

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
September 16, 2020 5:00 p.m.

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

Excused Absence:

Absence: Ed Ford, Sanji Lawrence, and Debbie Ruimerman

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. Mayor Florsheim was also present.

Public Session: The commission welcomed Mayor Florsheim to the meeting. Chairperson Carbonella asked Mayor Florsheim if he had anything he wanted to say for the public session. Mayor Florsheim said he read the minutes from the last meeting and was eager to answer the commission's questions.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Agenda: Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Agenda for September 16, 2020. Commissioner Fernandez motioned to approve the agenda. Commissioner Doyle seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

Approval of Minutes: Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes for August 19, 2020. Commissioner Fernandez motioned to approve the minutes. Commissioner Doyle seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried with one abstention.

Old Business:

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to clarification of the new anti-racism task force. He thanked the mayor for joining their meeting. He said that the commission was tasked with this important work a few years ago and that they are starting to see the fruits of that labor. He further explained that as the report part of this work has concluded, one of the things that needs clarification is the relationship between the Human Relations Commission and the anti-racism task force. He added that he takes some responsibility for that confusion and should have invited the mayor into this conversation earlier. He then turned the discussion over to Mayor Florsheim.

Mayor Florsheim said he shoulders that responsibility, as well. He said he wished he had the opportunity to have this conversation earlier. He explained that the appointment of members to the task force has been delayed partly because there is a huge interest. They now have to make some tough choices on who to appoint from a pool of highly qualified applicants. Also, he has to consider how to make the work of the task force fall to not just the members. The task force needs to engage other committees and commissions and the rest of City government. The delay is also due to the chaos and

complexity of re-opening City Hall, students returning to school, and getting Wesleyan up and running during this time of COVID-19. He explained that they didn't want to pull this together when they were focusing on other things. They wanted to make sure they were giving it the focus and attention it deserves. He said that they are building the task force from scratch and that he views it as a product of the work of the Human Relations Commission. He said ideally it will be a hand in glove transition of the work. He said the commission may ask the question of what the task force will do to reach out to committees and commissions, for which he doesn't have an answer because it is new. He's interested to hear from the commissioners their answer to that question. He'd like to know from the commissioners how those bridges can be built and how this task force can be most effective.

Mayor Florsheim explained to the commission that the primary reason for the creation of the task force is to be effective. The objective is to take some of the issues in Middletown that people have been talking about for a long time and more recently and put some energy and force behind making specific policy recommendations to achieve progress on those issues. That effort really started with Councilman Nocera, Director Jackson, and this commission putting together an effort to study race relations in the City of Middletown. As the report was being finalized and he took office, he attended a commission meeting and met with Director Jackson and Chairperson Carbonella about the trajectory of this work. From those discussions, one of the conclusions was that to commit to this effort, they will need more staffing. He clarified that he is not suggesting that the commitment from the commission hasn't been serious because he knows it has. However, the report is a product of the commission's work on this specific issue, but the commission has a wide mandate to work on many types of issues within the city. The commission was tasked with this work because it was the best group of people to do it. However, one of the conclusions of the report is that there needs to be more resources to tackle this issue. To meaningfully make progress, they need to start providing those resources, which is what they are trying to do by setting up this task force. They want to set it up in a way that is informed from the experiences of the Human Relations Commission. He said he's not in favor of creating task forces, research panels, and study groups when they're not needed. However, this task force should be a place where people work together in a hands-on way to operationalize things. Taking the work of this report to the next level requires more people. He said he hopes to create synergy among the different groups working on various sides of these issues.

Mayor Florsheim said that he was happy to answer the commission's questions and to address the discussion around the labor negotiations. He explained that he can't say a lot during active negotiations but he wanted everyone to know that they received the letter and talked about it extensively. He said he read the minutes from the last meeting and acknowledged there was quite a bit of back and forth. He said that he shares the view of Commissioner Doyle on this topic and that it does present an equity issue. He added that he was happy to be in attendance at tonight's meeting and would like to come to the meetings more regularly.

