

BELMONT HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Belmont Town Hall

May 4, 2006

Present: F. Yuan (Chair); J. Feins, D. Ruvolo, S. Shestakofsky, C. Williams, G. Barry, C. Morrissey, C. Bannon, R. Gibson

Absent: M. Rawji, B. Rudman

Guests and Liaisons Present: Paul Solomon (Selectman), Lt. Peter Hoerr (Belmont Police Dept.), Laurie Graham (Special Ed Advisory Board, Disability Access Commission, Youth Commission), Hildy Dvorak, Anne Barry, Mary Keenan (Friends of Library), Kathryn Bonfiglio (President, BAR)

1. Introductions

The Chair called the meeting to order. Donna Ruvolo volunteered to take the minutes.

2. Acceptance of Minutes for March, 2006 and April, 2006

The minutes of the meeting of March, 2006 were discussed. Fran addressed the wording of the discussion on priorities and co-sponsorships. A sentence was modified to reflect a change of the March minutes made in the April, 2006 minutes. Steve recommended that we make sure the minutes reflect the meeting and not reconstitute the meaning of the minutes. The March minutes were voted on and accepted with two abstentions (Garrett and Cheryl), with corrections of typos to be sent to Fran. Fran additionally recommended that the minutes be organized to reflect the agenda outline and an attempt made to standardize the minutes and votes be recorded of individual members.

The April minutes were discussed. Donna reiterated that we not attempt to alter the contents of the minutes unless they do not accurately reflect the content of the meeting. The minutes were approved with two abstentions (Garrett and Connie).

3. Belmont Citizen Herald Columns

Follow-up to Fair Housing Article:

An article about Fair Housing submitted by the Commission appeared in the Belmont Citizen Herald in mid-April. Fran said that that copies of the article were distributed to Commission members for review in advance of our last meeting, and that the article was approved by the majority of Commission and printed. Following it's publication, Commission Members Bill Rudman and Cheryl Morrissey submitted a Letter to the Editor of the Citizen Herald questioning the content of the article. Fran expressed dismay that our Commission is displaying our differences of opinions publicly. Cheryl commented that she is not going to

have her name on anything that is going to say that we are a discriminating town. She added that if you have enough money, you can come into this town and buy property, and that she did not want her name associated with this (article).

Connie said that when she read the article, she felt there was a concern that Belmont was “shaped” by this. Connie thought Bill and Cheryl were upset with the language. Judie said that her recollection was that the Commission decided to add that “other communities” were shaped by this, and questioned how do we, as a public commission, create a majority of opinion. Cynthia added that we had the opportunity and changed the letter in the meeting prior to the publication.

Cheryl said that that two people asked her what the article meant, and she felt compelled to write the letter. She needed to make it clear that she was extremely upset and totally opposed. Connie responded that perhaps if we are going to publicly print things in the paper, then we should identify who was an opposing opinion.

Fran said that she hoped we could learn from this experience and work toward consensus, but we also need to make sure all members feel their views have been accounted for.

Paul Solomon said that he feels the Commission, as a microcosm of Belmont, should do the work to reach consensus before an article is printed. It won't have as much weight if we are reporting minority views. Judie said that that there was no lack of process before the article was printed.

Fran noted that perhaps there needed to be more time spent on the phrase that “discrimination shapes and impacts our community”. There was general discussion that language is subjective; some commission members felt that this phrase isolated Belmont as a discriminatory community.

The conversation continued as to whether Belmont is, in fact, shaped by discrimination. Connie noted that she has not experienced this in her 40 years as a Belmont resident. Judie said that this is what she does professionally, and that there is a huge amount of data suggesting there is discrimination in the Boston suburbs.

Fran said that, for the future, we need to read the articles closely, in advance, and make sure everyone on the Commission has an opportunity for input by e-mailing Fran directly. Donna reminded the group that we cannot copy the entire group on suggested changes, or make comments about upcoming agenda items to the entire group, as this violates Open Meeting guidelines.

METCO Article

Steve introduced this article by noting not only did all of the METCO students pass the MCAS, but also had high percentages of college admissions. He also discussed the documentary, *Far From Home*, shown at the BAR Annual meeting, which highlights the experiences of a young woman who was a METCO student in Weston. He pointed out that in communities that are not diverse, the METCO program gives students a chance to learn about the diversity they will experience in the rest of the world. BAR owns a copy of the documentary if Commission members would like to arrange a viewing together, as well as a copy of the panel discussion of students which followed the viewing at the BAR Annual Meeting.

Cheryl asked what the cost per pupil to participate in METCO. Kathryn Bonfiglio said that each community receives \$3300 per student from the state. We are hoping for increased funding.

Fran said that the finding more families to support the METCO students would be helpful to provide support for students who would like to stay for after-school activities and sports. Kathryn added that BAR supports some of this with funding for transportation..

Laurie Graham reported that Heidi Haska at Burbank and the Youth Commission sponsored a very successful bowling day for METCO and Belmont students on a recent early release day.

Cheryl suggested that we add Belmont's financial contribution is to the METCO program to the article. The article was approved unanimously for publication with the addition of this information.

4. No Place for Hate Certification –

The Commission has asked for an extension of certification application. Most of our events have been co-sponsored with others. We reviewed some goals of the upcoming year.

Donna suggested the Commission support programming geared toward Middle School aged children. Kathryn suggested the "Second Step" program (*confirm name*) ; she sent this information on to Pat Aubin at the School Department. Fran talked about bullying and teasing programming, and the opportunity to work with other groups and individuals, including the Youth Commission, Erica Dinerman (Parent Teaching) and the PTO's at the Elementary and Middle Schools.

Steve recommended a program on fair housing, including how Belmont addresses and works on this program.

Cheryl mentioned supporting the Payson Park Music Festival, and Steve mentioned that the Commission can help by “brokering” sponsors and other potential funding sources.

Other ideas included continuing the column in the Belmont Citizen and sponsoring the MLK breakfast.

The Commission also discussed more participation in the Massachusetts Human Rights Commission, and perhaps inviting the group to Belmont or hosting and evening event for Members in the fall.

5. International Festival

Moez was not present at the meeting, but communicated with Fran that the plans are not realistic at this time. He would like to create a plan for future review.

6. Town Day

Members signed up to staff the HRC table at Town Day. Fran would provide the table and chairs.

7. Evaluating Criteria for Co-sponsorship

Donna presented a first draft for Evaluation Criteria for Co-sponsorship of events and activities. Commission members made a “first pass” at the criteria wording and will discuss this further content at the June meeting.

Donna withdrew the request for the HRC to co-sponsor the Freedom to Marry Ice Cream Social scheduled for May 17th. She said it is a wonderful, multi-generational event celebrating all people and families in Belmont and encouraged Commission members to attend.

8. Schedule for Phone Check.

The Commission discussed protocol for responding to phone calls on the HRC phone line. If the incident is significant, the chair can call an emergency meeting at any time, otherwise, the incident needs to be discussed at the next meeting. Donna agreed to check the phone while Fran is away.

9. Financial Resources

Paul Solomon reported that Sandra Curro in the Selectmen's Office is available to help with copying documents. There also might be some funding from HUD; Judy will look into this.

10. Other agenda items

Steve's term is expiring and he is not seeking reappointment. He said the Commission serves a valuable purpose, and if the Commission can function, the town can function. He appreciated the opportunity to serve.

Reggie is also stepping down from the Commission. He and his family are moving to Lexington, and he will no longer be able to serve on the Belmont HRC.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted: Donna Ruvolo