

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, May 2, 2022

5:00 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair
Dr. Shaun Filiault, Vice Chair (from 5:15 PM,
to 5:52 PM, via Zoom)
Jan Manwaring
Dr. Dottie Morris (arrived at 5:05 PM)
Dr. Mohammed Saleh (arrived at 5:08 PM)
Hunter Kirschner
Councilor Catherine Workman (arrived at 5:15
PM, via Zoom)
Rabbi Daniel Aronson (arrived at 5:04 PM)
Ritu Budakoti, Alternate
Heidi Schwieger, Alternate

Staff Present:

Andy Bohannon, Parks, Recreation & Facilities
Director

Members Not Present:

Marti Fiske

1) Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 5:02 PM. Roll call was conducted. Members from Keene Pride introduced themselves, as did a person from the Keene Sentinel. Ms. Manwaring asked if anyone was present via Zoom. Mr. Bohannon replied not yet, other than the Minute-taker.

2) Approval of April 4, 2022 Meeting Minutes

Ms. Schwieger made a motion to approve the meeting minutes of April 4, 2022. Ms. Budakoti seconded the motion.

Daniel Aronson arrived at 5:04 PM and introduced himself. Dr. Dottie Morris arrived at 5:05 PM and introduced herself.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called for a vote on the motion, which passed with a vote of 6-1. Ms. Manwaring stated that she abstains. Mr. Bohannon asked why. Ms. Manwaring replied that she

thought they were going to talk about the minutes first. Mr. Bohannon replied that she cannot abstain. Ms. Manwaring replied that she then votes against the minutes.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she understands that Keene Pride had concerns about what was said [at the April meeting].

Adam Toepfer, Keene Pride President, stated that he and others from Keene Pride wanted to present a report, and go over some misrepresentations. He distributed copies to HRC members and asked Susan MacNeil to speak.

Susan MacNeil, Board member of Keene Pride, 95 Rockingham St., Bellows Falls, VT, stated that Keene Pride was happy that this was taken up at the April meeting of the HRC, but when they saw the minutes, they thought perhaps some assumptions became fact and were dismayed.

Dr. Mohammed Saleh arrived at 5:08 PM and introduced himself.

Ms. MacNeil continued that Keene Pride came up with a statement that addresses some of the issues. It is too long to read into the record in its entirety, but she will share some highlights. She read:

“Keene Pride, a NH non-profit organization, would like to go on record to address the misinformation regarding our organization recorded in the Keene HRC’s meeting minutes of April 4, 2022. Keene Pride expresses profound gratitude to the City of Keene Planning, Licenses, and Development Committee for their unanimous recommendation of our downtown Keene license to hold a block party on Sunday, September 18, 2022. Keene Pride was thrilled to receive the unanimous support from the City Council to approve the block party application and event, which is free and open to the public. Keene Pride’s vision for the block party was never alcohol-oriented. We have not applied, nor do we intend to apply, for a liquor license for the block party or any of the public events that will occur between September 11 and September 18.”

Ms. MacNeil continued that item #4 addresses an issue that was in the meeting minutes about why September. It is essentially to have as many people as possible, and to help local businesses kick off a robust 4th quarter. Pride events held throughout the country bring in a huge amount of revenue to the organizations and businesses in the area. There was an assumption that somehow Keene Pride does not have an understanding or awareness of the cultural and historical issues surrounding the Pride movement, the Stonewall uprising. They certainly do. The Board has a depth of information, which is spelled out in the document. The idea of October was brought up, as a month for the gay community to recognize Pride, and October 10 is National Coming Out Day. If the HRC wants to do anything, they applaud that. There was an impression that somehow Keene Pride was not in touch with local businesses or other local organizations, but in fact, they are. They have put a lot in place already. They are in touch with the Rotary Club about banners for downtown and have the support of the Chamber, faith communities, non-profit organizations, and local businesses. Their intention has always been to keep the focus local and

