

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2024
7:00 p.m., City Hall
301 King Street, Room 2000
The Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

Lisl Brunner, Chair
Marc Bendick
April Breslaw
Iulia Fratila
Matt Harris
Susan Kellom (participated remotely by telephone)
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

Jim Parajon, City Manager
Alethea Predeoux, Assistant City Manager
David Miller, Investigator (Acting Director)
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair Lisl Brunner

Chair Brunner called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. and said it was Commissioner Kellom's last meeting. She thanked Commissioner Kellom for her dedication and years of service on the Commission and to the City. Vice Chair Palmer Johnson, Commissioner Schwartz, and Commissioner Harris expressed their appreciation for Commissioner Kellom.

2. Approval of Minutes of the February Meeting

Upon a motion by Commissioner Prince, seconded by Commissioner Harris, the Commission approved the minutes of the February meeting, as amended, with all Commissioners present voted aye.

3. Executive Committee Meeting

Chair Brunner stated the Commission wrote a letter to ARHA, in November, about a notice sent to ARHA residents, stating they faced possible arrest if they wore face coverings. ARHA said they were not available to meet and considered the matter resolved. The Commission thanked ARHA and asked someone to come to the meeting. ARHA initially accepted but then had a conflict. Chair Brunner said there is still interest in ARHA attending. Commissioner Harris contacted Kevin Harris, who represents ARHA residents. Vice Chair Palmer Johnson noted he is a Council candidate, so it is not appropriate to invited him. Kevin Harris is looking for a surrogate to speak about ARHA residents' concerns.

Chair Brunner said the Executive Committee debated how to follow up with ARHA, and suggested the best course of action is to invite the residents' association and extend another invitation to ARHA. Commissioner Schwartz stated that, at the HIV/AIDS Commission meeting, an issue with ARHA came up, about the inspections of properties, which sounded like elder residents in the buildings want ARHA to inspect units of people who are on the subsidy program because there are concerns about drug use.

4. Old & New Business

Inviting the Alexandria Police Department and the Sheriff's Office to upcoming meetings

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson reported that she reached out to the Sheriff. She was asked to collect questions from the Commission. She will present those questions to the Sheriff, so he can answer them at the meeting. She added that he committed to the April meeting. She stated she would like to send questions to him no later than April 9. Chair Brunner stated that she reached out to the new Police Chief with a general invitation to come speak to the Commission, but with a focus on school resource officers.

Consideration of Commission statement to City Council supporting a ceasefire

Chair Brunner stated that the Executive Committee discussed the different versions of the statement on the situation in the Middle East, which the Commission has been considering for the past few months, to be sent to the City Council. There was different support expressed for different versions, so they decided to put all three options before the Commission to discuss and then take a vote on.

Commissioner O'Connell moved to withdraw the original statement and asked for the Commission to consider the other two versions. There were no objections to the withdrawal of the original statement. Upon a motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Vice Chair Palmer Johnson, the Commission adopted the statement, titled "Recommendation to Join Representative Don Beyer in a Call for a Long-lasting Ceasefire in Gaza," with two minor changes, substituting instances of "request" and "call" with "recommend." The motion passed with 12 in favor and one abstention.

Commissioners thanked members of the public for coming to meetings and for sharing their personal stories of the suffering of their families and friends in the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Commissioner Prince read the Proclamation for Human Rights Month, celebrating the 48th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which was received by the Commission, in December 2023.

5. Liaison Reports

Commissioner O'Connell reported that she was not able to attend the meeting this month, but that the Landlord and Tenant Relations Board is still dealing with the same issue of trying to compel Landlords to meet with their residents on flooding and pest control issues.

Commissioner Prince reported that the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities had a guest speaker from a local employer of people with disabilities, 80% of their workforce is people with disabilities. The representative talked about their business model and hiring practices, and the Commission asked questions about benefits and wages. She also announced that the ACPD is looking for nominations for the John Duty Collins Award and the Gerry Bertier Scholarship; she encouraged Commissioners to share this information.

Commissioner Schwartz said he went to the Citizen Police Review Board meeting, but there was not a quorum. He will be traveling for three months and asked for volunteers to attend CPRB meetings, on the first Wednesday of the month. Vice Chair Rigsby volunteered to attend in April. Commissioner Schwartz reported that the HIV/AIDS Commission did not have a quorum, either, but talked about issues in schools and about inviting candidates for elected office and sending them a list of questions on their policies on a variety of HIV/AIDS-related issues, including education, testing, and housing.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women will host a webinar on Black Maternal Health, on April 4. She also announced that April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and that Commissioners will be distributing flyers at the Metro stops in Alexandria.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission is seeking nominations for four awards, one is for an individual who has served seniors for at least ten years; one is for a citizen with at least one year of service to seniors; one is to an organization that has made outstanding contribution to Alexandria seniors; and one is to a City employee who has contributed to Alexandria seniors. He added that the Commission also heard from AHA (At Home Alexandria). AHA is a non-profit membership organization that helps its members to age in their homes. Information for the awards can be found at alexandriava.gov/aging.

Commissioner Sylvanus reported that the Economic Opportunity Commission received an update from the General Assembly. The EOC had submitted ten legislative requests about ending homelessness, of which six were taken up: payment plans for tenants who owe one month's rent or less and leases in different languages, which were passed by the House, and now they are waiting for the Senate to pass them; increasing the pay or quit notice requirement from five to fourteen days and fee transparency. They also discussed the Potomac Yard Entertainment District and possibly weighing in on labor and housing. They discussed the Point-in-Time Count system, wherein they go out on the coldest day of the year to collect data on people experiencing homelessness; the data will be released in May 2024.

Commissioner Thompson suggested inviting candidates for City Council and School Board to speak to the Commission. After discussion, it was agreed to come up with the questions at the April Executive Committee meeting.

Commissioner Reeder reminded the Commission that two bills related to electronic meetings passed and are effective July 1st; he asked the Commission to reevaluate their electronic meeting policy and hopefully meet more electronically; it can be done 50% of the time. Commissioner Harris stated that he prefers to meet in person, rather than electronically.

6. Public Comment

Members of the public expressed appreciation for the Human Rights Commission for its work and for passing the ceasefire statement and sending it to the City Council.

7. Announcements /Adjournment

Chair Brunner, Commissioner Sylvanus, and Commissioner Prince are tentative volunteers to staff the ALIVE! Food Hub table, on April 13, 2024.

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

Commissioner Schwartz/Vice Chair Palmer Johnson **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:28 p.m.