

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 9, 2024

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Councilor Catherine Workman
Dr. Mohammad Saleh (at 5:06 PM)
Marti Fiske
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (at 5:08 PM)
Gina Burke
Ritu Budakoti
Debra Bowie, Alternate
Emma Charles, Alternate
David Morrill, Alternate

Staff Present:

Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager
Amanda Palmeira, Assistant City Attorney
(until 5:10 PM)

Members Not Present:

Aja Davis
Tedd Benson, Alternate
Jennifer Nescimento, Alternate
Dr. Dottie Morris

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos read the HRC's statement: *"In our efforts to create a more equal and just society, we move forward with the firm intention to value the voices, opinions, and experiences of all people. We choose to proceed with the awareness and humility that the statements and decisions we make will have a different impact for those with different life experiences."*

She called the meeting to order at 5:01 PM. Roll call was conducted.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos welcomed Amanda Palmeira, Assistant City Attorney, and stated that she is here to answer a question that had come up.

Ms. Palmeira stated that she has been in conversation with the Mayor and the City Attorney regarding the HRC's recommendations about the Racial Justice and Community Safety report. She continued that to give the HRC the perspective and concerns of the City Attorney's Office, she will begin with a satellite-level approach to give some context. She explained how the HRC is one of the City of Keene's 26 boards and commissions, most of which are products of City Council

action and advisory to/reporting directly to the Council. She explained how a few of the public bodies are created by State legislature, not the Council, but the HRC is not one of them and is advisory to the Council. Her understanding is that with recommendation 1.A., the HRC wants to request all public bodies in the City begin their meetings with a statement about equity, fairness, and equality. No specific legal bar prevents the HRC sending such a request to the Council. However, the City Attorney's Office wants the HRC to be aware of the effect of that type of request and give words of caution.

Ms. Palmeira continued that first, the HRC and other public bodies are created by the Council with clear responsibilities and authorities, and the public bodies "act as islands and don't control each other." Those lines would be blurred if the HRC submitted their request. It is best to avoid having one board trying to control other boards, especially the statutory boards. The City Attorney's Office has this concern regardless of which board or committee is making the request and regardless of the board or committee's message.

She continued that second, they are concerned about the "slippery slope" concept, which is what kind of example or precedent this would set for one board to make a request that would have implications for all other public bodies. Another committee, or a member of the public, could then make such a request, wanting to see some sort of statement or action taken by all the City's public bodies. The implications could be problematic.

Ms. Palmeira continued that she understands recommendation 1.A. is a statement furthering equity and fairness, which is notable, but again, (the concern) is not about the *type* of message. The HRC could feel that such a statement is uncontroversial and should be universally accepted, but there could be a group of people who have the same adamant belief about something contradictory to that and send it to the Council. There would be no legal bar to that, just like there is no bar for the HRC's recommendation/request.

Ms. Palmeira continued that with all that said, nothing prevents the HRC from making this request of the Council. The process would be to send the communication to the City Clerk's Office, addressed through the Mayor to the City Council. She asked if there were questions.

Councilor Workman stated that she understands the concern about advising other committees on how to conduct their meetings, but she thinks they could at least recommend to the Mayor that he read the statement at the Council meetings and maybe the three standing committees. She continued that that is different than asking all 26 public bodies. Ms. Palmeira replied that that would avoid the problem of controlling the other public bodies, but would not avoid the slippery slope concern. She continued that the HRC, as an advisory body, submits communications to the Council through the same channel that members of the public do.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC sending the recommendation to the Council means risking it not being adopted. She continued that the HRC has no control over what happens to the

recommendation once it is sent. Ms. Palmeira replied yes, the Council is fully autonomous with deciding how to act on it or not act on it.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she has a clarification question. She referenced a discussion the HRC previously had about the (Council rules) requiring people to stand while talking to the Council. Councilor Workman replied that the conversation about the Council's Rules of Order, and the rule about standing, is a separate issue than what they are discussing now.