regional. They have already received some financial commitments from a couple businesses in the city, including C&S, Brown Computer Solutions, and Fenton Family Dealership. They are applying for grants to national organizations as well as the NH Charitable Fund. They have confirmed that John Scagliotti, VT filmmaker of Before Stonewall and After Stonewall, is on board and supportive of being involved. They are also on Senator Jeanne Shaheen's calendar for an appearance at the block party on September 19 and her liaison for civil and gay rights is pleased that this is happening. They have local musical performers booked for three hours at Railroad Square. Keene Pride has reached out to the LGBTQ club at Keene High School, and they will be involved. There will be many family events for folks who attend the block party. They booked the Colonial Theatre's showroom on five different nights. They have an exciting event already with the MDEIB and are in touch with all those folks. Keene Pride will focus on educating the public, which will include a broad array of speakers and programming. They are working with the local historical societies, too. They plan to offer year-round programming and community building for the local queer community.

Ms. MacNeil continued that Keene Pride was a little offended when they read the meeting minutes, because [what was said in the minutes] was never their intention, and they wanted to set the record straight, because they are so excited and thrilled by the cooperation of the City.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the HRC wants to vote to accept the meeting minutes with the addendum of the document from Keene Pride. She asked if they can do that. Mr. Bohannon replied yes. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked for a motion.

Ms. Manwaring made a motion to [accept the April 4, 2022 meeting minutes with the addendum of the document from Keene Pride]. Dr. Morris seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

HRC members thanked Keene Pride for coming. Mr. Bohannon thanked the Keene Pride members for coming to speak to the HRC and making the clarifications and bringing this document forward so the HRC has time to review it and continue the dialogue with Keene Pride. Ms. MacNeil replied that Keene Pride would love to work with the HRC.

Councilor Catherine Workman arrived at 5:15 PM.

3) **Finance Report**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the Finance Report is the same as last month. She continued that she thinks that going forward, the HRC's finances will need to be discussed in some depth, due to the number of events. Unfortunately for the chairs of working groups for events, they will need to start making budgeting part of the process in a more formal way. She asked if anyone had questions. Hearing none, she moved on in the agenda.

4) Racial Justice and Community Safety Report
A) Approval of April 12, 2022 Meeting minutes

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC met on April 12 for two hours and made a significant amount of progress regarding the Racial Justice and Community Safety (RJCS) Report. She continued that the meeting minutes are in the agenda packet.

Ms. Manwaring made a motion to accept the meeting minutes from April 12, 2022. Mr. Kirschner seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the next meeting regarding the RJCS Report is May 9, from 6:30 to 8:30. She appreciates the HRC members putting the time into this.

5) Committee Programs for 2022
A) MLK Day – January 17

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they do not immediately need to start thinking about next year, but they should keep this on the radar.

Ms. Manwaring stated that she wants it on the record, as a reminder to the HRC, that they consider asking the Historical Society and Jenna Carroll to present her research on Black people in the area. She continued that about 14 people are working on that. It is too soon to consider this for Juneteenth, but by January, Ms. Carroll could have some excellent information.

B) Holi Festival – Not taking place 2022

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Holi Festival is not taking place this year.

C) Pride Month – October

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked Dr. Filiault or Mr. Kirschner to speak. Mr. Kirschner stated that he is not sure that he has anything to say at the moment, given what Keene Pride just shared with the HRC. He continued that he and Dr. Filiault need some time to discuss where they are at.

D) Juneteenth – June 19

Ms. Manwaring stated that things are coming along well. She continued that the event will be Saturday, June 18, since June 19 is Father's Day. They are working on the programming. The flyer is wonderful. Mr. Bohannon replied that he will make sure he sends it out to everyone, if he has not already done so. Ms. Manwaring stated that she and Ms. Schwieger are working on two tables, and the Library will have a table. One table will be on voting.

Ms. Schwieger stated that the Jonathan Daniels Center (JDC) will have its own presence at the event, but part of what they want to take on is enlisting the support of the NH League of Women Voters, to do something around voting rights. They also want to create a community engagement opportunity, a reflection with prompts to invite responses, which people can share publicly or take away with them, about their own activism and engagement. They are meeting after tonight's HRC meeting to talk more about it. The JDC will collaborate with the HRC on this.

Ms. Manwaring stated that she was looking up voter suppression and how people are kept from voting, and on the ACLU website, three states were mentioned repeatedly, including New Hampshire. Education is needed, about how voter suppression happens.

