

## BELMONT HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Belmont Town Hall

Thursday, December 7, 2006

Members Present: Fran Yuan (Chair), Judie Feins, Donna Ruvolo, Connie Williams, Laurie Graham, Moez Rawji, Lisa Bernt

Members Absent: Cheryl Morrissey, Cynthia Bannon, Janet Cudmore-Boswell, Rosalind Kabrhel, Trish Lohman

Guests and Liaisons Present: Paul Solomon (Selectman), Lt. Peter Hoerr (Belmont Police Dept.), Hildy Dvorak (Council on Aging); Mary Keenan (Friends of Library), Mike Collins (representing Belmont Against Racism)

### 1. Introductions

The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:08 pm. Donna volunteered to take the minutes.

New Commission member Lisa Bernt introduced herself. She is a lawyer, currently practicing employment law, and former Commission Counsel for the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination. She has lived in Belmont for 8 ½ years. Lisa will take over Bill Rudman's seat for the next 18 months.

Trish Lohman has been invited to join the Commission as a non-voting member.

### 2. Acceptance of Minutes for November 2006

The minutes of the meeting of November 2006 were discussed and accepted.

### 3. Ongoing Business

HRC Brochure - Fran said it would be nice to update the HRC brochure. Janet and Cheryl had volunteered to put together a budget proposal for this project. Fran asked Paul Solomon how the Commission goes about requesting funds for expenses, such as printing, publicity, or a reception.

Paul said while the Selectmen cannot promise funds, he feels that the funding for small projects can be approved on a project-by-project basis. The Commission should prioritize needs and let them know.

Currently, the brochure is budgeted at about \$40. However Fran would like to see a slightly higher quality and wider distribution. Laurie said the Disabilities Access Commission sent out a brochure with the town electric bill, and they received a lot of feedback. Judie suggested the month of April as a potential date to include an HRC brochure to coincide with fair housing month. Laurie will follow-up with the Electric Department to check availability.

Phone Line Update - Cheryl has been handling the phone line for the past two months. Connie volunteered to check the line during December.

No Place for Hate - The No Place for Hate sign has been posted on Concord Ave near the intersection of Blanchard Road.

Subcommittees - Fran suggested individual Commission members sign up for subcommittees, which can then report back during Commission meetings. These Committees would include Outreach, Publicity and Programs.

Laurie Graham volunteered to head up the Outreach and Publicity Sub-committee with Fran's support

Moez discussed broader use of the town web site to disseminate information and collect feedback. He inquired whether other groups within the community or other communities were using technology effectively for this purpose. Laurie mentioned the town of Arlington has an interactive component on their web site. Paul mentioned Belmont has strict guidelines on the use of the town web site. Donna suggested this might be due to available resources and monitoring of the site for inappropriate activity. Moez volunteered to research this and will report back at the next meeting.

Music Event/ADL Funding - Fran discussed a member of the community who had donated \$1000 to sponsor a music program for the community, as well as an opportunity to submit a matching grant to the ADL for funding. The ADL proposal is due in the next two weeks. Fran has researched an Armenian Folk Ensemble of 5-7 players who could perform for 45 minutes for \$500-\$700, or for 1½ hours for \$1200. Fran also has been looking into other groups, including a Mali Dance Group, an Asian group, or perhaps a group from MIT.

Moez said there are a number of groups at MIT who might be interested in performing for free, and we should also look into the possibility of a Cambodian folk dance group.

Mike suggested co-sponsorship with the Payson Park Music Festival or with the Belmont Public Library Music series.

Donna inquired whether this was a one-time program or whether this was a program direction the Commission was going to be prioritizing on a year-to-year basis.

Fran expressed concern that this event would take a lot of time; should we keep it simple for the first year so the Commission could concentrate on other projects.

Moez thought we should go forward and see how it goes; he would be willing to contact the groups from MIT and feels this could be kept low budget.

Laurie mentioned it might be a good event for "Belmont Unplugged"

Judie asked whether we need to spend all of the funds on the performers, and whether the donor stipulated that the performers needed to be Armenian. Fran did not think this was the case.

The Commission decided to forgo applying for a grant this year, but will move forward in planning a music program for the spring.

