

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE – SPECIAL MEETING**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday, May 23, 2022**

**7:00 PM**

**Room 22,  
Recreation Center**

**Members Present:**

Sofia Cunha-Vasconcelos, Chair  
Dr. Shaun Filiault, Vice Chair  
Marti Fiske  
Dr. Dottie Morris  
Hunter Kirschner  
Rabbi Daniel Aronson

**Staff Present:**

Andy Bohannon, Parks, Recreation & Facilities  
Director

**Members Not Present:**

Heidi Schwieger, Alternate  
Jan Manwaring  
Dr. Mohammed Saleh  
Ritu Budakoti, Alternate  
Councilor Catherine Workman

**1) Racial Justice and Community Safety Committee Report**

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos called the meeting to order at 7:09 PM. She stated that now that the HRC has taken a first pass at all of the recommendations in the RJCS Committee's report, they will start again at the top and go into more detail.

***1.A. It is recommended that the City of Keene take a position against racism starting with a strong anti-racist statement.***

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the City has a written declaration, posted in City Hall and other City buildings. She continued that the HRC submitted a statement [to be read before each City meeting], which [the Mayor] had a concern, not wanting to add that burden to the beginning of meetings. Mr. Bohannon stated that for the record, the statement was not rejected for its content or its purpose. He continued that at the time, it was felt that adding one more thing to all of the committees, having them read the statement into the meeting minutes, was not necessarily comfortable. The HRC should go back and explore this. There is opportunity to revisit it.

Discussion ensued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if she and Mr. Bohannon could have a conversation with the Mayor. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, they can do that, and the HRC can

refine the statement. He will set up the meeting with the Mayor. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if the HRC should refine the language now. Mr. Bohannon replied no, they can first find out where the language needs to be refined.

Dr. Morris stated that the Chamber of Commerce has a task force, and they are writing a statement as well. She continued that she does not know the content or intentions of that statement, such as whether it will just be for businesses.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that that brings up an action item that will keep coming up – the Chamber has a task force, there is the Monadnock Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Coalition (MDEIB), and there is the Human Rights Committee.

Mr. Bohannon stated that the MDEIB, led by the YMCA, asked the City Council for \$55,000 to have an MDEIB Director at the YMCA. Dr. Morris replied that they need \$120,000, because it has to cover benefits and other things. She continued that they are doing fundraising. The person would be working on behalf of several places but would be housed at the Y and report to the Y's Executive Director, which some people are struggling to understand, which makes the fundraising efforts more difficult. Pierre [Morton, MDEIB] talked to the Mayor and the City Manager before presenting the request to the City Council. Some of the money would be used for training for the community and other sorts of things.

Mr. Aronson stated that [regarding the statement the HRC wanted City committees to read before their meetings], he wonders if a compromise would be to always have the statement printed on committees' and boards' agendas. He continued that that way, it would not take up time to read it at the start of meetings. Others agreed that that is a good idea. Mr. Bohannon stated that the Chamber has, on its website, its Civil Rights Policy. Mr. Aronson stated that having a statement on a wall or website is one thing, but having it in front of decision-makers every time they have a meeting is different, and says 'this is a priority, and we need to have this mindset as we make our decisions.'

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos read the Chamber's statement aloud:

*“The GKPC operates its programs and services without regard to actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or age in accordance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and other statutes and authorities that prohibit discrimination in federally assisted programs and activities. Any person who believes they have been aggrieved by any unlawful discriminatory practice under Title IV may file a complaint with the GKPC.”*

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she read this aloud because she wants to understand where the HRC's goals differ from the Chamber's. She continued that the Chamber seems to have an interest in adhering to federal policy, and the HRC's goals are significantly less regulatory. It is relevant for the three groups to be in communication. She does not quite know how to go about

that or what that would look like. Maybe the chairs of the three groups could talk. Dr. Morris replied that Mr. Morton is stepping down as co-chair of the MDEIB due to work responsibilities, and Councilor Workman is the other co-chair, and she does not know who is taking over for Mr. Morton. She continued that they could reach out to Mr. Morton, who would probably be happy to meet [with Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos and the other chairs], but she does not know when he is stepping down. Councilor Workman has been very involved.