Ms. Budakoti stated that the HRC previously talked about collaborating with other organizations doing similar things [for Juneteenth]. She asked what happened with that. Mr. Bohannon replied that the conversation was had, and attempt was made to have one event this year, and for certain reasons the HRC decided not to do that and to have their own event. He continued that it would be challenging to get people to attend and help with a Juneteenth event if it was the same day as Father's Day. Also, the HRC wanted the event be downtown, and to have different messaging [from the YMCA's focus on health], because the HRC already did that with the MLK Day event. Those are reasons why the HRC wanted to do its own Juneteenth event this year, but they would be open to considering collaboration next year.

E) Keene International Festival – September 24

Ms. Budakoti stated that they have gained some momentum in the planning for this, and Mr. Bohannon is on the planning committee. She continued that she does not know how they are doing financially, but they are working on getting sponsors and putting things together, like the arts and crafts from places around the world. In addition, they are working closely with the Colonial to bring a multigenerational act, which will be a key highlight. Other performers from the local community will come in and rock the event. The planning has good momentum but they are still seeking volunteers, planning group members, and donors. Donations would be very helpful, because it all goes back into the community, and this is a wonderful event that brings the community together.

F) Indigenous People Day – October 10

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that Ms. Fiske is [leading this working group] but she is not present, so she will table this until next month.

6) New, Other Business

James Rinker of 34 Cottage St., Digital Community Engagement Journalist from the Keene Sentinel, stated that he has been in this role since January, and a big part of the role is engaging

with the community, especially parts of the community that are under-served by reporting and the work of the Sentinel. He is here on behalf of the Sentinel and interested in an open discussion with the HRC on how to best connect with people who are under-served by the community and give a baseline of what the Sentinel is interested in doing and what they have already started. He sees that the HRC is quite events-based and puts forth initiatives. [Regarding] a way to get the news out about the committee meetings, he saw in the meeting minutes that someone described the HRC as “a well-kept secret.” He wants to increase the region’s awareness of this work. He partners with the non-profit Trusting News, which partners with newsrooms around the nation. They are auditing the Sentinel’s opinions content to make it more accessible to those who have little to no media literacy and understanding of what goes into a newspaper, and making the Sentinel’s reporting practices clearer. Recently the Sentinel was recognized for their “Better Judgement” series, a revision of how they report on crime in the Monadnock region, in part to reduce the stigma around people who commit crimes. The Sentinel also hired him, in a dedicated role with community engagement and outreach, to put into action new ways to make an impact. He grew up in this region and has seen the impact local journalism can have. He is part of the audience engagement committee, part of which is doing outreach, similar to what the HRC does, identifying opportunities for the Sentinel to appear in the public eye and connect with readers and do additional outreach with the community. He is here to open the discussion and hear from the HRC about what he/the Sentinel can do, to open those doors.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos thanked Mr. Rinker for this opportunity. She continued that the HRC probably needs to mull a bit about what the best way would be for them to engage with him. That will be the HRC’s homework assignment for this month. Dr. Morris suggested that the HRC Chair write a column. Mr. Rinker replied that he can give the HRC contact information for [the person in charge of the] opinions content, because he does not handle that. He is not on the editorial staff. He could be the HRC’s liaison with the Sentinel for after they do their homework with mulling and planning and discussing what the HRC is interested in. Mr. Bohannon replied that there is definitely opportunity here, but they need time to process this. He continued that the HRC’s next agenda could include this conversation and Mr. Rinker is welcome at that meeting.

Ms. Budakoti stated that press releases right before [HRC] events would be very helpful. Mr. Rinker replied that one of his goals is to make the work being done in the community more well known. The Sentinel is currently redesigning their website, to be more accessible, more applicable, and more easily navigated, and hopefully it will include a new community events calendar. He saw this HRC meeting on the Sentinel’s calendar. A second goal of the audience engagement team that he is part of is attending events. They will do outreach for the Keene International Festival as well as various events in the region. Letting people know in advance that the Sentinel will be at these events means people will be aware that they can talk to Sentinel staff. The third goal is the creation of something he brought up, like transparency work – “coffee with a reporter” is in the works, and creating ways for people to connect with people who are generating the news, to ask open, honest questions. The Sentinel is still working on clarifying where people can send things, because there are several avenues that go to several people for different things. They are working on streamlining where people can send news versus letters

versus events. He is happy to do his homework and get a list of those for next month's HRC meeting.

