying that based on some of the information gathered through this study, it sees an opportunity to inform the City and make recommendations which will provide a greater opportunity not only for people from the public to advance but also people in 466.

Beverly Lawrence said that she understood that, but she wants more clarity on what happens with this letter after it goes to the mayor. Does it get turned over to the task force? Vice Chairperson Doyle said that the letter will go to the mayor, but she explained that copied on the letter are the Director of Human Resources, Director Jackson in her capacity as the Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management, Councilman Nocera, and the commissioner and members of the Middletown Racial Justice Coalition. She explained that the strategy behind this is setting a precedent with the first union going through negotiation at this time. As other union contracts expire and go through negotiation, this precedent will exist and can be pointed at to facilitate a similar change. She said she felt it was transparent that the community wanted more opportunity and better access to City positions. Beverly Lawrence asked why not make the change to all unions. Vice Chairperson Doyle explained that UPSEU is the only union going through negotiations at this time. The others don't expire until 2022. Beverly Lawrence then said it felt rushed.

Director Jackson explained that this is how policy change works. It can't be a provision for all unions at this time because the others are under existing contracts that don't yet expire. This is a recommendation to the mayor, who has a lot to do with policy change. The opportunity to make this change for the UPSEU contract will not be available again for another five years. This is an opportunity for the mayor to say that the City is hearing what the public is saying. This is an actionable item that can result in greater opportunity.

Commissioner Price said that she would need to excuse herself from the meeting because the Middletown Racial Justice Coalition is hosting an event in fifteen minutes and she has to be there early. She said that she understands what Beverly Lawrence is saying. She suggested that the letter include language like this is in the hopes that when negotiations come up for future contracts that all contracts are amended in this way. She added that while she agrees with Vice Chairperson Doyle that the iron is hot on this, the iron is hot on a lot of different issues right now. Can the commission put together maybe five recommendations at this time? She said her issue with this is that it feels incomplete. She said it seems as though the commission is cherry picking the issues on which it wants to work. She said that there are a number of areas where the commission could suggest improvements.

Vice Chairperson Doyle said that she would like the opportunity to respond to Commissioner Price before she left the meeting. Commissioner Price said she had to leave at this time. Vice Chairperson Doyle said that she sent the link to the letter and would like Commissioner Price to respond to it with the language she is suggesting. She said that contribution from other commissioners instead of just criticism would be appreciated. Commissioner Price said that she hears what Vice Chairperson Doyle is saying but the thought just came to her. Vice Chairperson Doyle added that as far as other recommendations, she has not heard anything from any other commissioners as far as suggestions and recommendations to address other issues reflected in the report. She said she is not capable of doing all this alone. She came up with one recommendation. She continued that part of the role of commissioners is to contribute to this process. She said that she was getting exhausted by the things that she is doing that were not getting commitment from the commission. She said she is feeling a very small iota of what the people may have felt who contributed to the conversations for the report. People who participated in the community conversations said that they felt they communicated their concerns but nothing was ever done. Now, she can see why. She said the commission keeps chasing its own tail, and she said she doesn't have a lot more to give.

Director Jackson said that she would like to recommend that this piece move forward. She said she has already spoken to the mayor about this. Once it moves forward, it's up to the mayor, UPSEU, and the Office of General Counsel (Labor Management Team) to decide if it's a reasonable, feasible provision to implement as a policy change in the union contract. The commission doesn't even have the final say. It can only make recommendations. However, this is an opportunity, and the commission needs to take advantage of it. Government moves very slowly, but this is an actionable item that she strongly recommends the commission pushes forward.

Commissioner Price left the meeting.

Commissioner Hart said she appreciated Beverly Lawrence's comments about things seeming rushed. She's right, but the commission has a small window of opportunity. She added that she really appreciated Vice Chairperson Doyle's work and effort. She reminded the commission that Vice Chairperson Doyle took this information from the meeting minutes when Commissioner Hart talked about communicating with the unions. She said Vice Chairperson Doyle read the minutes, thought about the concerns, and came to the commission with information that is really critical and timely. She said that she wants this to move forward. Also, Commissioner Hart said that she was confident that Commissioner Price could add to this letter. She then asked how soon the commission needs to act on this recommendation. Director Jackson said that negotiations are already underway, so this needs to happen as soon as possible. She said that she read the letter and thought it was exactly how it needed to be worded. It doesn't dictate. It explains that the City has an opportunity to add the provision in the contract language and therefore create better opportunity for people in other unions and in the public to apply for positions, wherein before there was a barrier for those potential applicants.

Commissioner Hart said that she is concerned about the tone of tonight's meeting. She said that it seems people are feeling disenfranchised. She is uncomfortable that Beverly Lawrence, Vice Chairperson Doyle, and Commissioner Price seem to feel they're not being heard. She said she personally feels the letter is good as-is, but if one person is feeling disenfranchised, they are all responsible for working through that. She said if the commissioners don't listen to each other, they are perpetuating the issues they are trying to avoid.