***1.B. It is recommended that the City work with community stakeholders to establish clear community racial equity and inclusivity goals and that the goals be widely adopted by the City and Keene agencies and businesses.***

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos took a few moments to read through the HRC's previous discussion of 1.B., from the (April 12, 2022) meeting minutes. She stated that she will consider 1.B. taken care of for the short term, given what those meeting minutes say. She continued that there is a bigger set of questions around the idea of the ombudsman and how to collect input, and so on and so forth, further down the list of action items.

Dr. Morris asked if they know how other communities might do something like that. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied no, but that did come up in conversation a few times. She continued that Brattleboro, VT, has undergone a process like this and there might be best practices to look for. Discussion ensued. Dr. Morris shared some information about how Brattleboro's DEI Committee works. She agreed to contact Brattleboro's HR Director, Sally Nix, to see if Ms. Nix could have a conversation with her and Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos. Mr. Aronson asked if Mr. Bohannon knows of other HRCs in the state or is part of a listserv he could reach out to and ask. Mr. Bohannon replied that he is not aware of any other groups like the HRC in the state, but he can put out an email and ask. He asked if Ms. Fiske could do the same, by reaching out to Library folks. Ms. Fiske replied yes, and they get might get more responses if they ask about DEI groups in addition to HRCs. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Keene has any kind of DEI group (involving City staff). Mr. Bohannon replied no, and discussion ensued. Mr. Bohannon stated that Rebecca Landry, IT Director and staff liaison for the RJCS Committee, knows someone who is interested in a summer internship with the City and maybe they would be interested in looking at a DEI program. That is something to explore.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that there was an action item from the minutes that did not specify who would be taking the action. Mr. Bohannon replied that that is true of many of the action items the HRC came up with. Mr. Aronson replied that part of tonight's work is to figure that out. Others agreed. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she would like to start putting some timeframes around the action items as well. She asked if it is reasonable for action items to be initiated within a week, in general. She continued that an example would be that if someone's action item is to reach out to a person the HRC would like to have a conversation with, they send that email out within a week of being tasked with it. They cannot control how quickly the person responds to the email. Others agreed.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they know they need to find a way of connecting public comment. She continued that she does not think they know yet if the HRC is the correct body to collect public input. Her personal opinion is that there is no point in collecting information if you do not have a process to close the loop on the information, whether it is a complaint, concern, recommendation, and so on and so forth. If it just goes into the void, people get frustrated. Mr. Aronson had raised the idea of having an ombudsman. The HRC does not have the authority to create any new positions for the City. Maybe the HRC would make a recommendation to the City Council. Maybe the HRC's responsibility is to brainstorm a process for collecting the information, which identifies the responsible parties in that process; they could flesh out the process and recommend it to the City Council.

Discussion ensued. Mr. Bohannon stated that yes, the HRC could flesh out a process and recommend it to the City Council. He continued that Dr. Morris had suggested the HRC have open forums/open discussions in the community about specific topics, and see what gets drawn out; that is something the HRC could talk about.

Mr. Bohannon asked Dr. Morris if it accurate to say that if the MDEIB Coalition does not get the funding it needs [for the MDEIB Director], the group will no longer exist. Dr. Morris replied yes, because its main purpose is to try to get that position in place. She continued that there are some things the Education subcommittee will be doing in the meantime, but getting the MDEIB Director is the group's main focus.

Ms. Fiske stated that her concern with the idea of the public forums is not knowing where the public comment would go – is the person taking the comments supposed to find a solution? It could be anything from something needing a detective to just someone needing resources pointed out. Public comments could be about crimes, or policy matters, or anything else. Discussion continued about who has what responsibility. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the question is who is triaging the public input. Discussion continued about what an ombudsman would be. Mr. Aronson stated that if there was an ombudsman, who is kind of like a concierge, that person would be entrusted with the triage, directing, and networking with other non-profits like the ADL and other advocacy groups equipped to do some of the research and networking.

Ms. Fiske stated that this requires some discussion; that ombudsman work sounds like a full-time job. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that her question first is whether this is the direction the HRC wants to go in, designing this process as a recommendation. She continued that an ombudsman is an example of what the process might look like. Reality is that the HRC does not have a budget or any authority. What should the HRC's time be spent on, in examining these action items?