Dr. Saleh stated that he may have missed it, but was a link to the spreadsheet that captures all the HRC recommendations shared with the committee? Mr. Bohannon replied that he thought he shared it at the last meeting, but can share it again. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that he shared the blank version, but not the output from the April 12 meeting. Mr. Bohannon replied that he has not sent that out yet. Discussion ensued. Mr. Bohannon stated that he will send what he has, and the HRC can refine it.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is looking to change the structure of the HRC meetings, and perhaps change the focus of the HRC. She continued that they spend a lot of time going through updates on events, which is not necessarily the best use of their time. She would like the chairs of the working groups to submit written updates to be included in the [agenda packet]. If a working group needs input from the HRC about something, they can ask for time on the agenda; otherwise, it will be up to the HRC members to read the notes. If HRC members have questions about the events or working groups, they can ask during "new business."

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that a few items that did not make it onto today's agenda will be on the agenda going forward. One is liaising with the Monadnock Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Coalition (MDEIB). Monthly, Dr. Morris and Councilor Workman will give the HRC insight into what is happening with the MDEIB and hopefully share with the MDEIB about the HRC, too.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos continued that the HRC had started a conversation about finding more concrete ways to impact the lives of Keene citizens, and that is her hope for the HRC's direction. The events are important and part of their charter, but they can do more, in terms of being a point of access for the community. They can examine the ways people interact with the City and how to make that more inclusive. As the HRC has discussed before, it is not just about race and LGBT issues, but also mental health and how people with mental health concerns are able to interact with the City and be heard, housing, access issues in the general, and the broader interpretation of "human rights." She asked for feedback. She is open to thoughts on what this can look like.

Dr. Saleh stated that he agrees with looking at the broader interpretation of "human rights." He wonders how they would go about that. Is there any other entity in the City government that is tracking the needs and concerns of citizens, or should the HRC ask other organizations in the city what they see as the issues and needs? Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she does not think the City is tracking this, and that is where the HRC can help. If the HRC is not equipped to do the work themselves, which is an unanswered question, they can figure out how to create a structure to collect and consider that information. Identifying the community agencies and organizations connected with populations who struggle to access community services and vitality would be a good place to start. Discussion continued about the organizations.

Mr. Kirschner stated that he is thinking about [Christina “Teeny” Wold’s] communication to the HRC [about mental health], and about creating avenues for folks to propose areas of concern/issues for the HRC to attend to. He is thinking about multiple modalities, going right to the people, in addition to the agencies that serve them.

Mr. Aronson stated that this dovetails with a discussion from the April 12 meeting about something like an ombudsperson that could be a central address for addressing concerns. He wonders if they could also use the Sentinel to get the word out that if people have concerns they would like the City to be addressing, in the realm of human rights, that this would be an appropriate place to bring them. They would have to be vetted and he does not know what the protocol is for that. That invitation would need to be crafted in a way that is appropriate for the HRC. Dr. Morris replied yes, it would be important to map out the process and determine who would be accountable. Dr. Saleh replied that the HRC probably does not have the bandwidth to address all the issues themselves, but could gather data and identify the collective needs of the community and try to come up with a plan.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that one hour a month is not enough. She continued that she does not know what the correct frequency and length of meetings are, or if they could do work on an ad hoc basis, which sounds like a lot of meetings. One hour a month is not enough, however, for what could be a massive endeavor. She would like to leave everyone with this germ of an idea today. HRC members already have a homework assignment to think about the Sentinel and how to use that opportunity. Another homework assignment is to think about what the HRC’s work should be, and what the structure should look like, which is a massive question. She wishes they could bounce ideas off each other, but unfortunately, they cannot, due to the rules of not creating a quorum outside of meetings. This will take a lot of discussion and brainstorming. She asked if next month’s meeting should be longer, or if they should set up a separate meeting to discuss this, or if it is premature. Others replied that they can talk about it at the HRC’s June meeting, since they already have a separate meeting in a week to discuss the RJCS Report. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos agreed and suggested the June meeting be two hours.

