

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
July 17, 2019 5:00 p.m.
~ Corrected Minutes ~

Attendance: Jeanette Blackwell, Justin Carbonella, Henry Fernandez, Ed Ford, Ava Hart, Precious Price, Debbie Ruimerman, Evan Davis, Youth in Government Representative, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence: Brandie Doyle and Howard Thody

Absence: Ani Zakarian, Youth in Government Representative

QUORUM: *Yes:* X *No:* _____

Call to Order: Chairperson Carbonella called the meeting to order at 5:10 p.m. Councilman Gene Nocera was present. Randi Renee McCray and Nyaunu Stevens of NCCJ were present.

Public Session: None.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Minutes: Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes of June 19, 2019. Commissioner Ford motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes of June 19, 2019, and Commissioner Hernandez seconded it. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

Old Business:

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to the commission's project and focus groups. He asked for those from NCCJ to start the discussion. Nyaunu Stevens said that the two anti-racism workshops went well. Certificates have gone out, and the evaluation for the second session is on its way. The evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Director Jackson said they would be providing the Common Council with the evaluations at the August 5th Questions to Directors meeting before the regular council meeting. Councilman Nocera asked if someone from NCCJ could be present for that meeting. Nyaunu Stevens said she would be out of the state. Randi Renee McCray said she would be able to attend that meeting on August 5th at 6:00 p.m. Nyaunu Stevens said that Cynthia Martin may be in attendance, as well.

Councilman Nocera explained that last week they had a community meeting. The issue of renaming the middle school was the main topic on the agenda. He explained that there were two groups: one that wanted to maintain the name Woodrow Wilson and another that wanted to see the name changed. The group that wanted to maintain the name presented the idea that it was important nostalgia for the community to embrace. The group that wanted to see it changed felt that the school was inappropriately named and that the community should stand firm on that. The discussion became very ugly. The Common Council didn't get involved in the discussion. The members are there to listen.

That meeting will be fresh in the minds of the council members at the August meeting. Director Jackson said that she is a graduate of Woodrow Wilson, but with the merger of the two schools, she agrees that they should name it something more appropriate. Commissioner Price said she is on that committee and is in support of a name change, but the process has been so ugly. Randi Renee McCray asked for clarification that the commission was saying that this renaming process has demonstrated racial tensions bubbling up to the surface. They agreed. They said they were seeing it in action. She asked for further information about the tensions over the name, and Councilman Nocera said that there was reliable evidence indicating that Woodrow Wilson supported the Klu Klux Klan. He added that he is a retired principal from Woodrow Wilson, and in 2008, a group of students came forward with the issue of renaming the school. Chairperson Carbonella said they couldn't ask for a better example of the anti-racism work and the work of undoing past wrongs. He added that some people have the idea that proximity to people of color equates to racial consciousness.

Chairperson Carbonella said that the next step in this important work is to follow up on the two anti-racism workshops with focus groups. As the commission members think about the focus groups, he explained that they do not need to think about the questions or the facilitation. They will rely on the expertise of those at NCCJ for that. What the commission members do need to think about is who needs to be in the room, how to organize the people in the room, and affinity groups. They also need to think about the construction of the groups and how to ensure that people are in the room for the conversation.

Randi Renee McCray clarified that the job of the commission is to identify the stakeholders and bring them to the room. This involves recruitment, selling the focus groups, and providing incentives, such as refreshments. The focus group provides an opportunity to center the voices of people of color who live in Middletown and to hear their experiences so they can gather some concrete, qualitative information about what it's like to be a person of color navigating Middletown. From there NCCJ can take that information and create reports and make recommendations. The focus groups should be only people of color. The focus group is much shorter than the anti-racism workshop, and it's much more intimate. It's not a place where they want debate or someone questioning if that is truly a person's experience. She explained that they should get affinity groups, who are people of color. But, the commission should determine who needs to be in the room, adults, young people, etc., and what communities in Middletown they represent.

Nyaunu Stevens added that the commission needs to consider what it wants to know at the end of the focus groups. She explained that the commission is going to bring these people together, and it also has to be accountable to them. As the commission markets these groups and asks people to come, it needs to be very clear in explaining what people are going to get out of it. They need to have an understanding of how they're going to tie the information they get from the focus group back into this work. They need to think about what will be the actual, tangible thing to come out of the conversation for the commission members as it relates to this work and the individuals they will be inviting to the focus group. That purpose will drive the work.

Randi Renee McCray added that while they've been using the term "focus groups," that term is typically used when there's a new product on the market, and the company wants to know what people think of it. She said a preferable term is "community conversation." In recruiting, they could say they're inviting people to a dinner and a conversation. Commissioner Price asked if they could

brainstorm that because in Middletown they hear that term a lot, and it's related to the Board of Ed. Randi Renee McCray said they can call them whatever they choose, but focus groups gives a different impression.

Randi Renee McCray went on to explain how the groups or conversations are usually run. She said that they have no expectation that the commission members would facilitate them. When they start the conversation, they feel out the group and set the tone for the people to feel comfortable sharing. Then, they set guidelines or expectations. They go through that for about ten minutes. Then, they have a lead-in question to start the conversation. She explained that this question comes from what the commission wants to know. As people raise thoughts and ideas, other questions may be added. Typically, there is a note taker. The note taker doesn't capture down who said what but rather themes. They explain this to the group at the beginning so people don't have anxiety over someone writing down what they said. They also need to explain to those participating what they intend to do with this information and how they will follow up on the conversation. The discussion usually builds on itself, and the facilitator is just managing the space and making sure that all voices are heard and all voices are valued. The facilitator also makes sure the discussion sticks to an hour and is wrapping up close to the hour mark.