Ms. Budakoti asked if the idea is that the HRC needs to seek City Council approval for things they are doing, such as the Keene International Festival, which is aligned with the HRC. Ms. Palmeira replied no, they would only need to go to the Council if they were requesting funding or for the Council to do something. She continued that the City Code lays out the things the HRC has the authority to do on their own.

Ms. Palmeira thanked the HRC for having her and left at 5:10 PM.

2) Approval of August 5, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Fiske made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of August 5, 2024. Ms. Budakoti seconded the motion.

Ms. Fiske stated that she has a correction to make, on page 6, under "C. Indigenous People's Day." She continued that the sentence, "Unfortunately, the grant did not work" should be changed to "Unfortunately, the performers could not settle on a date." It was not a matter of grant funding.

Ms. Budakoti stated that she has a correction as well – on line 221, her last name is misspelled. She continued that it is correctly spelled elsewhere in the document.

Rabbi Aronson made a motion to approve the August 5, 2024 meeting minutes with those two changes. Councilor Workman seconded the motion, which passed with a vote of 6-0 with Ms. Fiske abstaining.

3) Finance Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she has a correction to make. She continued that for the Pride Event, it should say \$238.06, which leaves a balance on hand at \$2,954.44. She had forgotten to add the \$7.50 she spent at the Dollar Tree.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that the City employee who was in charge of the automatic sending of Council-approved money from the City's budget to public bodies' budgets retired recently. She continued that she did not know how that process worked; she thought it was always an automatic transfer and figured out today that it is not. Thus, the money allocated to the HRC has not actually made it into the HRC's budget. Technically, the balance shown at the bottom of the Finance

Report is the actual balance in the bank, but the HRC has an extra \$2,000 on top of that. She will put it in the HRC's Finance Report when she sees it officially in the account.

Ms. Bender-Jesse continued that she added all the expenses and donations for Juneteenth. The reason it is on the side column under actual Juneteenth and not in the other one is because the other one is all set up and it keeps updating and changing the balance on hand. Because the HRC was not the fiscal agent, she did not want to have that affecting the HRC's balance on hand number. But now all the numbers are allocated, so it is able to show all the amazing money the HRC raised.

4) Monadnock Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Coalition (MDEIB) Updates

Councilor Workman stated that she does not have much of an update from last month. She continued that they are still looking for new members. The Coalition met with the Keene for Palestine group and had a good discussion.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked about the strategic plan the Coalition had been working on. Councilor Workman replied that it is not finalized yet, but she could send the strategic plan document (to the HRC). The action steps are what the Coalition is still working on, but the road map is there.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for a reminder of the dates and times of meetings. Councilor Workman replied that the steering committee meets the third Monday of the month, from 4:00 to 5:00 PM at the YMCA or via Zoom. She continued that they do not generally post meeting notices or minutes, but they are always open to having folks attend. It helps if people reach out ahead of time because the meeting room is very small and they want to make sure to accommodate visitors.

5) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she does not have an update, as the last meeting (of the City's internal DEI committee) was canceled. She continued that they are seeking more members. They are still working on the survey she told the HRC about last time.

6) Acceptance of Committee Event Reports

A) Pride Event

Mr. Morrill stated that the Pride Event working group will be tabling at the Keene Pride festival on Sunday. He continued that they are looking for volunteers for that and have a sign-up sheet today for the HRC. They will be handing out stickers and temporary tattoos, talking with people, and sharing a survey for people to fill out, regarding what Pride events the public wants to see from the HRC. They plan to do a larger Pride event in June.

B) Keene International Festival

Ms. Budakoti stated that she will send Ms. Bender-Jesse a digital copy of the KIF's flyer to share with the HRC. She continued that the event is two weeks from now, September 28 from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Planning and preparations are going well. She encourages people to attend. There will be many performances, including from Keene students, and everyone is excited. The KIF would love some volunteers from the HRC.