Ms. Budakoti stated that going forward, they should think about what the HRC’s role is in the City, what their strengths are, and what areas they can work within. She continued that if they just ask the community, “What are your concerns?”, there could be hundreds, but they are not all ones the HRC can help with. It would help if the HRC could lay out certain areas they can help with, and be very specific with people about what the HRC can and cannot do, and what resources they do and do not have. She asks the HRC members to do this internal reflection, so they have clarity on this before asking the community what their concerns are. The response from the community might help the HRC determine what to focus on and how much time to spend – for example, if many people speak of concerns of a particular topic, the HRC knows to focus there to help the community and how to allocate their time and resources.

Discussion ensued about the logistics of a two-hour meeting next month. Mr. Bohannon stated that they can find a way, if that is what they want. He continued that knowing the history of this committee, meetings typically are less frequent in the summer, with August being a month off. The HRC can meet in August if they want, but he would have another staff member fill in for him that month. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they can discuss schedule changes in general – maybe the first Monday of the month does not end up being the best meeting time.

Dr. Saleh asked, for clarification, if the plan is to meet for two hours in June, and that the main discussion will be on exploring the broader scope of the committee, but they are not agreeing – or not *yet* agreeing – to have every meeting be two hours long. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that is correct. She continued that however, the looming “threat” is that moving forward, the HRC will need to devote more than one hour per month to its work. Dr. Saleh replied that he personally would rather have the monthly meetings run longer, instead of adding another day to the calendar. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they will need to figure it all out. Mr. Bohannon stated that some City committees do not specify an ending time for each meeting, but rather, meet for as long as each agenda takes; there are different ways to do it. Discussion continued.

Dr. Morris stated that someone asked what the HRC’s purpose as a group is. Are they an advisory group? They need to clarify that in their own heads. Ms. Manwaring replied that when this group was formed, there was discussion about whether it would be a “committee” or a “commission,” the latter of which has statutory rules. Mr. Bohannon replied that it stays as a committee. Discussion continued about the difference. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the HRC could get a quick explanation of “commission” vs. “committee,” via email. Mr. Bohannon replied that the City’s only commission is the Conservation Commission, which has statutory responsibilities, along with the Planning Board and [Zoning Board of Adjustment]. All the other City bodies are committees. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the other side of being a committee and not having the statutory requirements they must follow is that there are powers they are not authorized to use, which they need to be conscious of as they have this conversation. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, ultimately, the City Council has the authority.

Dr. Saleh stated that he would like clarification on what happens to recommendations that committees make. He continued that for example, the HRC created a draft statement to be read aloud [before City committee meetings], and the Mayor did not like it so it was put aside. They do not want to go through significant effort only to be pushed aside. Is there any established protocol for that? What happens next? Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that was one of the items to put back on the agenda – reconsidering the language of the draft statement, and having a dialogue with the Mayor about how they can address his concerns. Ms. Manwaring replied that at the time, the Mayor said he did not feel he could ask the chairs of every public body to read a statement at the beginning of each meeting, and it was more about that than the specific language in the statement. Discussion continued. Dr. Saleh asked what the established process is for the HRC’s recommendations. For example, do they have to go to the Mayor first? Ms. Manwaring replied that they could write a request to the City Council, and the City Council

would assign the HRC's request to a City Council committee, and the HRC would go to that committee meeting and talk about it. That committee would make a recommendation to the City Council, and the City Council would vote on it. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that this conversation will be on next month's agenda.

Dr. Morris stated that the City Attorney would have answers to many of the HRC's questions. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they should consider asking the City Attorney to attend the June meeting. She continued that maybe an email from him would be enough. Mr. Bohannon replied that he will try email. He continued that the City has a new Assistant City Attorney, also; maybe she could help with this.

7) **Adjourn – Next Meeting Monday, June 6, 2022 at 5:00 PM**

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 6:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Andy Bohannon, Parks, Recreation and Facilities Director