

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

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

Excused Absence: Brandie Doyle and Sanji Lawrence

Absence:

QUORUM: Yes: X No:

Call to Order: In the absence of Chairperson Doyle, Director Jackson called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m. Anthony Gennaro, who will be appointed to the commission, was in attendance.

Public Session: Jay Tulin, Chairperson of the Human Relations Commission in Farmington was present. He said he wanted to speak on the Statewide Human Rights and Relations Meeting. He said he was contacted by the chairperson in Guildford and the chairperson in West Hartford and was then put in touch with the commission in Hamden. They have reached out to a number of commissions in other towns, some of which are inactive. The goal is to have the statewide meeting in March. This idea was created by the Hamden Human Relations Commission, and he volunteered to address the Middletown Human Relations Commission because he used to live in Middletown and served on the Citizen's Advisory Committee. Once a list of the functioning, active commissions is established, a formal communication will go out to each commission's chairperson. The idea is to have the chairpersons and any interested participants come together for a forum to see if there is any consensus in moving forward. He clarified that the commission in Farmington is not a new commission. It's a re-creation of an old commission. He added that he thought the statewide meeting is a great idea and that he strongly encourages the commission to participate.

Director Jackson said they were introduced to this idea of the meeting because an email from Michael Thompson was sent to the Town Clerk, who forwarded it to her office. She said she left a message for Michael Thompson but did not hear back from him, yet. Jay Tulin mentioned a person named Sean, and Director Jackson asked him to clarify. Jay Tulin said that the chairperson of the Hamden commission is Sean Cardwell.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Agenda: Commissioner Ford motioned to approve the December 16, 2020 agenda. Commissioner Hart seconded. Director Jackson called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Approval of Minutes: Commissioner Fernandez motioned to approve the November 18, 2020 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Ford seconded. Director Jackson called for a vote. The motion properly carried with one abstention.

Old Business:

There was no discussion on the commission's next steps at this time.

New Business:

Director Jackson spoke on the possibility of the Human Relations Commission participating in the statewide meeting. She said that when she first started at the City, there was a State Human Relations Commission. It was beneficial because they were able to effect change in working with legislation. She added that housing is a major issue. Also, when the governor ends the moratorium on evictions, there will be tsunami of evictions. She said she hopes the state can provide some additional funding so the Jones Fund and CRT can work together to right-side people. Some tenants have received stimulus money and/or the additional unemployment and did not make an effort to pay on their rent for several months and don't have an explanation. CRT, St Vincent De Paul, and the Jones Fund are going to be the only resources for people who are facing eviction, so she hopes the state offers more funding. Another important housing issue is that there is no cap on rent or how much a landlord can raise rent.

Commissioner Hart said she was a bit confused because the understanding she has about this is that it's a coalition or a consortium. However, Jay Tulin used the word forum, and to her a forum is more of a one-time event. Director Jackson agreed with Commissioner Hart and said that she was a little confused, as well. She read a portion of the email to the commission. The message in its entirety is below:

Hello,

I'm a commission on the Hamden Human Rights and Relations Commission. We are interested in seeing all the Human Rights/Relations Commissions in Connecticut meet together (over Zoom), to discuss what each commission does, and how they best do it. It seems that with the current challenges facing Connecticut and the United States, learning each other's strengths, and how to better support one another would be very helpful. Do you think your town's Human Relations Commission would be interested in meeting in March or April 2021, and to whom should I speak?

Best Regards,

Michael Thompson

Commissioner Fernandez said it sounds like it would be an open agenda to hear from each other about problems and challenges and see if they can help each other. Director Jackson agreed. Commissioner Fernandez said he was concerned that he was hearing about towns such as West Hartford, South Windsor, and Hamden. Commissioner Fernandez said those towns have issues of discrimination in housing. He gave an example of a person who is in an upper level with the State, had a bid on a house, could probably have paid cash for the house, and lost it when the seller found out who he was. He

added that West Hartford cruisers would chase people coming from Hartford back into the housing projects in Hartford. He's concerned that these are the towns that will be involved in this meeting.

