

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2023
7:00 p.m.,
VIRTUAL (Zoom)

Members Present

Danielle Beach
Marc Bendick
Matt Harris
Susan Kellom
Katherine O'Connell
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson, Vice Chair
Megan Prince
Tom Reeder, Jr.
David Rigsby, Vice Chair
Sam Schwartz
Conrad Sylvanus
Jon Thompson

Staff Present

Anna McClure, Investigator
David Miller, Investigator
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Lisl Brunner, Chair
Iulia Fratila

Guests:

Alison O'Connell
Rose Esber
Samar Najia
Katie Akbar

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Vice Chair Rigsby

Vice Chair Rigsby called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. Introductions were made.

2. Approval of Minutes of November Meeting

Upon a motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Commissioner Beach, the Commission approved the minutes of the November meeting, All Commissioners present voted aye, and one abstained.

Public comment

Vice Chair Rigsby welcomed members of the public and gave each of them three minutes to speak. He told the speakers that if they do not have a chance to finish their statements, to submit them in writing to Anna McClure to circulate them to the commission.

Allison O'Connell expressed her concern about anti-boycott legislation and said that it comes through the State every year and said that last year HB1606 passed and HB1898 was tabled. She said HB1606 conflates anti-Zionism with Antisemitism, and it often goes with outdated usage of the definition; she will be sending an article from the person who created that definition, saying how it has been misused in public platforms. She shared that the anti-boycott legislation is something that has passed in multiple states; the ACLU has fought it in Arkansas, and a Federal Judge in Georgia found that it violates the First Amendment. She said that she hopes for the Commission to encourage legislators not to sign on to anything like it in the future and she continues to hope that the Commission will use it as a platform to support Palestinians in the city and said that other City Councils have done so.

Rose Esber shared the losses that they are experiencing as they learn of the deaths and suffering of family members and friends in Gaza. She gave an update on what is happening in Gaza and said that

20,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, 2023, and asked the Commission to support a cease-fire.

Samar Najia also shared the loss of her family member in Gaza and does not understand why the State of Virginia is not speaking louder on this issue.

Katie Abkar stated that she was here to express her deep concern about what is happening in Gaza. She knows that this is not a local issue, but there are some City Councils that have spoken up and called for a cease fire and she feels that if Alexandria does not call for a cease fire, it will come to regret it. She said that she would be appreciative if Alexandria is willing to make a statement calling for a cease fire, or any other statement simply stating that we stand for respect for human beings.

3. Executive Committee Meeting

Vice Chair Rigsby stated that the Executive Committee met last Monday and discussed the January and February meetings and what topics will come up. He stated that for the January Meeting he believes that Rabbi David Spinrad has been invited as a guest speaker. Anna McClure stated that Commissioner Schwartz has been coordinating this and has been in contact with Rabbi Spinrad.

Vice Chair Rigsby stated that, for the January Executive Committee Meeting, they are going to invite Police Chief Hayes and ARHA representatives to discuss the recent mask-wearing notice that was released to ARHA residents. Commissioner Thompson stated that he has drafted two letters that the Commission can send to Chief Hayes and an ARHA representative. He said that the Commission essentially just wanted to see if they could get more information about how the two departments interact with each other and how a decision was made to send out these notices. He also reported that Chief Hayes has issued an apology, but the Executive Committee thinks there needs to be more investigation to figure out what happened.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson stated that the Police Chief said he was going to go door-to-door to tell all of the residents at the housing development that this was a mistake, so it seems that something went out without any examination. Commissioner Thompson stated that the Commission does not know if it was someone from the Police Department or from ARHA who requested that this notice be written and sent out. Commissioner Thompson said that the Executive Committee was disturbed that it went through all the channels and made its way out the door.

Commissioner Harris stated that the mask law itself prevents anybody from intentionally hiding their face, so if you are a woman going to the health clinic and you do not want to be seen by the press or pro-life people, it is illegal for you to conceal your identity, so the law itself needs to be changed. He said that he had brought it up to the Commission for Women and received no response. Vice Chair Palmer Johnson said that she will bring up this issue at the next Commission for Women meeting.

Commissioner O'Connell stated that the Landlord and Tenant Relations Board has talked about this issue and everyone on the Board is very concerned about this because it was sent to those in low-income housing. She added that the Chair of the Landlord and Tenant Relations Board would be interested in either helping, supporting, or being part of the conversation.

Investigator Miller stated that Commissioner Harris was correct, and they had to look at the law itself but noted that the law has been on the books for a very long time and has not been enforced. He reported that the Chief had said that it was not something that was going to be enforced and explained that an officer had conducted a presentation talking about laws that are on the book. Investigator Miller heard that the ARHA staff person took it upon themselves to issue it through the ARHA community.

Vice Chair Rigsby stated that invitations are going to be extended to the Police Chief and a representative from ARHA, also reminded the Commission that everyone is invited to attend the Executive Committee meeting. Investigator McClure stated that she would appreciate it if the Commissioners let her know if they plan to attend the meeting, because it might have to be moved to the Office's conference room. Investigator McClure will confirm the attendance of the Police Chief and will check with ARHA to see if they are going to be able to attend, and she also reminded the Commission that ARHA is not a City government agency and cannot be compelled to come.