Director Jackson said that she agrees. Everyone has a voice, and everyone has an opinion. This recommendation is going to the mayor, and he is the hiring authority. He is the one who has the final say on who gets a job. If someone has a dissenting opinion, that person needs to come to the table with a solution. It's one thing to talk, but the commission is supposed to be getting things done.

Commissioner Ruimerman suggested that it be added to the letter that the commission hopes the task force will follow through on this. Director Jackson clarified that the task force is not even in place at this time, and contract negotiations are happening now.

Commissioner Fernandez said that it is better to approach one union instead of all four. If the commission fails on all four, it won't get another opportunity. The letter is doing what the commission intended by addressing the specific article. If the recommendation has to be worded differently to address the other contracts and their specific articles, they have time to research that. However, this letter is written with the intention to add a provision to that specific article. He said that in his experience with unions, this letter is appropriate.

Beverly Lawrence said she had to leave the meeting because she had the same conflict with an event for Middletown Racial Justice Coalition. Director Jackson thanked her for her input.

**Motion:** Vice Chairperson Doyle motioned to table the discussion. Commissioner Fernandez seconded.

Vice Chairperson Doyle moved the discussion to the thank-you letter to participants. Director Jackson said that the letter the commissioners approved at the last meeting has been copied and will be mailed out this week.

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to the agenda item of next steps. He said that he thought it was important in this moment to gauge where the commission is and take a breath. He said there is confusion over the commission's relationship to the report and the relationship to the task force. Director Jackson said the Human Relations Commission has a charge as outlined by the City ordinance. Chairperson Carbonella said that he is clear on the charge. However, the City just voted to establish an anti-racism task force. He added that his sense is two groups should not be doing the same thing. Director Jackson said that the commission has its charge already, and it will not change. Anti-racism work is not the same as the commission's functions. The charge and functions of the task force have not been established, yet.

Chairperson Carbonella said that anti-racism work is programing, policy change, training, system work, education, and many other things. It is a wide breadth of very intentional work that looks to undo systems of oppression. He said it's disjointed if multiple groups are carrying out strategy for the municipality.

Commissioner Fernandez said that one of the reasons they are here addressing this is because this has been going on for years within the City. He said that people are concerned that people get jobs in the City because of knowing someone or having a connection, and people of color are not a part of that process. He said that another task force coming on board is only going to help the work. He added that the two groups will likely end up working together from time to time.

Director Jackson said the commission was moving along with a certain momentum. However, now that the City is going to establish an anti-racism task force, there is great confusion. It's disrupting the commission's work. The commission can't even pass a letter of recommendation to the mayor at an appropriate time because there's confusion. When confusion steps in, nothing gets done. Even if the contract language doesn't come to fruition, the commission has at least done its due diligence. She said she is sensing roadblocks that are suddenly getting in their way, and she doesn't know why. Also, those roadblocks are causing dissention in this commission.

Commissioner Fernandez said they can add something to the letter. However, it makes no sense to spend \$25,000 and have nothing to present. Director Jackson agreed. Commissioner Fernandez said that contract negotiations are occurring now, and it wouldn't make sense to present the recommendation later. He said they should have put it to a vote instead of tabling it. The majority rules. The commission is not addressing the work that Vice Chairperson Doyle did in doing the research and drafting the recommendation, but it is addressing two other people who have something critical to say about the recommendation. Director Jackson agreed and added that the others have had many opportunities to change or revise the recommendation.

Commissioner Hart said she had a question about timeframe. She said that Commissioner Price writes great, compelling letters, and she's sure she can add whatever language needs to be added. However, she said she wants to move forward. She asked when the letter needs to be amended. Director Jackson said it should be amended by Friday so it can go to the mayor by Monday. Commissioner Fernandez suggested that they ask for revisions by Friday, and if it can't be amended by Friday, the letter will go forward, and commissioners can draft something else at a later date.

Commissioner Fernandez said he had issue with the fact that people came to the meeting knowing they had an obligation to attend another meeting. They waited until just before they had to leave to make comments and didn't stay in the meeting long enough to allow feedback from the other commissioners. He added that he is concerned that the commission is going to miss an important window in the negotiations because the letter may get held up again. He then added that the next time a group needs money to do work like this, people are going to question the result of the \$25,000 already spent. He reiterated that the recommendation should have been put to a vote.

Commissioner Hart asked Vice Chairperson Doyle if she was comfortable reaching out to Commissioner Price or if she would prefer that someone else reach out to her. She added that it seemed Commissioner Price had something very specific she wanted added to the language of the letter. Vice Chairperson Doyle said she sent the letter to the commissioners on the Monday before the meeting. Commissioner Hart said she would recommend a conversation because Commissioner Price may want to just talk through it before she puts anything down in writing. Commissioner Hart said she was willing to reach out to Commissioner Price, and Commissioner Fernandez said he agreed with that.

Director Jackson reminded the commission that it still needed a motion to move forward. There was further discussion on what occurred when the commission tabled the recommendation and what should occur for it to move forward. Director Jackson added that holding up the letter denies the mayor an opportunity to make a positive change on behalf of employment for the City.