Chairperson Carbonella asked if someone from the commission should be there to greet the people in the group and then leave. Nyaunu Stevens said for the sake of establishing a safe space, someone shouldn't come in the beginning and then leave. Also, the group would feel more comfortable if there wasn't someone there in an official capacity. Director Jackson said she agreed with that and that the NAACP health committee is doing something similar with Middlesex Hospital. They're running focus groups, but no one from the committee is participating, just the consultant and her team. She added that one of the questions she'd like to see answered is how many in the room work for the City and if they've applied for a job and how they felt about the recruitment process. Or, do they feel that Middletown is a warm, friendly community? Have they ever felt embraced by the community? Most minorities will say that Middletown is not a warm environment.

There was discussion on including a survey with the conversation. Commissioner Blackwell mentioned that some people may feel disconnected and not privy to some important information, especially information that affects them if they have children. Director Jackson said that type of topic would be great for the next part of the process, the community groups. Randi Renee McCray said that a written component could be beneficial if the commission is seeking answers to some yes or no questions. Having written data would be helpful, and some questions like, have you applied for a job with the City, could lead to a lengthy discussion that could take over the conversation.

Chairperson Carbonella said they have specific things they need to determine in order to move forward with focus groups. First they need to establish the desired outcome so NCCJ can craft questions to that end. Also, they need to determine the affinity groups. Evan Davis and Director Jackson explained that they had discussed having one group be comprised of youth and the other made up of adults.

Councilman Nocera asked about the commission's objective in doing the focus groups. Randi Renee McCray said she thought she heard someone say the objective is to hear how people are experiencing Middletown. The commission would then take that information and data and establish core areas on which to move forward. Councilman Nocera said he wanted people to be clear that the commission would follow up with action and research and develop a plan.

Director Jackson distributed the document that Evan Davis had put together on how to conduct a focus group. She explained that the adult one would be first, and the youth one would have to wait until school is back in session. She added that she'd like to see some Latinx people participate because they are very isolated. She reminded the commission that they have a short time frame to accomplish this. Randi Renee McCray added that the commission may want to approach groups that are already meeting because putting out fliers could cause a problem. Chairperson Carbonella asked if the commission should simply identify the ten people for each group. Evan Davis said he could easily put together a group of ten young people of different races. Randi Renee McCray said that there is likely a group of adult people of color already meeting in Middletown. Director Jackson suggested approaching the various groups and asking for one person from each group, such as NEAT. There was further discussion on making sure that the people participating would be from the economic class from which the commission most needs to hear. They also discussed getting people to the table who don't normally come to community functions to speak.

Director Jackson asked for commission volunteers to work with Evan Davis. Commissioner Price said she would work with him. Director Jackson said that Commissioner Price could meet with Evan Davis sometime next week. They could set up a time to meet in her office at City Hall.

Director Jackson said that the commission members need to be thinking about what they want to get from the focus groups, the individuals they want to invite, and locations and sites. She advised them that they needed to email Kasey Shoemaker and Evan Davis so he could start organizing their written ideas. Chairperson Carbonella clarified that Commissioner Price would work with Evan Davis on identifying the adult participants. Evan Davis said for the youth focus group he proposes that they take place the second or third week of September on any day, Tuesday through Friday. Chairperson Carbonella asked if there are connotations of having this discussion in school that are helpful and not helpful. Evan Davis responded that it would be beneficial because the students are already in the school day. Some students go to the community conversations all the time, and having it at the school might allow them to reach students who don't attend the conversations. There was some discussion on how it might negatively affect the conversation if a student had a negative feeling about being in school. Director Jackson said she would coordinate with Dr. Conner on the schedule.

Commissioner Ruimerman said she has a background in catering and would like to prepare the food for the adult group. So, dinner time would be best. The commission discussed the possibility of providing childcare.

Chairperson Carbonella clarified that the written participation from the commission regarding the desired outcome of the focus groups, the individuals who be asked to participate, and the potential sites should be emailed to Kasey Shoemaker. Director Jackson added that she would have Kasey Shoemaker send an email out to the commission on Friday, July 19th because she would be out of the office Friday and the following week.

Director Jackson advised the commission that Commissioner Doyle couldn't be present at tonight's meeting but had completed the draft of the survey based on the commission's feedback. She advised that the survey would go out at the end of the month to those who attended the anti-racism workshop.

Randi Renee McCray asked the commission to set some dates for the focus groups and the community forums so NCCJ can put it on its calendar. Chairperson Carbonella asked the commission members if they were comfortable with Commissioner Price, Evan Davis, and him handling the dates for the two focus groups and potentially starting the logistics of the larger community dialogue. The commissioner agreed.

New Business:

The commission discussed the location for the meetings in August, October, and December. Chairperson Carbonella advised that the conference room at the Youth Services Bureau is available. Commissioner Ford motioned to have the August, October, and December meetings at the Youth Services Bureau. Commissioner Price seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

Review: The commission reviewed the 2019 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be August 21, 2019 at the Youth Services Bureau.

Adjournment: Commissioner Fernandez motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Ford seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:14 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III