Judie suggested a World Music theme, and that it could be held on a weekend afternoon to make it accessible to families and seniors.

Laurie will research venues.

Tunnel Project - Fran has sent photos to the MBTA to repaint the train tunnel under the tracks in Belmont Center. This activity will happen in the spring.

Bullying and Cyber bullying presentation - Laurie Graham reported there were about 100 parents and educators at this event, which featured speaker, Elizabeth Englander from Bridgewater State College. Fran said the groups that are most often targeted are students with special needs and students who are perceived to be gay or lesbian.

Laurie said this presentation would be discussed at a (newly formed) Community Coalition for Youth Safety.

Donna added that due to the federal funding available in Elizabeth Englander's project, there is an opportunity for Belmont to have a comprehensive project implemented in our town; however there would need to be buy-in from the school department and the individual schools. Laurie said

that while each school has a bullying program, they are all different and the town does not have a "common language" on this issue.

Laurie added that a large part of the presentation was on cyber and technology-related bullying, which doesn't tend to get covered in traditional bullying programs. Donna and Laurie volunteered to research next steps with the bullying program in Belmont.

Newspaper Column - Moez suggested that to avoid controversy from within the Commission and the community, we invite a guest with a particular expertise to write columns for the newspaper on different topics of importance to the HRC. Additionally, other Human Rights Commissions could write of their experiences and what they have done to share information with our community.

Connie mentioned that we should be able to submit these columns as a Commission and that we can't avoid controversy by going to external authors.

Donna added that the newspaper needs to see some relevance to Belmont to print an article, and whether the Commission writes the article or not, it would have to be sponsored by us, so there would still be an association with our group.

#### 4. Belmont World Film

Moez has been in contact with Belmont World Film and they are not ready to accept a proposal at this time.

#### 5. Discussion

##### Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice Report

Fran asked how do we make Belmont welcoming to African America families? There is a perception that this is a socio-economic issue, but it goes beyond this.

Connie said there is a concentration of minority residents in communities south of Boston, in particular, a few towns with high concentrations of non-white communities.

Lisa noted, this a concern in Massachusetts as well as across the country and has been for generations.

Judie asked how do we address these impediments?

Fran said there are not currently any African American teachers in the Belmont schools; that is going to make a difference. It is all connected. What is it that we can do to affect change?

Mike said some families that have tried to rent here have been discouraged: landlords do not want younger children due to lead paint issues.

Laurie asked if this is something to talk to the Vision 21 Committee about? Arlington has done a lot to reach a more diverse population. What is the moral issue?

Donna said that the first layer is to reach people of color that could be homeowners. She added that Belmont is still perceived as a socially conservative community, although our voting records and state representation defines us a more moderate community.

Moez said the town needs to be working to move forward on these projects.

Mike said Belmont Against Racism (BAR) has been working on this for years, and there is not an easy answer. It might be handled through a housing fair. This would need to be a cooperative between many groups in town.

Judie added this would be a great time to do this; there is a lot on the market.

Hildy said we get a huge number of people buying in Belmont coming from Cambridge. Coldwell Banker sends out Fair Housing Information. And, Aviva Rothman-Shore (of the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston who spoke to us last month) would work on anything that the Human Rights Commission would like to work on. Judie added there were brochures developed by the Fair Housing Committee.

Hildy said Coldwell Banker offers comprehensive sessions to their brokers on Fair Housing.

Moez asked whether other realtors could be invited to this training.

Hildy said Coldwell Banker would be interested in working with the community to provide a program to the public.

Peter suggested a "Faces of Belmont" brochure to be targeted to non-white communities about why you want to live in Belmont.

Fran noted this is one layer of getting the word out; it is many layers.

Lisa asked what are the issues keeping non-whites from settling in Belmont?

Connie noted that the geographic area is one issue. The minority population, overall, is quite small. Belmont is small and self-contained, and there is not a lot of diversity in the housing market.

Judie said there is some diversity of lower income housing, and she will follow-up with Aviva about putting together a seminar on fair housing.

Hildy said that she feels it should be to educate the general public and not the realtors.

The meeting adjourned at 9 p.m.

Respectfully submitted: Donna Ruvolo