Mr. Aronson replied that if there were a State ombudsman or State Chief Diversity Officer, this discussion would be different. Maybe they could advocate for that.

Mr. Kirschner stated that he hesitates about creating a process for another person/position to enact. What is the need? If the need is solutions to racial bias, he expects that there will be a lot of emotional labor in this work, not just practical. He continued that he approaches this kind of work in relationship, and relationships involve emotions. Racial harm can cause trauma. Someone who has experienced or witnessed racial harm is likely to have many emotions and a need for processing, to be able to move through and find a solution or reconciliation. Thus, he hesitates to have a solution-focused process, because the truth telling is so important. Public forums and conversations are important, to see if there is wisdom that can come from the community, rather than outsourcing that to another person or process.

Dr. Filiault stated that they need to stay grounded in their role as the City's Human Rights Committee, and they are not a commission. He continued that the best they can do is make a broad recommendation. They do not have authority and thus need to stay at a high level of abstraction in their recommendations. Ms. Fiske added that she is concerned about the HRC possibly taking on too much work. She continued that this is their third meeting about the RJCS Report in addition to their primary work, the educational component. The RJCS Report deserves recognition, but she thinks the HRC will need to decide at some point whether to focus on the RJCS Report or their educational work, because she does not think they can do both. Mr. Aronson agreed and stated that the HRC is approaching hour six of working on the RJCS Report, and the question is "How long is this piece of string?" Ms. Fiske replied that the HRC could potentially make recommendations for another committee to pick up. Mr. Bohannon asked if that can be the MDEIB Coalition.

Ms. Fiske asked if the HRC needs to get the Mayor's permission to pass this work on, if the Mayor assigned them the RJCS Report. Mr. Bohannon replied that there is debate about where the report lies, because there is no public record of the report being assigned to the HRC, but the report itself referred it to the HRC. He continued that obviously no one wants the report to collect dust, but this needs to be figured out. What is the MDEIB Coalition's charge? That group is not connected to the City. There seems to be a little circle of people having this conversation right now. What about the other groups? He thinks it will help to have a meeting between Luca Paris, a Chamber of Commerce representative, Dan Smith from the YMCA, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos, himself, Councilor Workman and Pierre Morton from the MDEIB Coalition, to talk about who will take ownership of this and how to move it forward. He has concerns about how the MDEIB Director position could be sustained, because everyone is fighting for positions and funding. Every City department needs positions. It does not seem likely that a new, outside position could be funded/sustained, given this.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she thinks that an underlying issue they keep bumping into is that there is no structure for this kind of work. Mr. Bohannon replied that is correct. They are trying to create it. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they are trying to do it without necessarily having the organizational buy-in of the City. The HRC is an ancillary entity. Mr. Bohannon replied that he believes the HRC can provide education to the greater Keene area with the intent from this report. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the HRC is good at education.

Mr. Bohannon replied right, and they need to continue the education, otherwise it will get lost if the HRC stops carrying the flag on this.

Dr. Filiault stated that he thinks the HRC can continue to create educational programming that keeps the RJCS Report's recommendations/bullets in mind and carries the charge of them. He continued that they have spent over five hours talking about what the bullets could look like. Maybe at this point the HRC should write a letter to City Council and the Mayor about their thoughts on the RJCS Report's recommendations, and leave it at that. And then continue working seriously on the charge that they know they have, to continue educating the city. The HRC can incorporate the bullets from the report into their work when they create educational events and make sure they are checking the boxes.

Discussion continued. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that the HRC should absolutely hold itself accountable to the RJCS Report in its own work, but she is concerned that there are elements of this that will not get done, if the HRC is not taking up the banner. For example, unless the City Council decides to have a public forum on a matter, [it probably will not happen]. Communities do not tend to do that unless something goes wrong. If there is going to be a public forum on any of these issues, she suspects it will have to come from the HRC. She agrees that education is the HRC's primary charge, but not their only one. The idea of putting their recommendations in a letter to the City Council and saying "This is as far as our mandate can take us, given the nature of this committee" feels a bit like passing the buck. Dr. Filiault replied that the HRC does not have a buck to spend. He continued that if they write such a letter to the City Council, it would be read into the record and given to City staff to work with. The Council might give it to a Council committee, or to Mr. Bohannon to give back to the HRC, but then the HRC will be officially given a charge, and there will be a public record of it.

