

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION  
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 2025  
7:00 P.M., City Hall  
301 King Street, Room 2000  
Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

Marc Bendick, Vice Chair  
April Breslaw  
Iulia Fratilla  
Matt Harris  
Manisha Maniyar  
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson, Vice Chair  
Kara Pitek  
Megan Prince  
Tom Reeder, Jr.  
Sam Schwartz  
Jon Thompson, Chair

Staff Present

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

Members Excused

Lisl Brunner  
Conrad Sylvanus

Guests

Alyia Gaskins, Alexandria City Mayor  
Alethea Predeoux, Deputy City Manager

**1. Call to Order/Introductions**

Chair Thompson called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. Introductions were made.

**2. Guest: City of Alexandria Mayor Alyia Gaskins**

Chair Thompson welcomed Alexandria City Mayor Alyia Gaskins. Mayor Gaskins answered questions from the Commission, such as what areas could be more beneficial for the Commission to focus on considering the state of the country right now. She said that some communities are feeling anxious, fearful, and uncertain and those concerns cannot be ignored. She suggested finding ways for the Commission and Council to work together, looking at potential research they should do, and finding ways to get out into the community.

Mayor Gaskins mentioned three priority areas: 1) fear around DEI initiatives and the City's commitment to them. She said the City is not backing out; 2) Related to immigration, in January Council stated that the City's law enforcement officers will not participate in ICE arrests to enforce immigration laws; 3) As we approach World Pride, there are an increasing number of emails from people who are concerned about whether it is safe to travel here and want to know what the City will do to protect residents, specifically trans residents?

She also answered questions about potential threats might at the State level, and whether it is different from or in step with the federal government. She said that it is consistent with the federal government and needs to be watched closely, because the Governor made statements about Alexandria's stance on immigration and that he would be fight to withhold funding from the City, although none of that has materialized yet.

She also answered questions about what the City is doing to prepare for ICE raids in the community. Mayor Gaskins the City is trying to work directly with the communities that are

going to be most impacted. She said they are communicating with five or six organizations. ACT for Alexandria is organizing nonprofits through regular meetings, and the City is also working through this network. She noted that LAJC has a “Know Your Rights” training; the City has red cards available to take, and LAJC has yellow cards.

Mayor Gaskins answered questions about what the City plans to do if a federal court strikes down a local “DEI” program and how the City will handle a situation where certain programs might face legal challenges. She said that, several years ago, she put an add in the budget for a business accelerator that was focused on Black businesses because she heard that Black business owners were not benefiting from small business programs. When the City rolled out the program, within an hour, they were served with a lawsuit arguing discrimination. Council realized that they had to change the program and do it different. A lot was learned from that, including that they should work closely with the City Attorney’s Office. She said that an interdepartmental workgroup is looking at risks and vulnerabilities across City programs, including how much they receive in direct federal funding and what language is being used.

Commissioners asked what percentage of the City budget is made up of federal funds. She said she will find out the exact percentage, but across ACPS and the City, the amount is \$51 million. Her biggest concern is that there are a lot of programs the City receives direct funding for, such as Medicaid, SNAP, WIC, and TANF, that are at risk, and one of them alone is \$29 million. If the City loses that funding, there is no way we can make up that gap, nor does the City have not have the infrastructure to run those programs. Her other concern is about immigrant families working with refugee resettlement agencies. Those agencies make rent payments of \$3,000-\$5,000 a month, but many of the resettlement agencies have been told to stop their work. If those payments stop, those families are not going to have their rent paid and will need rental assistance. The City cannot support all those payments, and the shelters are at capacity; there is a waiting list of 113 people for the shelters.

Mayor Gaskins explained that when there is a new Executive Order, the City has a legal team in the City Attorney’s Office, and support from outside counsel, in some cases, to help them review and understand what the EO means for the City.

Mayor Gaskins said she was inspired to get involved with government and local politics because of her interest in service and her mother’s health issues. She became interested in local health and started working for a local nonprofit. She started to understand how systems and policies can make people's lives worse and decided to run for office in 2020. She said that she was trying to find a way to change deeply local policies that make your life better or worse every single day.

She also answered a question about the direction that the Human Rights Commission should take in getting involved with the community that is being impacted, especially in light of challenges in having an understaffed office getting new employees on board and up to speed. She said the City is getting ready to hire a new Director and this is an opportunity for them assess what things are to be prioritized and where additional support is needed. The Commission should take its direction from the people who are most impacted. She said that, when she was ready to make a statement, in January, she was told that the community did not ask for that. The community did not want attention coming to them, or strangers they do not work with coming in and trying to

help even if they have the best intentions. The community said that they needed time to build their infrastructure, because once she makes the statement, ICE could be there the next day. Mayor Gaskins said she had to take a step back. She noted that, as long as the Commission is rooted in the community and continues to be in that conversation, that will be the best cue.

She answered a question about how closely in line the School Board is with the DEI mission. Mayor Gaskins said this is not a conversation she has had. She answered a question about the Police Review Board and the lack of clarity on its mission and its powers, particularly the subpoena and investigative powers. She said that Council deferred voting on the revised ordinance and put together a subcommittee, which Vice Mayor Bagley and Councilman Aguirre are serving on. She supported this move because there was going to be no agreement between staff, the community, and Council. At that point it was either going to die and there would be no way forward, or they could take a step back and recognize that this is a Council decision. She has been told that there have been several meetings with the Police Chief, Board members, and staff. On April 22, they will brief Council, but her understanding is that there has been a lot of progress and there have been some compromises. She said the bulk of the conversation has been on subpoena power, and they are looking for a compromise.