Chairperson Carbonella thanked Mayor Florsheim for his introduction of the conversation and asked the commission members what their questions were regarding the relationship between the existing Human Relations Commission and the soon-to-be-formed anti-racism task force. Because no one spoke first, Chairperson Carbonella said he agreed with the mayor that the commission has a broad breadth of social justice issues, which includes race. He said he is concerned about two separate groups strategizing and planning around this which could lead to either stepping on each other's toes or tiptoeing around each other. In thinking about directing, strategizing, and coordinating resources, he

asked the mayor for his thoughts about how the two entities should function. He also asked if the task force will fully take the lead on this work.

Director Jackson commented that she is noticing, since this work has been done, a big struggle for some of the commission members is to differentiate the two entities. The Human Relations Commission has a defined function. However, there is no defined functions for the task force. She said that the commission can still do its work. The commission shouldn't expect it to be able to cover everything that was in the report. However, the commission can still work on segments of it and continue to make recommendations. The commission's role is advisory, so it should not stop itself from making recommendations to the mayor. She said she envisions the task force as a working group. The task force's function must be different. She continued by saying that the commission's recommendation was timely because negotiations were taking place. Also, it improves upward mobility and removes a significant barrier.

Commissioner Fernandez said that this recommendation was also an attempt to rectify decades of past history of barriers in City employment. The notion of ending racism is entirely different than doing the work of eliminating barriers in employment in the City. The unraveling starts with the mayor and Human Resources. They don't have to spend a great deal of time on it if they just set new rules. The problem everyone in Middletown sees is that qualified people can be considered, but the person who gets the job tends to be a relative with fewer qualifications and less experience. He continued and said he disagreed with the numbers presented in the NCCJ report because he believes they used numbers from the last census, and he believes the numbers have gone up since then. Middletown residents need better opportunities to enter City employment.

Commissioner Doyle said she had a quick question for Mayor Florsheim. She asked if the letter with the recommendation was out of line. Mayor Florsheim said he appreciated the comment and answered that it was not out of line. Additionally, he said that he read the minutes from last month's meeting and said he wanted to be very clear that the fact that the City is forming a task force does not in any way mean that the commission cannot function in its advisory role. It was not at all out of line. He added that he wanted to address Chairperson Carbonella's concern by saying the key is good staffing of the task force. He used the example of the fact that the City has a number of commissions with environmental mandates, such as the Clean Energy Task Force, the Commission on Conservation and Agriculture, the Complete Streets Committee, and others. He said there is frustration among the members of those commissions and committees because there has been a lack of action on many issues that have existed for years because they haven't had robust staffing. Therefore, the City has been struggling with how to improve that situation. He explained that the nature of the relationship between one commission and another is always going to be defined by their ability to communicate and collaborate with each other. That responsibility should not fall to the volunteer commissioners. That is a role for the staff and for his office. Adding that support is a big part of the intention for the task force.

Commissioner Doyle said that she has always understood the role of the commission as advisory. The commission should hear from the constituents in Middletown of what the pain points are and then make recommendations of how those can be addressed. She said that she believes a major difference between the commission and the task force will be resources. She said her understanding was that there would be a certain contingent of City Hall staff who will be a part of the task force. She also said that her understanding is that there are funds set aside for the task force and now that the report has been completed, the commission has exhausted its funds. She suggested that the commission could have an

advisory role while the task force could be an implementation arm. She added that she believes that nearly everyone, if not everyone, on the commission works full time so trying to accomplish any major City-wide endeavors in their free time has proven to be a gargantuan ask of a group of volunteers. She added that educating and raising awareness is not really a part of the commission's charge, so that would be a good component for the task force. She said that the Russell Library has been committing some of its limited funding to educating the staff to try to become a more welcoming and equitable place. She also recommended that the task force could bring NCCJ back to provide the anti-racism training for the newly elected City leadership and other employees who supervise or hire within the City.