Commissioner Hart said it couldn't hurt to learn more about this meeting. Perhaps, this will be an opportunity to examine those issues that exist in other towns. Commissioner Fernandez said the commission is already struggling to work with the report about Middletown. Residents in other towns and arenas can't help Middletown. Middletown has to help itself. That process starts with the Common Council, the mayor, and the Director of Human Resources. However, if the commissioners meet with another town that has had numerous lawsuits for housing discrimination, how can they help that town?

Director Jackson said she believes Middletown is far ahead of all these other towns once they come together. Middletown has done its homework, research, and an assessment of itself. Middletown now knows it has some key areas that it knows it needs to improve. However, if this group wants to come together and help find sources of funding to deal with a specific issue like housing, then it would be beneficial to come together and to unite on this. A statewide group would be more equipped to change legislation or acquire funding. However, they should first come to the table to hear of issues in other towns.

Commissioner Ford said that when the commissioners said they wanted clarification about that this is, Jay Tulin wrote something in the chat saying that the idea is to conduct a forum first with the intent to possibly establish something like a coalition. Commissioner Ford echoed Director Jackson's notion that having the power to get legislation done, especially on an issue as critical as housing. He added that the only way to effect legislation on this type of issue is to have multiple towns come together. Also, Middletown has some knowledge and wisdom to offer towns that may be behind. Middletown could possibly learn some things from other towns, as well. Working coalitions can always have benefits. However, he added that people shouldn't go into this to just meet and waste time. They need to have a purpose. He then asked if the commission has a permanent chairperson. Director Jackson said that the commission should be able to accomplish that in January because it will be fully staffed with nine members. At this time, Chairperson Doyle is the chairperson for the interim. Commissioner Ford said he trusts Chairperson Doyle and everyone else on the commission, as well, to act as a liaison between the Human Relations Commission and the statewide group.

Director Jackson agreed and said with the addition of two new members, the commission is a strong team. They need to find another area pointed out in the NCCJ report on which to work. She added that she doesn't know what the Anti-Racism Task Force will choose to address. This coalition on the state level could bring more strength to the City's commission and what it wants to do in Middletown. Commissioner Ford added that the Anti-Racism Task Force at this time it outlining its priorities. Director Jackson thanked Commissioner Ford for the update on the task force and said she hoped housing, specifically affordable housing, which was a major component of the NCCJ report could be a focus, as well. There is not a viable market for affordable housing in Middletown. Money that was intended for affordable housing was used to build Westlake. However, Westlake is not at all affordable housing. That should have never happened. There was further discussion of the affordable units that changed to Carabetta Management after their 99-years lease was up. Now the rents are fair market.

Commissioner Ford said he had a question about the history of the City's zoning codes. Is it possible that zones were established that set up the locations or areas that influenced where affordable housing could exist? Is there anything that would restrict the City from putting up affordable housing in a

certain area? Director Jackson responded that much of the affordable housing is under the Middletown Housing Authority. If they're not at the table when these decisions are being made, the city puts these units wherever it wants. If they're not careful, redlining will happen again.

There was further discussion on how federal dollars, allocated for affordable housing, were used to build Westlake. Commissioner Fernandez spoke on the Charter Oak development in Hartford and how when the city tore it down, it was rebuilt. People who lived there had an opportunity to buy a home, pay very little down, and own it after about ten years.

Commissioner Hart said that in terms of systemic issues, she definitely agreed with Commissioner Ford and Director Jackson about the benefits of the statewide Human Relations Coalition. She said it would be a good idea to at the least engage with this group. She added that with regards to housing and the history of affordable housing units being torn down and federal fund being used to build units that are not affordable housing, the commission should have a better understanding of who is on the housing committee. If there are any vacancies on the board or committee, can the commission have a voice or an influence that way? She said that sometimes good people make bad decisions because they didn't have all the information. She said that she's from Middletown. She is familiar with Long River Village and had family who lived there. When they lost Long River Village, African Americans lost a sense of community. At one point, there was a daycare there and a grocery store. When people got displaced, they lost that neighborhood and access to those community resources. She said that going forward, she'd like to see this commission get more informed and engaged with the groups that make these decisions. They have to get involved when the foundation is being built. If they try to come in when the house has already been built, it's just too late.