Commissioner Bendick asked if the process could be expedited by drafting a proposed piece of legislation repealing the concealing of the identity law for the next Commission meeting. Investigator McClure stated that the City approved their legislative package on Saturday, but she can talk to Sarah Taylor the Legislative Director about the Commission's concern. Investigator McClure also stated that she will have an opportunity to comment on the bills that have been introduced.

Vice Chair Rigsby reported that at the February meeting, the Commission plans to have Erika Kleiner, the City's LGBTQ+ Task Force Coordinator, and she will invite other guests to talk about transgender youth in public schools.

4. Old & New Business

Investigator McClure reported that they had an initial meeting to go over the City's legislative packet and said that she would send it out. She explained that the City took all the proposals received from different sources and divided them into five categories: Recognizing and Strengthening State Partnership with Localities; Preserving and Expanding Local Authority and Funding for Localities; Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable and Underserved Populations; Enhancing Public Engagement, Health, and Safety; and Improving Resilience, Promoting Energy Efficiency, and Encouraging Clean Energy Investment. Investigator McClure stated that the Office will be watching the expanding local authority proposal and, as bills come in, she will update the Commission on what she is seeing.

Investigator McClure asked for volunteers to attend the next Outreach at ALIVE! Food Hub, on January 13, 2024. She will be sending an email after the holiday to see who will volunteer.

Investigator McClure reported that the Rainbow Crosswalks were approved on November 28, and said that there was a presentation. She stated that Councilmember Kirk McPike did a great job talking about it and said that June 1 is the target implementation date. She reported that Zoning for Housing was also approved on November 28.

Commissioner Prince brought up a new item for discussion and asked what the proposed new stadium is going to do to the community and whether it is going to increase or decrease housing costs and property values? She said that there are a lot of possible implications that the Commission needs to take into consideration. Investigator McClure stated that it has not been approved. She also added that there will

be opportunities for community engagement going forward. Investigator McClure said that once more information is available, she will communicate it to the Commission.

Investigator Miller stated that in the meetings that they have attended so far, the City Manager has been very clear that this is not unlike other public engagement processes. A lot of information went out through the news media, but they are just starting the public comment period and all of the interaction between City Departments and the community, and it is not a done deal.

Commissioner Beach announced that her term is coming up for renewal and said that she is not planning on reapplying because she is busy with work and i travel. She stated that it has been a great ten years and it has been very enjoyable. She added that it has been a very hard decision to make and thanked everyone on the Commission for everything they do. Vice Chair Rigsby told Commissioner Beach that she would be missed and said that she has always shared her knowledge and expertise with the Commission and has been a great member of the Commission. Commissioner Harris told Commissioner Beach that she would be missed and said that there isn't anybody on the Commission who knows immigration law as well as she does. Vice Chair Palmer Johnson said that she thoroughly enjoyed working with Commissioner Beach and thanked her for her legal expertise.

Commissioner Bendick strongly seconded Commissioner Prince's recommendation regarding the proposed stadium. Commissioner Bendick said that that the Commission should take a position on the stadium matter and that it is extremely important for the Commission to take a position on it early.

Commissioner Thompson suggested asking City Council to provide the Commission with more information about the stadium and said that it is important to see how much money is coming from Monumental Sports and how much money is coming from the Commonwealth versus local funding. He said it will be interesting to see if any studies have been done to see what sort of tax revenue will be brought in from this proposal and also where the City is planning on putting that tax revenue. Investigator Miller asked the Commission to consider what guests from City Departments they might want to invite in the coming months of 2024.

Commissioner Reeder stated that he does not think that the Commission will be getting out ahead of the Council at all by taking apposition early because the Council is asking for input and the Commission should provide it. He does not think Council has taken a position yet, so the time is right to have input on this issue. Commissioner Prince stated that the Commission needs to do a lot more research into this, but it needs to be done quickly.

Commissioner O'Connell stated that, at the last meeting, they had discussed, briefly, a cease fire resolution and there was a discussion about getting more information and said that she was looking at past resolutions or statements that the City has made. She mentioned that the City had made a statement about Anti-Asian hate after the attack in Georgia and mentioned some other ones. She mentioned some of the incidents that have happened against the Palestinians in this country, and she thinks that at the very least putting out a statement in solidarity with our Native American and Palestinian American residents in the light of multiple hate crimes that have occurred across the country, and asked what the steps or process for the Commission would be to do something like that. Investigator McClure stated that a resolution would be appropriate vehicle for that kind of thing, and she said that it is something that she can figure out procedurally how it works.

Commissioner O'Connell brought up the government speech resolution that was passed in November and said that it is unclear to her what the actual process is, there is no transparency there. She questioned what the process is for when someone gets to say that City Hall will get lit up in a particular way. Investigator Miller stated that the office had a discussion on this issue and will be following up to see who the appropriate person is and said that the staff is actively working on it.

