

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
June 19, 2019 5:00 p.m.

Attendance: Jeanette Blackwell, Justin Carbonella, Brandie Doyle, Ed Ford, Ava Hart, Precious Price, Howard Thody, Evan Davis, Youth in Government Representative, Ani Zakarian, Youth in Government Representative, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence: Debbie Ruimerman

Absence: Henry Fernandez

QUORUM: Yes: X No:

Call to Order: Chairperson Carbonella called the meeting to order at 5:14 p.m. Councilman Gene Nocera was present. Beverly Lawrence and Betsy Morgan of the Racial Justice Coalition were present. Director Jackson explained that NCCJ would not be in attendance for this meeting. Based on where the commission is at for the July meeting, someone from NCCJ may be in attendance then. Chairperson Carbonella recognized that there was a public hearing on the renaming of the middle school from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. and some present may want to attend that hearing. Also, he asked is Ani Zakarian would like to recognize Juneteenth for the group.

Recognition of Juneteenth: Ani Zakarian read aloud, “Juneteenth is the oldest known nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. Dating back to 1865, it was on June 19th, that the Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free.”

Chairperson Carbonella thanked her and spoke on the passing of Bill No. 7082 that will include African American and Latinx studies in the public school curriculum. Evan Davis was one of the students who testified on behalf of that bill in Hartford. Commissioner Blackwell mentioned seeing on the news a group of third graders who corrected a book about Christopher Columbus saying that he did not land in America, but rather the Caribbean. Director Jackson mentioned the promise of 40 acres and a mule as a reparation, but the United States never made good on it. While, the slaves were freed, they had zero to start their lives. African American’s have always been at a disadvantage. Gov. Corey Booker, who is running for presidency in 2020, introduced a reparations study bill to the Senate.

Public Session: None.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Minutes: Chairperson Carbonella asked for a motion to approve the Meeting Minutes of May 15, 2019. Commissioner Doyle motioned to approve the Meeting Minutes of May 15, 2019, and Commissioner Ford seconded it. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried.

Old Business:

Chairperson Carbonella moved the discussion to a status update of the commission's project. He asked if someone could walk the commission through the evaluations and attendee feedback. Director Jackson began by saying that there was a five-question evaluation form that was completed at the conclusion of the anti-racism workshop. Question 1 was please circle the number which best corresponds to your evaluation of the following: quality of content, effectiveness of facilitators, and overall assessment of the workshop. The color codes indicate that green is poor, blue is average, and gold is excellent. The chart shows an overwhelming response of excellent. Director Jackson said that as a participant she was very surprised because she had no idea what to expect. Councilman Nocera agreed. He said he'd been through a number of different programs. However, this session was impressive. The presenters were effective, the goal of participation was achieved, and the participation was sincere. People were encouraged to examine and be honest. It wasn't always comfortable, but it was effective. Director Jackson added that for the second training, the Chief of Police encouraged the captains and lieutenants to attend. A total of six lieutenants and captains were present. There was great dialogue on the differing perspectives on police interactions. Other participants were troubled to learn certain things about the reality of the world in which they live.

Councilman Nocera spoke on the issues of neighborhoods, poverty, and redlining. He said people have the impression now that schools are more integrated and less segregated. However, they are more segregated than they were in the 1960s. That's a reality, and it came across in the presentation.

There was further discussion on the elements of the presentation and how people reacted to learning about certain realities of the world. Commissioner Doyle said that she attended the first session in April and encouraged other decision makers within the Russell Library to attend the June session. Since then, there has been a more significant commitment to diversity training, which is something they have always talked about. Now, it is a much bigger priority, and they have a date scheduled. There is a now buy-in and recognition that one training isn't enough. This has to be an ongoing effort and it's a responsibility of the library. She said she hopes that's being replicated in departments throughout the City. Director Jackson said that she hopes to learn this with the survey for the attendees, which needs to be tweaked so they can hone in on what changes need to be made in the workplace. She'd like to see their specific suggestions for the next steps and how those steps can be supported and facilitated.

However, returning to the evaluation response, she pointed to the response to the question of how the attendee intended to use what he or she learned and the third question which prompted general comments. Commissioner Hart said the comments showed that attendees really got something out of the session. She wondered if they could share the results with the Common Council. Director Jackson said she already had that discussion with Councilman Nocera. Councilman Nocera said that the commission should plan to present the council with an update on the project status in August, and these results can be part of that presentation. He added the presentation should be given at the 6:00 p.m. questions to directors meeting as well as the 7:00 p.m. Common Council meeting. During the questions to directors meetings, there is more back and forth and the council members can directly discuss the presentation with them. The Common Council meeting is televised, so it would be important to have the presentation at that one, as well. Director Jackson agreed to the idea and said she would ask the consultant to be present for those presentations.

Director Jackson asked Commissioner Doyle to expand on the survey she created. She said that a handout had been provided at the end of the training session. There was a survey at the back of the packet, and at the last meeting, she agreed to migrate that survey to Survey Monkey, so it could be distributed to all those who attended. Basically, the survey is exactly the one provided by NCCJ with an introduction. There is some context to it because it's based on the Action Continuum, which she linked to in the survey. Essentially, the questions had two parts. One was where the individual is on the Action Continuum, where would the individual like to be in a year, and what he or she needs to get there. The other part was the same set of questions, but as it pertains to the person's workplace. She added that she really wanted to see the decision makers commit to what they plan to do and not just what they need to move the workplace further along the continuum. That's her suggestion, which would deviate from NCCJ's survey. She asked the commission for feedback.