Ms. Fiske stated that the HRC has come up with action items they *can* do, like collecting resources for educational training for City partners, like businesses, for example. She continued that that is a solid piece of work they could accomplish, publishing the list of resources for anyone who wants it. Dr. Morris replied that here is an example of overlapping work in the different groups, because the Education subcommittee of the MDEIB Coalition has started collecting these resources and is planning to generate a list to publish on the YMCA's website. She continued that they just discussed it this morning. There is some duplication of work. It will be such a valuable conversation when the chairs from the Chamber's group, the HRC, and the MDEIB Coalition get together. Discussion continued about the work of the Education subcommittee, which includes the Events & Outreach Coordinator from the Monadnock Food Co-op. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Dr. Morris could reach out to her about collaboration possibilities.

Mr. Kirschner spoke about the benefits of coalition building with the Chamber's group and the MDEIB Coalition, and how this is not just the HRC's work, it is everyone's work, which means sharing the responsibilities, resources, and information. He continued that the relationships

between these groups will have a direct impact on whatever it is that the HRC is able to do for the City. Others agreed.

Mr. Bohannon stated that a while back, the HRC used to give an annual report to the City Council. He continued that the HRC could ask to go on the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure Committee (MSFI) agenda to provide an update on what the HRC has been doing. They could do this every year. It would keep the City Council aware of the HRC's work, their events, and their financial situation and needs. He spoke of how keeping the HRC's work, including how they are collaborating with other groups, in the Council's awareness could help the HRC. Discussion ensued. Mr. Bohannon added that he would recommend that HRC members make the presentation, instead of him, because the Council hears from him so much already.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she is still getting her head around how much the HRC can reasonably accomplish and what exactly they are mandated to do. She continued that she fears moving forward in a vacuum under the seal of the City of Keene without the actual government of the City of Keene sharing the HRC's agenda. The other two organizations that the HRC wants to partner with have some authority by dint of their membership giving those groups authority. If you a member of the Chamber and on the [DEI] committee, it is because you want to participate in it, whereas the HRC is here because they have been selected to do this work, but it does not necessarily mean that they are bringing the City with them. The City is on board with the HRC's educational programming, or at least, the HRC has never had any complaints, but regarding anything further, there is no "loop closing" to make sure the City government actually supports what the HRC is trying to do. Discussion ensued. Dr. Morris spoke of Mr. Morton's experiences meeting with the Mayor and the City Manager as the co-chair of the MDEIB Coalition, and asked if it is similar to the process for the HRC. Mr. Bohannon spoke of the differences and similarities in processes for an outside group (MDEIB) and an inside group (HRC) seeking funding.

Ms. Fiske asked if the HRC should have a meeting with the Mayor, or talk with the Council. She asked if it is correct that the RJCS Report is the Mayor's project. Mr. Bohannon replied that the Council adopted it. Dr. Morris stated that the Mayor gave the charge. Ms. Fiske replied that it seems like it would make sense for the HRC to organize their notes better, to specify the action items they have thought of, the problems they are running up against - money, lack of clarity about their charge, duplications of efforts, and so on and so forth, and ask [the Mayor and City Council], "How far do you want us to go?" They could ask if it makes sense for this project to be turned over to another group or for some combination of the groups to happen. Others agreed.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if that sounds reasonable to Mr. Bohannon. Mr. Bohannon replied yes and stated that so much of what the HRC has said tonight is also said in the report – such as, there is a lot of work, and it is hard to know where to start. Ms. Fiske replied that there is also the question of who has the authority to be able to do the work. Mr. Bohannon replied

that the answer to that, from the report is: *“The committee makes the following recommendations to the City Council and to the community at large based on information gleaned from its research, discussion, and public input. Though this is the result of the work of a City committee, the recommendations will be most effective as adopted by an intended audience including businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies throughout Keene and the greater region. It is acknowledged that this will likely include some overlap in coordination, with additional local and State initiatives focused on racial justice.”* Mr. Kirschner replied that this report is so big the HRC does not have to overlap in its efforts with other groups. They can say what they are focusing on and prioritizing. That is a conversation they need to have. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, they will set that meeting up, and maybe it could happen quarterly. He continued that it does not have to be the same people each time, but each meeting could have people from the Chamber’s group, the MDEIB Coalition, and the HRC, to check in with each other.