Commissioner Bendick mentioned the discussion two meetings ago about issuing a statement in support of the safety of Palestinian residents within the City of Alexandria. He said that he thought that there was approval to have the Executive Committee send the statement out. Investigator McClure explained the process of Proclamations and said that they can only be used in very specific ways and stated that the Commission's statement had been sent to all members of City Council.

6. Liaison Reports

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson stated that the Commission for Women met on December 12 and said the Commission supported the Domestic Violence shelter Christmas party, which was held on December 14. She announced the Domestic Violence program will be distributing bookmarks at the Alexandria Metro stops. She announced that National Human Rights Trafficking Awareness Month is in January.

Commissioner O'Connell stated that they discussed two things at the last Landlord and Tenant Relations Board meeting. One was a pilot program that provided air filtration, as well as assessments of people's homes to help them with clean air in their homes. For people with breathing disorders, such as asthma and COPD, things like air filters and air purifiers were provided as part of the pilot. They found out that, after the pilot was implemented, people reported fewer hospitalizations due to breathing disorders. The City is looking to expand this program after being successfully implemented. She said that they also discussed the face mask issue, specifically as it had to do with being sent to the ARHA residents.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging is beginning to formalize a working group to oversee the transition of the Ladrey apartment building. He reported that Ladrey is for low-income individuals who are over 55 or disabled, and it is being redeveloped. He also reported that they heard from Cherry Blossom PACE, which provides health services and personalized in-home care.

7. Announcements /Adjournment

Investigator McClure announced that the EEOC contract has been approved by the City Council. Investigator McClure stated that the Health Department is doing a large-scale effort around healthy homes and said that she has been involved in the public engagement work group. She reported that the initial survey has gone out and she will forward it to the Commissioners.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson announced that she received the Human Rights Month Proclamation.

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

Commissioner Kellom/Commissioner Thompson **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:32 p.m.

Statement for the Human Rights Commission, Tuesday, December 19, 2023 – Rosemarie M. Esber

Alexandria residents and Virginians are losing family members and friends daily in Israel's ongoing Genocide in Gaza daily.

As of December 19, 2023, Israel has killed an estimated 20,000 Palestinians since October 7. About 8,000 of the dead are children and 5,000 are women. More than 53,000 civilians are injured, including 9,000 children. 8000 Palestinians are missing.^[1]

27 of the 35 hospitals are not working

197 places of worship have been damaged

50 percent of homes have been destroyed or damaged

102 ambulances were damaged

11 bakeries destroyed

73 journalists were targeted and killed by Israel.

70 % of the 2.5 million Gazans don't have enough food. There is no clean water and disease is spreading.

My extended family is sheltering in the Holy Family Catholic Church in Northern Gaza where Israeli snipers murdered an elderly Palestinian woman and her daughter.

There is nowhere safe in Gaza. Every hour in Gaza:

- 15 people are killed - 6 are children
- 35 people are injured
- 42 bombs are dropped
- 12 buildings are destroyed

On December 13, UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire but the United States and Israel have not observed the ceasefire vote. Carpet bombing and siege are war crimes and the United States is complicit in genocide.

I ask the Human Rights Commission advise the City of Alexandria to issue a statement or resolution in support of upholding international humanitarian law, an immediate ceasefire to stop the genocide in Gaza, and in solidarity with Alexandria residents' who have Palestinian families and friends in Gaza and the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

^[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

Statement of Samar Najia to the Human Rights Commission, December 19, 2023

As mentioned during my allotted time, I have lost 6 members of the Dajani Family (my immediate family) and another unknown number from the El Helou family (which is my extended family). No one knows the death toll.

I wanted to add two additional points:

1) the Palestinian families of Alexandria and Virginia have experienced violence, displacement and dispossession for 75 years since 1948. They have violently been stripped of everything they owned, seen their families decimated and massacred and this suffering has not abated since. Our elders never healed. The Gaza assaults have repeatedly and collectively traumatized the Palestinian American community. We are collectively depressed - My parents and uncles would have been devastated if they were still alive to see the carnage and worse, the silence of politicians. But it is now our children who see the pain.

2) the Palestinian American identity has been diminished and erased on the federal level, on the state level (our senators refuse to stand up for us or demand a ceasefire or condemn the killing of civilians), and recently the Mayor of Alexandria highlighted the colors of white and blue in city hall in disdain for the lives of Palestinians dying by the minute. For 3 weeks, he lit up the city while Palestinian children, mothers and elderly were being massacred.

At that moment, the Mayor took a stand on foreign policy. We should have been in mourning and not in celebration of a foreign government's violence. In our workplaces, our identity is erased. In our schools, our history is rewritten and on social media, we are censored.

We want the City of Alexandria to be a leader among other cities and affirm the human rights of Palestinians- why- because Palestinians have experienced the longest genocide in history. I hope the City will find the courage to speak up for Palestinian Americans and uphold MLK's conviction. that "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."