C) Indigenous People's Day

Ms. Fiske stated that they are all set, working on the advertising now for the event on Sunday, October 13 at 1:00 PM, at Heberton Hall at the Keene Public Library. She continued that she will send the flyer to Ms. Bender-Jesse to distribute to the HRC in a JPEG format. It would be great if people could share the flyer on their personal social media pages. They are looking forward to having Hawk Henries here, who is quite a performer and a skilled artisan. He will perform traditional music and his original compositions, on flutes he has made and the 150-year-old flutes he has repaired.

D) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Rabbi Aronson stated that Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is Monday, January 20, 2025. He continued that to put together a planning committee, he has emailed the Keene School District (KSD), the high school, the middle school, the MDEIB, the Library, and the Greater Monadnock Collaborative. He hopes to center the voices of students, as Ms. Budakoti is doing, mindful of the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a holiday and teachers cannot be required to do anything. He is seeking support from directors of bands and choirs, and hopes the event will start shaping up in the next several weeks.

Ms. Budakoti stated that the schools have an early release day/extended advisory prior to the holiday. She continued that if Rabbi Aronson has a resource he wants shared with the school community, the advisors could share it with students through their advisories. Rabbi Aronson thanked her and replied that he will talk with her more about that later.

E) Black History Month

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Dr. Morris chairs the working group and is not present, so they will skip over this.

F) Juneteenth

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Juneteenth working group will meet in October to start planning for 2025.

7) New Business

A) Keene for Palestine Discussion

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked to hear from the guests from Keene for Palestine. (Katie Carbonara) stated that they (she and Ella Bogdonoff) are attending this meeting without having prepared anything, and were curious to hear what (the HRC)'s thoughts are.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked the HRC for their thoughts on their previous discussion about this topic. She asked whether there is something the HRC would want to participate in or research further, and if there is anything they feel is appropriate within the HRC's remit that they can contribute.

Rabbi Aronson stated that he intended to go to the Palestinian culture night but could not make it. He continued that he thinks it is a great thing to have and he would love to go to something like that in the future. He asked if anything else is planned.

Ms. Carbonara replied that the event was a huge success. She continued that a wonderful Palestinian woman and her daughter came and told their family's story, showed photos, and shared food. The (organizers) would love to do another event in the future but have no plans yet. A film screening will be at the library next Wednesday at 5:30 PM. They are working on an upcoming action as part of a group of organizations from around VT and NH. If they schedule another cultural night, they will let the HRC know.

Ms. Bowie stated that she attended (the cultural night) and it was very effective. She continued that it gave people a little bit of understanding of what it was like to stand in the shoes of a (Palestinian) family without all the horror that has been happening to and in that land. It was very well done. She saw Dr. Saleh there as well.

Dr. Saleh stated that he realized how little he knows about the people's lives, culture, and music, because that does not come into the conversations. He continued that many people would have benefitted by seeing something like that, and he recommended to the organizers that they record it and put it on YouTube. He has not come across anything like it in the public domain, and maybe that is a failure on the part of broader society not to recognize the community as people.

Ms. Carbonara stated that she has a document of resources, which she would be happy to share via email.

Dr. Saleh stated that when the HRC discussed (Palestine) at their last meeting, Dr. Morris made the point, which he seconded, that this is traumatic and difficult to talk about, but the HRC does not exist to do the easy conversations. He thinks it was Ms. Carbonara who brought up the fact that no other NH towns have a human rights committee, which he had not known. The fact that Keene does have one means something. The HRC was originally the Jonathan Daniels Committee, then built into Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and then became the HRC. The inspiration comes from Jonathan Daniels, whose work, fundamentally, was getting people to care about people they

typically would not care about. He believes that the spirit of the conversation Dr. Morris started is that the HRC needs to be thoughtful and look for the framework that is helpful. If people try to have a conversation just to hurt each other, that does not help. He thinks Dr. Morris's expectation, if he understood, is that the HRC can help develop a framework where a healthy conversation could take place. He expects the HRC can continue on that path, even if it takes many months. He does not want to think that just because Keene is a small town, their impact is small. He believes they have the potential to make a (bigger) impact.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that if this conversation is to continue, it might be best to have a subcommittee (working group) of the HRC to brainstorm what something like that might look like. She asked if Dr. Saleh would consider leading such an effort – for the brainstorming, not necessarily the execution. Dr. Saleh replied that he cannot walk away from it just because it is a difficult task, so yes, he accepts. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if other HRC members are interested in joining Dr. Saleh and brainstorming. Ms. Fiske, Mr. Morrill, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos, and Ms. Bowie stated that they will be a part of it.