Mayor Florsheim agreed with Commissioner Doyle that the task force should be described as an implementation arm. He said that the task ahead is to refer to the report, make policy recommendations, and implement them. He said that this emerged because they knew the report would be completed soon. In getting feedback from the staff and from the commission, he learned that it was time consuming and expensive by volunteer commission standards. Once the report was complete, he knew they didn't want to just put it on a shelf and have it sit there. They wanted to be able to act on it. An important part of that was going to be introducing resources. Also, the Common Council approved a line item in the budget for the Office of the Mayor for this work to continue, and it will be up to the task force to determine how to spend the money. However, that does not mean that every project and every aspect of this work will be dictated by the task force. For example, if the Human Relations Commission and the Conservation Commission want to partner on a project to create a community garden in the North End, they can do that and request funding for the project from the task force. He said that one of the first things that task force would do would be to create a mission statement. He said he envisions that the mission statement will start with the ideas put forth in the NCCJ report. Years later, they may want to reassess the work. But, he said that is the general idea of how the task force will work. He continued by saying a big goal for him is to better coordinate the work of the all the advisory committees and volunteer boards. The City asks a lot of the volunteer leadership, and he wants the committee and commission members to know that their time is fruitful and that it is time well spent. He said that part of that requires that he provide the resources to the committees and commissions and his team. He said that he has heard it from this commission and from other boards and committees that people feel it's always a fight to get work accomplished. He reiterated that he feels that is due to lack of resources, lack of staffing, and lack of communication, through no fault of the volunteers.

Commissioner Thody said he had a question. He said that he had to educate himself over the renaming of the middle school. He said that the Beman Triangle is a well-kept secret and wonders if there is any way the task force can work with Wesleyan and Cross Street A.M.E Zion to get a plaque for the area. He said at first he was opposed to renaming the school, but after reading a lengthy report on the history of the Beman family, he was in agreement with renaming it. The history should be publicized, and it should be taught in the schools. Chairperson Carbonella said that the intentionality of ensuring that the community's history is adequately and equitably told is a shared responsibility. He added that if this commission wants to own some of that work, then that could be a part of the evolution of this process.

Chairperson Carbonella asked if the commission members had any more thoughts, concerns, or questions in regards to the relationship between the Human Relations Commission and the task force. He then clarified with Mayor Florsheim that the NCCJ report will be the guideline for the task force. Mayor Florsheim said absolutely. He said that needs to happen hand in glove with this group. He said that report is a great document and will be helpful to any new group in terms of finding its direction. However, it does not make sense at all for one group of people to hand it over to another and have a new set eyes decipher it. He wants the process to be collaborative and recognizes that there is a great deal of institutional knowledge within the commission.

Director Jackson asked Mayor Florsheim for timelines for the task force. Is the task force going to be formulated by Thanksgiving or perhaps the New Year? Mayor Florsheim said the plan is to make appointments to the task force at the October Common Council meeting. He said the next step would be to get the groups together and determine the nature of the relationship between the two groups. He said that from reading last month's minutes he sensed that the commission was confused about what it should be doing in the meantime. He advised the commission that it should continue do the work it has been doing. He continued by saying that the recommendation they submitted is and was very helpful in letting him know how the commission is thinking about these issues through the lens of City employment and the City's labor relations practice. He said the commission members should not wait to make recommendations, make their voices heard, or even just reach out to him about next steps or operational steps.

Chairperson Carbonella suggested that as the task force develops its mission statement, in addition to that or in lieu of, it should also create a theory of change. He added that something he has learned from this process is that there are multiple paths to addressing systemic oppression. Along the way, the commission had to re-litigate certain decision points. The notion of working in affinity was one of them. This happened a number of times, and he thinks it's because the group did not have a solidified core of how to address these issues, which led to stumbling blocks in terms of philosophy.

Commissioner Price left the meeting.

Mayor Florsheim said he thought that was a great suggestion. He said he remembered from an earlier meeting that was a point of tension. He used the example of how different approaches to issues can yield different results, such as a collaborative approach versus a confrontational one. He said that they need to have those conversations on when to use the carrot and when to use the stick, or when to build coalitions and when to prioritize issues. Chairperson Carbonella suggested that the group also establish definitions. There can be multiple definitions of racism in a certain conversation. Some may think of it from an interpersonal standpoint; whereas, others may look at it from a systemic perspective. He added that having the commission do a summit with the task force would be very informative. He asked the commission members if there were any other thoughts or questions for the mayor.

