

**Belmont Human Rights Commission
Belmont Town Hall
December 8, 2005**

Meeting Minutes

Present: HRC Members: Fran Yuan (Chair), Steve Shestakofsky (Vice Chair), Cynthia Bannon, Judy Feins, Reggie Gibson, Cheryl Morrissey, Bill Rudman, Moez Rawji, Donna Ruvolo, Connie Williams

Liaisons: Laurie Graham, Belmont Special Ed Advisory Committee(BSEAC), Belmont Youth Commission, Disability Access Commission; Lt. Peter Hoerr, Belmont Police Dept.; Paul Solomon, Board of Selectmen

Minutes of the November 3, 2005 meeting were accepted with minor corrections.

Fran passed around an example of hate group leaflets that were distributed in Belmont. It was the consensus of the group that it is best not to dignify this literature with a direct response, giving attention to the group perpetrating the leafleting. The Commission should respond, however, by informing Belmont Citizens how they might respond if such literature shows up on their lawns. Fran will write a column about the issue including steps that can be taken in response to hate literature. It is desirable to let the Belmont Police Dept. know and also the HRC so that we can keep track of incidents and be helpful to citizens when such an incident occurs.

We were informed by Fran that the HRC column was not printed in the current edition of the Belmont paper but would come out next week. HRC members authorized Fran to write for the Commission. We agreed that no one should write in the name of the Commission without sending members a draft first. Paul Solomon suggested that comments to Fran about the articles she circulates be sent to her and not to all the members. Bill Rudman suggested that articles written by individual members should be clearly presented as by the individual rather than in the name of HRC. The group agreed that topics should reflect the concerns of HRC. Fran will circulate her articles to the members and any individual HRC member who writes a piece should also circulate it to the group. The column articles would then be signed by the Human Rights Commission as a group.

Speaker

The speaker for the evening was Laurie Graham, liaison to the HRC from three organizations: Belmont Special Education Advisory Council,(BSEAC), Disability Access Committee, and Belmont Youth Commission. Two of these groups, Youth and Disability, are Commissions.

BSEAC

The Council's mission is to advise the School Committee on Special Education

concerns. The Committee has a representative attend School Committee meetings and meets with the PTO. The main mission of BSEAC is to work with parents of special needs pupils. Over 600 children in Belmont are so identified. The biggest challenge for the committee is getting parents to participate in workshops. BSEAC is mandated to hold an annual workshop on Basic Rights. Pupils often have special needs that are not obvious but may have behavioral problems. This can make parents feel attacked, especially if a student is disruptive in class and may require time from a teacher that other parents feel takes away from the learning environment for the whole class. There are also tensions within the special needs community. For example, children with a particular diagnosis may be perceived as getting services more easily than others. In terms of disability awareness, it is difficult for teachers to address this as a part of the curriculum because of the great demands already before them such as preparing students for the MCAS.

Laurie addressed questions from HRC members regarding stigmatization and bullying. Some special needs students do feel stigmatized. Bullying does exist and is addressed as best teachers can. Teachers have few aides and limited resources to adequately address behavioral issues. Laurie stated that bullying and targeting special needs kids is an educational issue. How can HRC & others help with this? Another challenge is educating kids who are targeted with bullying that police officers can be an ally and that they need to learn to talk to officers. Donna asked how we could use our resources to be advocates. Laurie responded that respecting diversity and acceptance of difference are areas we can help with. She reported on an activity called Fun Fest, a fund raiser for special needs children between 5 and 12 years old.

Youth Commission

Laurie than reported on the Belmont Youth Commission, a commission under the Health Department. Its main focus is on the middle school. There is a Youth Center that focuses on promoting a culture of acceptance. Activities include community service projects such as working with the Food Pantry. Youth provide baby sitting at the library under the supervision of a registered nurse. Between 30 and 60 participants engage in these projects. A dance is sponsored at the Butler school and attracts about 100 participants.

There is a desire to increase access to the Youth Center for METCO students. The commission is attempting to maintain better records on who is coming to various activities.

Disability Access

Just as there are persons with hidden special needs, there are persons with hidden disabilities. For example, a bipolar disorder is not as visible as a physical handicap and may take more understanding than an obvious physical challenge. Ray Glazier is making a video on what it is like to have a disability in Belmont. For example, curb cuts and cross walks are areas that need attention.

HRC members thanked Laurie for her work and her comprehensive report. We will continue to seek ways to collaborate with the groups Laurie represents.

Update on activities

We briefly discussed Moez Rawji's idea for an international music event. Moez will make a presentation at the January 2006 meeting. Cynthia agreed to discuss ideas with Moez via e-mail and Reggie agreed to work with Moez. In the past Garrett Barry received a letter from a venture capitalist offering to contribute to the work of HRC. At the time of the offer, there were no projects with which to respond to his offer. Perhaps the music event would be attractive to him.

Fran encouraged us to attend the MLK celebration on Jan. 16 at the Belmont High School.

Diversity Training Day

HRC members gave their opinions about the day long Diversity Training on December 3. The training accomplished the goal of members getting better acquainted with each other. The evaluation was generally positive, though critical of some aspects. For example, the trainers did not follow Donna and Fran's request to have a clear agenda for the day. Commission members wanted to move ahead on issues while the trainers felt the need to spend more time with process. However, they did not share this with the group. Perhaps the commission can build on this experience by having an occasional informal time together such as our lunch at Patou.

Future Meetings

The next 3 months are scheduled: In January, the speaker will be BHS METCO Program Coordinator, Maurice Wright, and Burrell Clark, METCO parent. In February, Lt. Peter Hoerr, Belmont Police Dept., and liaison to HRC will speak. In March, Nava Niv-Vogel, Director of the Council on Aging, will speak. Earlier in the meeting a suggestion was made that we invite a liaison from the Inter-faith group, Belmont Religious Council.

Respectfully Submitted,
Constance W. Williams