Director Jackson said that they could make a motion to reopen the discussion of the recommendation and stated that they do still have quorum. She reminded them that the additional funding went to the



task force for it to work on projects and programing. However, the commission is still advisory and has the ability to advise the governing body and the mayor.

**Motion:** Commissioner Fernandez motioned to reopen the discussion of moving the recommendation forward for a vote. Commissioner Hart seconded.

Chairperson Carbonella recused himself from the discussion. Commissioner Fernandez praised the letter for its professionalism. He added that approaching the unions and making recommendations for change is a learning process. He added that addressing the importance of people of color getting into management positions in the City is going to be a long fight and many more letters will need to be written. He said that change will not happen overnight. Commissioner Hart said she would have a conversation with Commissioner Price over anything she wanted to add to the letter before it goes forward. Director Jackson asked for that transaction to be completed before the close of Thursday so Vice Chairperson Doyle could get the update and the commission could review it. Commissioner Ruimerman added that she didn't hear that anyone was totally against this letter, just that there should be more added to it. Therefore, she said she didn't see a problem with it going forward. There was further discussion on the importance of having patience with these processes and knowing that this opens up more opportunity for the best qualified candidate.

**Motion:** Commissioner Ruimerman motioned to move forward with the letter of recommendation to the mayor with the understanding that the commission can make future recommendations. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. Vice Chairperson Doyle asked for any further discussion. The commission had no further discussion, so Vice Chairperson Doyle asked for a vote. The motion passed with four ayes and one abstention.

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to next steps. He said that there are two notions on the table. One is the relationship between the commission and the task force, which is still being formed. The second is the notion of identifying priorities based on the community's feedback. He said the commission needs to determine how it is going to take information from the report and then create action steps. His said the letter seems to be an initial attempt at taking pieces of the report and starting to actualize them. He asked if the commissioners thought it would be helpful for him to invite the mayor to the next meeting to hear from him on his perceived vision of the task force and its relationship with the commission. Director Jackson said she thought that would be a great. She also suggested that the commission get some type of template of what the task force is going to be doing. Otherwise, the commission will go in circles trying to do its job without understanding the job of the task force. She added that an outline of its functions should have been established before it went before the Common Council. She said that the commission is still advisory and will continue to function in that way. Chairperson Carbonella said without a deliberate conversation about the relationship between the two groups the commission will either tiptoe around it, which would not be good for the commission, or step on its toes, which would not be good for the task force. He added that the commission has been having a very deliberate conversation about race, and the commission's charge is more expansive than that.

Director Jackson agreed that Chairperson Carbonella should invite the mayor to the next meeting to speak on the task force. Then, it will be documented in the minutes the mayor's thought surrounding this task force. Then, the commission can keep its focus on its work moving forward. Chairperson Carbonella added that determining how to amplify the priorities put forth the in the report should be a

conversation the commission should have after Mayor Florsheim discusses the task force and its relationship to the commission. Director Jackson agreed that based on the discussion of this meeting, those are reasonable next steps. She said that her understanding of what Beverly Lawrence was saying was that the community needed to review the letter. However, Director Jackson said the community has already given input and voiced concerns. They don't need to look at the letter. They need to know the City is doing something.

Commissioner Hart said having the mayor come to the next meeting would be great. She said that when she first learned of the task force, she had a lot of questions and concerns, and at this time, the commission still doesn't have a lot of clarity on it. She added that she is concerned for individuals in this group feeling disenfranchised and isolated, and the commission needs to figure that out. She also said that Beverly Lawrence's concern about follow up in the community is an important one. People can move forward on actions but sometimes forget to go back and follow up with others on the actions. Also, she said this change is a process. They're going to have to keep working and keep looking for opportunities. Vice Chairperson Doyle did her homework and brought this opportunity to the commission, and the timing was fortunate. They are not going to be able to do everything in one shot. The work will evolve. Director Jackson agreed that as they continue to dig into this work, it will evolve.

Director Jackson said bringing the mayor on board for the next meeting would be a positive thing. Then, the commission can refocus on its role in an advisory capacity. She explained to them that they don't want to be the group that has the information on the concerns and issues and does nothing with it. Commissioner Ruimerman suggested that the commissioners have their questions prepared ahead of time for the next meeting. Director Jackson agreed that it would be a far more productive meeting if the commissioners send their questions ahead of time so the mayor can have an understanding of the discussion before the meeting. Director Jackson said she would make a note to herself to send an email out to the commission asking for them to submit questions to the department regarding the vision of task force.

Chairperson Carbonella said that this work is hard, and often people get only one shot to make change. He appreciates everyone's work from the beginning of this project.

**New Business:**

**Review:** The commission reviewed the 2020 attendance.

**Announcements** The next meeting of the commission will be September 16, 2020.

**Adjournment:** Vice Chairperson Doyle motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:40 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,  
Administrative Sec. III