Commissioner Fernandez said he had a question. He said as he listened to Commissioner Doyle earlier, he thought he heard that some of the members of the task force would be selected from City employment. He wanted clarification on that. Mayor Florsheim said he intended to clarify that earlier. He said of the numerous applicants, none were City employees. However, it will be a staffed group in much the same way that Director Jackson is staff to the Human Relations Commission. It will be staffed through the Office of the Mayor. At first, the staff person will be the Chief of Staff. However, the

long-term goal is to create a staff position. The task force will not be comprised of City employees. Commissioner Fernandez said that was good because that is where the problem lies, so it would be difficult to make progress if that were the case. Mayor Florsheim said that he has had multiple conversations, and this is topic has come up a lot, and he's aware that this is an important issue that needs to be addressed. He clarified that his agenda is to continue the good work that was started with this commission.

Commissioner Doyle thanked Mayor Florsheim for meeting with them tonight and having this conversation.

Beverly Lawrence left the meeting.

Chairperson Carbonella thanked Mayor Florsheim and said that dismantling how this lives within systems, including Middletown's municipality is critically important work. For it to be elevated to the highest levels of government and power decentralized to the people running it is important and appreciated. He thanked Mayor Florsheim for amplifying and resourcing the work.

Mayor Florsheim thanked the commission and said he looks forward to continuing this work. The commission thanked Mayor Florsheim, and he left the meeting.

Chairperson Carbonella asked Commissioner Doyle if she wanted to speak on the recommendation letter and say anything above and beyond what has already been said. Commissioner Doyle said that she copied everyone on the email which contained the revision from Commissioner Price so she hoped everyone had a chance to review it. Director Jackson said that she spoke to Deputy General Counsel, Kori Wisneski, about it. She indicated that the labor negotiation team received it and it was timely. Kori Wisneski indicated that it might be difficult for it to go through; however, Director Jackson reiterated to her the importance of removing this significant barrier to all City employees and applicants from the public. She explained to her that this change broadens opportunity. It doesn't take any opportunities away from everyone. Director Jackson said she intends to also speak to Geen Thazhampallath, who is the UPSEU Union President.

Commissioner Doyle said she offered the suggestion to Kori Wisneski that they increase vacation leave for UPSEU as an incentive. She added that she was glad the letter got to the right people at the right time. She then said now that the recommendation has been made, it's time to turn their attention to next steps.

Chairperson Carbonella asked how everyone was for time. The commissioners agreed that due to other meetings and constraints, they need to wrap up the meeting soon. He asked for thoughts on where this group goes from here. Commissioner Doyle said that they should return to the report and look for another piece of it that can translate into a recommendation. She suggested looking at the education piece and possibly making a recommendation to the Board of Ed. However, given the circumstances, the Board of Ed is facing a number of challenges at this time. She then suggested that everyone read through the entire report again before the next meeting and think of some concrete action that can be taken.

Director Jackson said it's important that the commission is on record as identifying a barrier and making a recommendation to the mayor and to the labor management committee. This recommendation takes nothing away from anyone. Commissioner Doyle said she'd like to see the report further distributed. Also, she'd like the Common Council to have a printed copy of it. Commissioner Doyle also asked Chairperson Carbonella to send the NCCJ report to Technology Services to put on the City's website.

Chairperson Carbonella said that the commission has two other issues. First, Commissioner Doyle has decided to step down as Vice Chairperson. Secondly, Chairperson Carbonella said he needs to be mindful of his growing family and his out-of-work commitments. He said he will be stepping down as Chairperson and will also be resigning from the commission. It's also a natural time for new leadership. Commissioner Doyle thanked Chairperson Carbonella for his very apt leadership all these years. Chairperson Carbonella said he has been happy to chair the commission and this project has been an insanely heavy lift from the volunteer level to the staff level. Commissioner Thody thanked Chairperson Carbonella and Commissioner Doyle for their work and leadership. He also thanked Kasey Maurice for doing the work of the minutes.

Director Jackson remarked on where the commission is at now and all the progress it has achieved under the leadership of Chairperson Carbonella and Commissioner Doyle.

New Business:

Review: The commission reviewed the 2020 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be October 21, 2020.

Adjournment: Commissioner Doyle motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Thody seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:19 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III