



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

Meeting Minutes
Tufts Administration Building, 179 Holland Street
April 20, 2006

Present: Martha Costa, Herby Duverne, Mary Lu Mendonca, Kevin O'Malley, Cesar Urrunaga, Yvette Verdieu

1. Administrative

Minutes

We did not have a quorum to approve the last two months' meeting minutes. Kevin suggested everyone take a look at them to see if there are changes to be made, and we can vote on them at our next meeting.

New Commissioners

Mary Lu reported that Ben Echevarria has been appointed and approved by the Board of Aldermen, but is not yet sworn in.

Director's Report

Mary Lu went over the Director's report:

- The city has posted the position of GLBT Liaison and expects to fill it within the next couple of weeks.
- The city has hired an ADA Coordinator. Richard Tranfaglia, who is the new head of Personnel, will be taking on ADA duties in addition to his full-time position. The commission was concerned that the ADA tasks might not be carried out properly if the Coordinator already has a full-time job.
- Mary Lu is working with the city's Somerstat department and some graduate students to create a program-based budget for the Human Rights Commission.
- Personnel has been updating the city employees' handbook and Mary Lu suggested changes to the proposed sexual harassment policy. We will also be working with Personnel and other departments to give employee trainings on this and other subjects, probably beginning with department heads and then moving through other staff.
- The owner of the Highland Creole Cuisine contacted us and met with Mary Lu, Franklin Dalember of the Haitian Coalition, and Aru Manrique of the Multicultural Commission. Rosemont, the restaurant owner,

is Haitian American and his restaurant serves traditional Haitian food to primarily Haitian clientele. He feels that his customers are unfairly receiving disproportionately more parking tickets than other business' customers. Mary Lu has contacted Somerstat to see if she can get statistics about the number of tickets issued per business in the city. Commissioners discussed the problem. The restaurant is located at the intersection of Highland Avenue and McGrath Highway, with only a couple of temporary parking spots in front of the building and a residential street (permit parking only) alongside. Everyone agreed that location is a main reason for the problem. Martha said that the police are constantly being called because of the parking situation in front of the restaurant. She said that extra spots have already been given to the business to accommodate him. According to Rosemont (via Mary Lu) local officials stepped up enforcement efforts recently when Chief Bradley and Alderman Taylor visited the restaurant and announced that they plan to begin towing cars from the restaurant. Most commissioners felt that Rosemont should just sit down with the officials and work out a solution, and Mary Lu agreed but pointed out that his approaching the HRC suggests that we are being called upon to take on an advocacy role in this situation. Mary Lu agreed that a meeting would be useful, but thought we should approach it with the Somerstat data and some concrete proposals for a solution. She asked the Commissioners to offer ideas for proposals, and people suggested alternate parking locations such as the High School concourse, library parking lot, the lot belonging to the white building across the street, the elderly housing lot, and the gas station, or changing the side street from residential to public parking. Commissioners will send ideas to Mary Lu and participate in the meeting if possible.

- We will have two students from Tufts University College of Citizenship and Public Service working with us this summer on the Conversations Project.
- Mary Lu has been working with others to organize a Haitian Flag Day celebration. The event will take place on May 18, with a morning flag-raising at City Hall and a program at the Somerville High School Atrium in the evening. Commissioners should attend.
- Our application for the No Place For Hate program is in. There will be a ceremony on June 7, which commissioners should attend.
- Mary Lu has been advocating for the Somerville Police to get new badges with identification numbers. Currently officers wear numbers on their hats, but the police has been looking at a few new badge designs that include numbers.

Commissioner Reports

- Cesar reported that the issue of CORI reform at the local level is on hold. As a result of a much-publicized murder in New York, Aldermen Trane and Heuston moved to require CORI checks on all bar employees in the city. Considering this climate, it would be better to hold off on introducing a resolution to reduce the use of CORI checks. He said that most people working on these reforms are focusing their efforts on state legislation, which – if passed – would supersede local resolutions like the one in Somerville.
- Cesar also reported on his efforts on behalf of Juan Cruz, a Medford resident who approached Cesar at the March 12 know-your-rights event to report harassment by the Medford Police Department. Cesar spoke with Diane McLeod at the Medford HRC, who spoke with the Police Chief. They planned to meet with Cruz, who will bring an English-speaking relative to interpret.

- Kevin reported that he will meet on Monday with the Middlesex's Sheriff's general counsel. Kevin will encourage them not to participate voluntarily in immigration raids like the one in which Somerville resident Jose Alfaro was arrested.

2. Program/Activities

Know-your-rights Forums

We are continuing with our series of know-your-rights forums. The next one is scheduled for Friday, April 21 at 6:00 p.m. at the MAPS (Massachusetts Association of Portuguese Speakers) office. This forum is geared towards the Brazilian community and will focus on rights when confronted with immigration or law enforcement officials – the same topic as the March 12th event held for the Latino community.

We discussed whether to continue holding forums on this topic, or whether to look at issues specific to other communities. A suggestion was made to hold a forum on domestic violence, perhaps in conjunction with the Women's Commission, RESPOND, and the police department. Most people felt that since we have been working on forums for the Latino and Brazilian communities, we should focus next on a forum for the Haitian community. We discussed whether to continue with the immigration/law enforcement topic, and decided to stay with this same format. Herby will contact Harvey Bazile, a Haitian American lawyer in Somerville, to ask whether he will give the presentation. Commissioners felt that we should consider holding the event at a Haitian church to maximize attendance.

There was a side discussion about traffic stops. Martha said that police have a new form that should be used to collect data about racial profiling during traffic stops. She said that this program is voluntary, and that while the forms have been distributed it remains to be seen whether officers will actually use them. Mary Lu told the commissioners about a discussion she had with Sergeant Rooney of the Somerville police. Sergeant Rooney explained that officers making traffic stops are often given a document called the International Drivers License, which authorizes motor vehicle operation with a foreign license for up to one year provided that the driver is not planning to remain in the U.S. Rooney said that officers question drivers about their status to determine whether the license is valid when they have reason to believe that the driver is here permanently, which may lead to allegations that local police are questioning people about their immigration status.

Conversations Project planning

Mary Lu also reported that she had begun to look into setting up the Conversations Project for the Fall. The city's grant administrator had suggested that we talk to Alex Pirie about past Projects to get a clearer vision of our plan, and that we consider getting community groups to cosponsor.

3. More Administrative Issues/Future Planning

Outreach

The agenda included an item about community outreach through PTA groups, but we tabled it for next meeting because Susan Goldstein was not present to report about whether she had recruited us a liaison to the School Committee.

Commissioner Activity

Kevin announced that he plans to resign from the Commission, effective after our May meeting. He said that he will continue to support our work in any way he can, but he no longer has the time to participate effectively while balancing all of his family and work obligations. Everyone agreed that we understand his reasons, but are very sad to see him go. Kevin will send the mayor a letter of resignation, and we should be prepared to elect a new chair at the May meeting.

May Meeting

Instead of having our next meeting on the third Thursday as usual, Mary Lu proposed that we reschedule for the following week so as not to conflict with Haitian Flag Day events. Commissioners agreed. We will all try to attend Haitian Flag Day events on the 18th and hold our monthly meeting on May 25th instead.