

Topeka Human Relations Commission

Meeting Minutes
December 1, 2014

Commissioners met on December 1, 2014 at 5:30 p.m. for the December monthly meeting
Holliday Building – Conference Room
620 SE Madison Street
Topeka, KS 66603

To request an ADA accommodation, please contact 368-3606 between the hours of 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. no later than 3 working days in advance of this meeting.

Mission Statement:

The mission of the Human Relations Commission is to conduct outreach and educational activities that promote justice and cultural understanding, and improve relationships among all citizens of the City of Topeka.

Commissioners present:

Ms. Lorean Williams
Ms. Margo Rangel
Ms. Amy Cohen
Mr. Mike Padilla
Mr. Bill Beachy

Commissioners absent: Ms. Stephanie Mott, Ms. Darcella Goodman, Ms. Joyce Grigsby,
Mr. Anthony Fadale

I. Call to order – Commissioner

Noting a quorum, Lorean Williams, Chair, called the meeting at order at 5:30 p.m. Lorean Williams, Chair, asked for a volunteer to take minutes. Amy Cohen volunteered.

II. Pledge of Allegiance followed by a Moment of Silence

III. Approval of Agenda

Amy made a motion to adopt the agenda and Margo seconded. No discussion. Motion carried.

IV. Approval of Minutes

Minutes from November meeting were presented. Mike made a motion to adopt the minutes; Margo seconded. No discussion. Motion carried.

V. Staff Report

Shawn was unable to attend the meeting tonight and she has not been told who her replacement will be at this time. Shawn typed up the letter that Amy wrote per the agreement for last meeting and delivered them prior to the start of the meeting.

VI. Committee Reports

- *Prejudice & Poverty Committee Update*

Stephanie sent an e-mail stating there was no new business at this time.

- *Troy Scroggins Award Committee Update*

There was a discussion about the two nominations received. Two of the three members of the committee were not in attendance so only some decisions could be made at this time. Margo e-mailed Amy the nomination. Amy forwarded it to Stephanie (Joyce does not have e-mail). Margo stated that in the future, she will not take any applications sent to her. Lorean asked the Committee members to consider consistency as she believes this is important but an exception may need to be made for this nomination as it was received by the deadline. It was agreed the committee will review both nominations, contact the second nominee to request a designee to fill out the application since we received the information in a timely manner, follow-up with Shawn, the Committee needs to come up with a Plan B for background information about the Troy Scroggins Award, and ask Shawn to confirm the date with the award winner and approval to be on the City Council agenda either December 9th or 16th. Margo and Lorean must sign the award ahead of time if they are unable to be there in person so the committee must leave enough time for this.

- *Town Hall Committee Meeting Update*

Margo reported there are no dates set for January, February, etc. Margo needs to contact the League of Women Voters.

VII. Old Business

The discussion came up about marriage equality and Margo asked for some clarification and what type of support or endorsement was Amy looking for when she brought up the topic as Margo was not at the last meeting. Amy explained that Joyce seemed unclear as to why Amy brought the issue up and what it had to do with HRC. Amy tried to explain what she thought Joyce meant but it was determined it was best to wait for Joyce to be at the meeting so she could speak for herself. Amy said she was looking for HRC to write a letter of public support for marriage equality and stated that marriage equality pertains to the Commission because people in the LGBTQ community did not have equal rights in terms of marriage equality when she brought up the topic at the last meeting. Amy said that unless the Supreme Court makes a decision about this issue, Kansas has passed marriage equality so the point about HRC making a public statement in support of marriage equality is mute. Lorean stated that regardless of Commissioner's personal beliefs, this issue is about

humanity and ensuring that all people are treated fairly and humanely in ways that do not permit discrimination. She explained that fair treatment is a part of what HRC is concerned with and what we do; people are people. Amy stated that personal beliefs may vary but the bottom line is social equality and social justice. Margo stated that when K-Step came in some people had different beliefs and some of those people are no longer on the Commission. Mike said that we are to act fairly and consistently and our beliefs cannot influence our actions. There was a question about what Joyce said last meeting but since she is unable to attend tonight, we decided that we could not speak for her. Bill stated that Amy did a good job summarizing and then he read the minutes from last month. Bill stated he wanted to include education on this topic and most of the Commissioners agreed with this. Bill stated that he is for marriage equality. Margo and Amy separately stated that the Commission does not need to spend time discussing personal beliefs since we are here to ensure people are treated fairly and humanely. Lorean gave the example of how interracial marriage use to be illegal and regardless of her personal opinion, prohibiting interracial marriage was a form of discrimination and that is why the Commission is concerned with the law the prohibited marriage between same sex couples.

VIII. New Business

Margo led the discussion that she is tired of issues being postponed and tabled for later and that we should be in front of the issues and not keep putting them off and ending up behind the issues. Amy stated that when she brought the request to discuss a letter of support for marriage equality, it had not passed but now it has so the issue is mute. Margo also talked about Ferguson and being behind on that issue as well. She noted that Amy brought this up months ago and nothing was done about it. She is tired of not getting things done.