B) Other New Business

Councilor Workman stated that the executive committee members of the Coalition have been communicating, via email, about the recent tragedy that happened at Keene Middle School (KMS). She continued that the Coalition had been planning to do a community conversation at the end of September, but that date would have fallen on the same date as the conversation KMS is planning. The Coalition has pivoted. They will put a pause on their (the Coalition's) community conversation until at least mid-October, and they have extended their support and resources to KMS, if KMS will allow the Coalition in to assist with the conversation later this month. The Coalition is also re-evaluating what the October topic might be, tying it into how to start/have these tough conversations, how to be kinder to one another, and how to listen to one another even when we disagree. The topic of how to have civil conversations is something that keeps going around, because it impacts all facets of life, and nearly every humanitarian conflict boils down to that.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she will put on her Youth Services hat and say that she would love to join/support any of these conversations and efforts. She continued that she has been working with (Superintendent) Rob Malay and is the liaison between the City of Keene and SAU29.

Ms. Fiske stated that on November 9, 1:00 PM at Heberton Hall, the Friends of the Library are sponsoring a Circle Conversation, "See No Stranger: A Circle Conversation to Connect Our Community." She continued that it is about how to become more comfortable conversing, living, and working with people in a world of polarization and lifestyles. It will be two hours long and will involve small group discussions, followed by a large group discussion to envision restorative practices in the community. It is facilitated by Leaf Seligman. Patrick Heneghan will be part of it, too. She will send information about it to the HRC, through Ms. Bender-Jesse. This event fits in well with much of what the HRC has been discussing today.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that she has created a mock-up of an HRC brochure, for the HRC to look at today. She continued that she is open to any feedback on it. Regarding HRC promotion, she will try to attend and help at all of the HRC's events, but if she has to miss one, she would appreciate other HRC members taking photos at the event and sending them to her. She welcomes photos from any of the events, even the ones she is present at. She would love to add more photos from HRC events (to the brochure). There will be many copies of the brochure at the Keene Pride event they are tabling at.

Ms. Bender-Jesse stated that regarding the HRC's conversation about wanting a banner or tablecloth or something with the HRC's logo on it, she emailed the HRC a few weeks ago with some price estimates for those. It is up to the HRC about which direction to go in.

Discussion ensued about the banner versus tablecloth and the costs of each. Ms. Fiske expressed concerns about the banner stand easily toppling in the wind. Ms. Bender-Jesse agreed and spoke of the likely need for the banner to be replaced periodically. That is why the tablecloth is an option to consider. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked the HRC if they agree it is reasonable to move forward with the purchase of the tablecloth. Discussion continued about the options. Ms. Fiske proposed a slim banner or sign that could be attached to the edge of a tent. Ms. Bender-Jesse replied that she will look into that.

The HRC decided to move forward with a tablecloth. Ms. Bender-Jesse asked questions about color and size preferences, which the HRC answered. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked Ms. Bender-Jesse and stated that the HRC still owes her an answer about the banner.

Councilor Workman stated that last fall, she had asked the Mayor if she could step down from the HRC to give more time and energy to the Coalition. She continued that she had agreed to stay on the HRC until another City Councilor was able to join it, which had not happened until just recently. She recommended Councilor Kris Roberts as her replacement, and he said he would be honored.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked Councilor Workman for her service to the HRC.

8) Adjourn – Next Meeting October 7, 2024, at 5:00 PM.

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:03 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Alyssa Bender-Jesse, Youth Services Manager