Commissioner Price said she anticipates less feedback than the first survey. Director Jackson said that the email would come from her asking for next best steps in regards to the workplace. She will explain that they are looking for feedback from the attendees so they can build something internally, like brown-bag-lunch discussion or quarterly reviews. They also need to engage the next level of employees, as well, because those employees interact with the customers. There was discussion on making sure the survey clearly explains that this is in relation to the workplace and next steps.

Chairperson Carbonella added that this would cause people to own the work without the feedback from the community. He then spoke on focus groups. He said the intention of the focus groups is to center marginalized voices and hear their experiences in Middletown. That feedback would then inform the work of this group. He reminded the commission that it moved the anti-racism workshop from the back of the linear work to the front so leaders and decision makers would be more receptive to hearing from the focus groups. His concern is giving City leaders an opportunity to plan next steps exclusive of community feedback. Director Jackson said one was the workplace, and the commission specifically wanted the City of Middletown leaders and officials to participate in the anti-racism training because they make decisions and policies, etc. Secondly, the intention of the focus groups would be to gather information, almost in the same venue but regarding the community. Commissioner Doyle said that in her mind, the surveys have two purposes. The lesser one is to gather feedback from the attendees. The more important one is to bring this back to mind. They've had some time to absorb the training, so this second survey could serve as a reminder and cause them to reflect on their place on the continuum. People's attention has probably moved on at this point, and this can re-engage them and pull them back to what they experienced during the training. She added they at the end of the survey, people can have the opportunity to provide their email to receive updates on progress with focus groups. Director Jackson said after question two, where would you like be to be on the continuum in a year, she would like to see a prompt to explain. She'd like some verbiage like that. Commissioner Hart said that would be too personal for the individual questions, but she'd like to see that prompt for the workplace related questions. Commissioner Doyle said she wanted to make sure the survey did not take long to complete. Director Jackson agreed but said when it came to certain responses on the continuum, such as educating others, she would like a prompt for the person to explain how he or she is education others. It's important to have some content for the responses, instead of someone just selecting a spot on the continuum.

Commissioner Doyle said they should decide the purpose of the survey. Is the purpose to gather information? To her, the purpose was to get attendees to reflect and commit. Councilman Nocera said he didn't want the City or the community to think that because this was an anti-racism training, that the

Human Relations Commission through the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management only cares about anti-racism. There are broader issues such as discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, etc. Those issues of discrimination enter into our workplace, too. He said the council chose racism as a starting point but it's not saying the others don't exist. Commissioner Price said that no matter what else they're talking about, race is always a factor. People of color, regardless of age, gender, or sexual orientation are always treated differently. She said they need to always focus on the most marginalized voices. They can still talk about those things, but they will always come back to the racial component.

Director Jackson spoke on the importance of hiring diversity in the City. The number of people of color who attended the training as a person in a leadership position was strikingly small. The commission members who attended spoke on their reactions to some of the exercises in the session.

Commissioner Thody said he thinks those who take the survey should be aware of how long it will take to complete it. The commission discussed adding a seventh question asking what type of commitment the participant is willing to take to progress along the continuum. There was further discussion on the workplace question and how people would answer it. There was discussion of how the departments work together based on the nature of their business. There was also discussion on the importance of providing customer service.

Commissioner Thody asked who sets the vision for Middletown. Councilman Nocera explained that the Common Council is the legislative branch and the department heads are the executive branch. There's a separation of powers, but the legislative branch has to have faith that the executive is carrying out the orders and directives. As far as the vision of the city, that would come from the Mayor, as he is in charge of City Hall, signs off on everything, and is the elected leader of Middletown.

Chairperson Carbonella said he felt like there were two issues pertaining to moving this forward that need some type of resolution. The first issue is how to handle the fact that there are people at the table, doing this work who weren't able to attend either of the two-day sessions with NCCJ. There was discussion clarifying that the training from NCCJ is much different than other types of anti-racism training. Commissioners who attended NCCJ's session and other types of trainings indicated that NCCJ's session is different and more impressive. Director Jackson said she would get the Commissioner Precious Price the price list from NCCJ for various sessions. Chairperson Carbonella said that the second issue is how to move forward on the focus groups. The commission members need to all be in alignment on the purpose of the focus groups. And, the other issue to how to proceed with the focus groups. He mentioned the time and said that they couldn't have this discussion this late in the meeting. He asked if the commission was comfortable having the discussion of the focus groups be the primary focus of the July meeting. Director Jackson asked the commission to come to the July meeting with ideas so they aren't starting from zero. She added that NCCJ said the focus groups could be anything the commission wants them to be. The commission asked if NCCJ could provide suggestions or an outline.

The commission agreed to have focus groups as the primary topic for July's meeting. Councilman Nocera asked Chairperson Carbonella to send an outline to the commissioners ahead of time with his ideas.

New Business:

Review: The commission reviewed the 2019 attendance.

Announcements The next meeting of the commission will be July 17, 2019 in Room 208.

Adjournment: Commissioner Doyle motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Thody seconded. The chairperson called for a vote. The motion was properly carried. The meeting was adjourned at 6:39 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kasey Shoemaker,
Administrative Sec. III