Mayor Gaskins said she noticed the signs members of the public are holding about Council's response to the Human Rights Commission's letter on what is happening within our Palestinian community. She said she answered this at a Council town hall and is open to figuring out the right conversation to have. She recognized that she sees them and is not just passing over them. She heard three members of the public who gave comments regarding the divestment resolution and the issues in Gaza.

### **3. Introduction: New Commissioner**

New Commissioner Kara Pitek introduced herself and said that she is a government contractor.

### **4. Approval of March Minutes**

Upon motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Vice Chair Bendick, the Commission approved the minutes of the March meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye.

### **5. Executive Committee**

#### **May Meeting**

Chair Thompson said they invited the Legal Aid Justice Center and are working how to have the training at a more public meeting, since it is important to focus on training those not at risk.

Chair Thompson asked Deputy City Manager Alethea Predeoux to introduce herself. Ms. Predeoux said the Office of Human Rights is in her portfolio. She said they are in the process of hiring a new Director and hope to wrap it up in the next couple of weeks. She said Acting Director McClure and Acting Director Miller have been doing a tremendous job guiding and leading the office. She wants to ensure they can keep the staff and create an environment where people feel valued and welcomed. She added that the Chair of the Human Rights Commission will work with them in the final round of interviews. She stated she came to the City to serve and learn about her community differently and to partner with people.

Acting Director McClure reported that a new investigator has been hired, started last week. Acting Director Miller is working to replace Mike Hatfield, ADA Program Manager, who is retiring on April 25. The new hire for the position will be ADA Coordinator. Acting Director Miller assured the Commission that the office is focused on getting staff but won't forget the mission and will assist the Commission however possible.

Vice Chair Bendick said the Human Rights Commission is underutilized and could take on issues on behalf of Council. They could organize the studies, organize the public hearing, and give them the benefit of a digested version, rather than giving them the raw input. Ms. Predeoux said she could not agree more and thinks the City can do a better job partnering with and utilizing Commissions, particularly on specific issues. She said the CMO has been discussing how to utilize and partner with Boards and Commissions.

Commissioner Breslaw stated that the Commission does not receive reporting or data about cases the office receives. Acting Director McClure said the Office does track information, but it is spread across systems. The office is working on a system to have the information in one place, and she will bring it in the future. Ms. Predeoux said this is an issue across the City, not having the right systems to easily track certain information, and the City is working on it.

Commissioner Pitek asked if there is interdepartmental collaboration. Ms. Predeoux said that she has eleven departments in her portfolio, and they meet biweekly. The purpose of these meetings is to coordinate across the eleven departments. She wants to create their portfolio report that has basic updates and priorities for the month so that she can share it with the other Deputy City Managers. The City Manager's Office is working on strategic planning and work plans. Acting Director Miller talked about an issue in the West End where there were a lot of concerns about a lack of accessibility in housing and trash issues. A group of staff worked together, including Police, Code, Housing, and Human Rights, to address those community concerns.

Chair Thompson asked the Commission what attributes they want in a new Director. Acting Director Miller excused himself during this part of the meeting. Commissioners cited the following: 1) has can-do attitude, is proactive and willing to push the envelope; 2) good with two-way communication, not just guiding the Commission, but also understanding and appreciating where they want to go; 3) has an ear to the community; 4) has a broad-based network; 5) willing to explore connecting and communicating with surrounding jurisdictions.

#### Goals of the Commission

Chair Thompson said the Commission's main roles, in the Ordinance, are reviewing claims and conducting studies. The budget has caused constraints, so they typically have a panel or a community member talk to them and give the information to Council, like conducting a study. The Commission suggested having a list of three to five topics reflecting community needs. Acting Director McClure suggested looking at the community services survey results. Acting Director Miller suggested looking at that in conjunction with the data that Acting Director McClure will provide to decide what they want to look at and whether a study should be done on a particular issue. Acting Director McClure said the Racial Equity Office has a racial equity data mapping tool that is a good way to look at a lot of different data points.

## **6. Old Business & New Business**

### **Hate Crime Incident Update**

Acting Director McClure reported that she spoke to the Police Chief about an incident, on Ripley Street, where the “N” word and a swastika were spraypainted on a car. The Police do not think it was targeted at the individual who owns the car. The incident has been reported to the FBI. The Police Chief said he is working on updating the City’s hate crime reporting policy and Acting Director McClure said this may be an area for the Commission to engage with the Chief.

## **7. Liaison Reports**

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women met virtually and had a presentation from the Office of Housing and Adult Services. The Commission will be going to various markets to pass out information on issues that have to do with women. April is Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Awareness Month, so they will pass out information on issues. She said there is a poetry night, “Embrace Your Voice,” on April 29 from 6- 8:30 p.m., at the Lyceum.

Commissioner Schwartz announced that he met with the Public Health Advisory Commission, which unanimously approved merging the function of the Commission on HIV/AIDS into their commission. They also updated the role to include sexually transmitted infections, generally. The next step will be to work with the City Clerk to eliminate the Commission on HIV/AIDS and transfer the functions to the Public Health Advisory Commission.

Commissioner Prince reported that the ACPD elected a new Vice Chair. She reminded the Commission that they are soliciting applications for the Bertier Scholarship and nominations for the John Duty Collins award, both due by April 30, 2025.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging heard a presentation on the Resident Survey from Robert Stackhouse, from the Office of Performance Analytics.

## **8. Public Comment**

Members of the public gave comments regarding Gaza.

## **9. Announcements/Adjournment**

Acting Director McClure said she will keep the Commission updated on the Pride events. Chair Thompson suggested having a petition in support of a Del Ray rainbow crosswalk.

**MOTION:** Adjourn the meeting.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson moved and Commissioner Schwartz seconded. **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:58 p.m.