Dr. Filiault stated that the HRC can choose one piece of the RJCS Report to do and do it well. He continued that maybe it is integrating the report into the HRC’s work and creating a checklist for themselves, and finding the pieces that the people in this room can run with, and running with it well. Then, coordinating the HRC’s work with the work of others who are also picking up the torch. Discussion continued about the logistics of the three groups meeting together, like where to meet, when, and the question of meeting minutes. Mr. Bohannon clarified that those quarterly (or however frequent) meetings would not be public meetings. He continued that if they were public meetings, they would [be subject to the requirements of RSA 91-A, such as noticed in advance, with agendas, meeting minutes, and so on and so forth]. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that the intent would be something less formal. Discussion ensued about whether they would want a public record, and what the public expects. Mr. Bohannon stated that other HRC members are welcome to attend whatever meetings are set up with the MDEIB Coalition and the Chamber’s group, as long as there are not so many HRC members that they create a quorum of the HRC, [which would make it a public meeting subject to RSA 91:A]. He continued that there could be a greater collaboration somewhere that he is not thinking of. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that they will not know until they meet.

Ms. Fiske stated that as long and painful as this process has been, the HRC now knows the report intimately. She continued that they have some good ideas, a good sense of what is going on in the community, and some things they can make recommendations for and work towards. Mr. Bohannon replied that he agrees, and he would like to see if he and Ms. Fiske can work on the City side, regarding trying to push some of the DEI stuff, maybe with the possibility of the intern he mentioned earlier. He continued that he thinks that is where some of the bones/structure will get created. To quote what Mr. Kirschner said to him the other day, “Twelve hours a year does not solve this problem.” It is true. The HRC has added six hours, but it is still not enough. If someone has 148 hours that they can dedicate to focusing on some of the things the HRC is looking to get done, it pushes the HRC in the direction they want to go in. He can have that conversation. Having that intern participate in the HRC’s meetings would be good.



Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Mr. Bohannon is talking about him and Ms. Fiske trying to create a DEI committee for the City departments, like a safety committee, involving this intern. Mr. Bohannon replied that he does not know; they need to have that conversation. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos replied that she thinks it is a great idea. Discussion continued. Dr. Morris stated that that is something to keep in the back of their minds when/if they meet with Sally Nix. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos asked if Mr. Bohannon wants to join that meeting with Sally Nix. Mr. Bohannon replied yes, it could be helpful for him to understand what is happening in Brattleboro. He continued that he has some other New England communities he can check in with, to see what they are doing. Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that she thinks a DEI committee in the City, similar to a safety committee, is a wonderful idea and perhaps not something that should come from the HRC. If it could happen organically, as a recommendation from staff, it would have more traction. Ms. Fiske replied yes, right now some DEI work is being done by individuals in different departments, but they do not know what other departments are doing. Dr. Morris stated that the DEI Committee in Brattleboro came about after a colleague of hers provided a full day of DEI training to every single municipal employee, and the employees had the idea themselves of creating a DEI Committee, so Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos is right, it did not come from an outside group.

Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos stated that they have a few minutes left in this meeting. She continued that they have some action items, and getting the meeting minutes and notes and action items organized is the first step. She suggests that the action items they have in the short term – contacting Sally Nix, reaching out to the co-op’s Outreach & Events person, and reaching out to the Chamber’s group and the MDEIB Coalition – are valuable regardless of whether the HRC writes a letter to Council or has a meeting with the Mayor, and certainly within the HRC’s purview. Once the notes are together, they could review that document via email, and come back together to decide how to proceed on a broader basis. She asked if that sounds reasonable. Others agreed.

There being no further business, Chair Cunha-Vasconcelos adjourned the meeting at 8:27 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Britta Reid, Minute Taker

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