Mike said he agreed with most of Amy's summary but said we missed the mark that deals with transgender issues etc. He said we are not here to pick and choose, we are supposed to deal with equality and social justice and we are overlooking the broader need to treat people fairly and equally and that is where we get side tracked and divided and that is when he becomes frustrated. Mike stated he was excited to come on board but now he doesn't feel that HRC is contributing and there is no place of importance for HRC in government. Mike gave an example of how the Mayor could ask the Commission what public concerns we are hearing, what he thinks the Commission can do about it, he could be on the phone with the Chair asking what he thinks we should do about Ferguson, etc. He stated that on other committees he serves, there are measureable goals and objectives and he does not feel he is making a difference on the Commission. He said he thought about contacting his City Council person to ask to be removed from the Commission because he does not feel he is doing any good here or seeing any progress. Mike shared that HRC does not have community visibility and people do not know we exist because we are not present as a Commission (not as individuals) at public events that we should be leading and having a voice in or being asked by the city to have a voice; the Mayor or City Council Members and the community should be looking to us to take the lead and have a unified voice on such issues as Ferguson but no one is asking for our opinion and this is not what he thought it would be when he signed up to be a Commissioner. Mike feels HRC is a Commission in name only and it needs to be recognized by the community by calls from the media, City

Council Members, asking us questions about how we can support the City. It is not HRC's job to do all of this alone and in isolation.

Margo agreed and stated that it has been this way since we lost our enforcement powers. She is weary and agrees we are stagnant and doesn't feel she has a purpose here. Margo stated she feels Mike is right, that we can't name what has been accomplished. She said other committees she has been a part of there is a flow, a check list, meeting goals, etc. but not here. She said it feels like it happens over and over again; we did have something marriage equality and racism/Ferguson and we did not do anything. People need to be treated fairly and equally; that has to change for her, she is tired but not a quitter. We are behind the eight ball and she doesn't feel like she is making a difference. She stated that it is time for elections for the Chair and Vice-Chair and they are long over-do.

Mike said he applauds the Commission for staying together to try to do what we can but when there is not any backing and lack of progress, what are we supposed to report to the City Council that we have done? He does not feel he's served anyone and there have not been any results. Amy agreed with this. Bill thanked Mike for hanging in there and he's glad he said what he did tonight. Bill read the mission statement out loud and stated there are a lot of politics that influence the City inside and outside of HRC.

Lorean motioned for an extension of the meeting to go until 7:15 and Margo seconded it. All agreed in favor.

Mike asked that we give consideration of education for ourselves to rededicate to the core mission, that we set out an agenda for ourselves, draw people in who helped put us here, talk with community resources and get the word out that we are here, organize events that represent the community, status, etc. so that people consider us when there are issues concerning the community. Mike stated he thought people need to be invited and attend our board meetings so we have a pulse on the community concerns and not after the fact. Mike shared that expending effort and resources is a way for us to help the people we can help.

Lorean stated this was the purpose of the letter that Amy drafted. Lorean said it would be helpful if HRC had a pamphlet we could include with the letter but there is not one available now. Commissioners read the letter that Amy drafted and thanked her for her work. A change was made in terms of the contact name and information to the letter. Amy brought up the concern about the signature line and Margo brought up the concern about Amy's personal information being used in the letter. Amy agreed to contact Shawn to have a city e-mail address set up and to use the city voice mail for messages rather than her personal information. The Commission agreed that Lorean's name and title should be used instead of Amy's name and to send the letter to the Mayor, City Council Members, the City Manager, and Suzi Gilbert. No other changes were made to the content of the letter. Bill agreed to get Amy the list of community resources so the letters can include these entities. Mike suggested that we engage Suzi Gilbert to help market HRC.

Lorean motioned for an extension of the meeting to go another 5 minutes and Margo seconded it. All agreed in favor.

Mike said it is hard to measure social work outcomes because the community doesn't see us as a voice that's being listened to or sought out.

Bill asked if we should inquire about our investigative powers.

Mike said the doors closed quickly on this issue when he brought it up and he is concerned that the city will close us down. He said he feels the community members are walking on egg-shells but not turning to this group. He pointed out there is a brand new Chief of Police that we invited to visit with us and see what we think but nothing happened.

Bill stated the Chief of Police came to the rallies.

Mike said that we are appointed by the Mayor to deal with community issues and the Chief of Police should reach out to us immediately, we are here, but no one is doing that.

Lorean suggested we have our own Town Hall meeting, advertise it in the newspaper so people know we are here and what we are here for which is outreach and education. We need to put ourselves out there so people know we are out there. She said then we can ask for community concerns and bring in the City Council if we need support to achieve our goals. People use to know us but they do not any longer. We don't have control of that but we can let the public know we care about what is going on in this city. She said at one time we had a pulse on what was happening in the city and we need to do that again. We cannot control what may happen to HRC and that is not our call to make, but we are not going out without a fight. We need to get ourselves out there and have our own public outreach. She does not believe sitting on the commission is in vein; first we must let people know we are here.

IX. Public Comments

None.

X. Commissioner remarks

Bill: Commented the Topeka Peace and Justice Ferguson rally went pretty well and about 150 people attended. He said the Chief of Police and Assistant Chief of Police were there. He noted the Human Rights Commission extended its application for the law seminar.

Amy: Commented she attended a similar event at the Capitol and it would have been nice if we could have collaborated efforts to be unified and had HRC be the ones initiating the event.

Mike: Commented he supports a peaceful protest that brings credit to the Commission regardless of the incitement.

Margo: Commented that all her remarks were previously stated.

Lorean: Commented the law enforcement partnership panel may be dissolving but she is not 100% certain. She has been asked to be on the Citizen Advisory Board as an individual and not a Commissioner. The meeting is with the Topeka Police Department on December 4, 2014. Lorean asked that we send her (about 3 lines or so) of concerns about systemic racism/Ferguson, and she will compile the suggestions of peaceful ideas and write the letter.

Bill: Stated the City created the Law Enforcement Partnership Panel and he wanted to know if they have the authority to dissolve it. This was confirmed by Lorean.

XI. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned.

The next meeting will be January 5, 2015 at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Commissioner Amy Cohen