Director Jackson asked Anthony Gennaro if he had anything he'd like to add. Anthony Gennaro said he'd been following along and listening to the discussion. He's on board with what the commissioners are saying. Director Jackson asked if Commissioner Thody had anything he'd like to add, and he said that he'd like to see the commission follow up on affordable housing in Middletown. He also said that they should touch base with the mayor and see what his plans are for the riverfront. Director Jackson said that was a good idea because the City is currently in the process of mapping out a plan for that area. Director Jackson said she and Councilman Faulkner had great discussion of the Martin Luther King Corridor and the potential for more affordable housing there. She added that these questions and concerns need to be addressed to Joe Samolis because he is the Director of Planning, Conservation, and Development, and he was working on that plan for over a year. Commissioner Thody suggested that Commissioner Ford work to keep the commission abreast of what the City is doing to improve affordable housing. Commissioner Ford agreed and said he was happy the commission is having this discussion tonight. The Anti-Racism Task Force is in discussion on this issue, as well, and wants to make it a priority, especially considering that they are in the middle of a pandemic. He also directed the commission's attention to the fact that the City has a Housing Authority board, and there are five seats on it. He listed the current members: Philip Cacciola, Evan Noglow, Larry Riley, Sebastian Santacroce, and Senovia Stone. Commissioner Ford said he thinks the next step is to understand how the members are selected. In moving forward, the commission will have to work with this group. They can't function in silos. They need to work collaboratively.

Commissioner Fernandez said that in going back to the NCCJ report, he is concerned about the numbers being wrong. They think they're the majority, so they will believe that they need to have more seats at the table. He said they need to understand that they're not the majority and allow more

diversity at the table. There was discussion over the numbers Commissioner Ruimerman got from the schools. He said his concern is that the people of color are the majority but they're not being represented as such. Also, the people who are getting the contracts and doing the work are people who have connections.

Director Jackson said the commission needs to do its research. Commissioner Fernandez said they paid a consultant to do the research, and they used incorrect numbers. Director Jackson reminded him that they used the numbers from the most recent census. Unfortunately, the census was ten years old. Director Jackson said that while the numbers may not be the most accurate due to the fact that the most recent census was ten years ago, the feedback was from Middletown residents. Commissioner Fernandez said he understands that but numbers are a driving force. There was further discussion on this.

Commissioner Hart asked Commissioner Fernandez to clarify his point. Commissioner Fernandez said that his concern is that the numbers drive everything else moving forward. The federal government distributes money based on population and income. He added that they've discussed this issue in previous meetings. Director Jackson agreed and said that is a major disconnect because the numbers used allow funds to be allocated. However, the populations that benefit from the money are not the same populations that were used to qualify for the grant money. The scenario of tearing down Long River Village and using the federal dollars to build Westlake is a perfect example of that. Commissioner Fernandez said that they need to address the leadership, such as the Director of Middletown Housing Authority. Director Jackson agreed and said it would be beneficial to paint a picture of how money was spent and allocated during the tenure of the leadership of someone at the Middletown Housing Authority.

Motion: Commissioner Hart motioned that the commission follow through with expressing interest in engaging in conversation about participation in the Statewide Human Rights and Relations Commission meeting. Commissioner Ford seconded. Director Jackson called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Approval of 2021 Meeting Schedule: Commissioner Ford motioned to approve the 2021 Meeting Schedule. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. Director Jackson called for a vote. The motion properly carried.

Review: The commission reviewed the 2020 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be January 20, 2021.

Adjournment: Commissioner Thody motioned to adjourn. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. Director Jackson called for a vote. The meeting was adjourned at 6:14 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III