

Belmont Human Rights Commission
Belmont Town Hall
May 4, 2007

Meeting Minutes

Members present: Lisa Bernt, Janet Boswell, Judie Feins, Laurie Graham, Cheryl Morrissey, Donna Ruvolo, Connie Williams, Fran Yuan (Chair),

Members absent: Trish Lohmar, Moez Rawji, Rosalind Kabrhel

Guests and Liaisons present: Michael Collins (Belmont Against Racism), Lt. Peter Hoerr (Belmont Police Dept.), Hildy Dvorak (Council on Aging), Mary E. Keenan (Library Liaison), Alana Janulewicz (Chenery Middle School), Paul Solomon (Selectman)

The meeting began at 7:10 p.m.

1. Administrative

Laurie Graham agreed to check the HRC phone line for the month of May.

Motion: The minutes of the April 4, 2007 meeting were adopted with minor amendments.

Town Day is May 19. Members agreed to cover the HRC table for specific time periods. Fran Yuan will make a sign for the table. We agreed that having a raffle might attract people to the table. Connie agreed to ask for a gift certificate from Patou and Judie will ask Kashish.

2. Speaker

Fran Yuan introduced Laurie Wolfe, representative from the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MPTC). Laurie provided a packet of materials about MPTC and the proposed legislation, House Bill #1722: An Act Relative to Gender Based Discrimination and Hate Crimes. Laurie introduced herself as a resident of Belmont who in the past worked in a Cushing Sq. Chiropractic Office. The MPTC is seeking support for this proposed legislation and is asking the BHRC to consider lending its support.

Summary of Laurie's presentation and questions from the Commission: Laurie explained that this is the first attempt to get a state statute in MA and that legislation exists in 10 states. The Bill is explicit to gender-based discrimination. Current MA anti-discrimination laws do not protect persons against gender-biased discrimination. Major areas of concern are employment, housing, public accommodations, and education. Education refers to public and charter schools, not private and religious schools.

The effect of the proposed legislation is to extend current anti-discrimination law. Hate crimes are included to cover acts against persons based on gender identification. Laurie cited a CA case of rape and murder that occurred within the past 5 years.

Federal legislation has passed the House of Representatives. Ten states, District of Columbia and 82 cities and counties have laws against gender discrimination. The proposed legislation is on the Coalition web site. Sources of information are also the Transgender Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Lisa Bernt asked where existing statutes could be obtained. MTPC drew on existing statutes to draft the Bill. Cheryl Morrissey expressed concern that a hate crimes provision would cause problems if there was an objection based on religion. Laurie Graham responded that

religious beliefs have not been stifled because of anti-discrimination law. A discussion about intent and motivation followed. Lt. Hoerr gave an example of a web site that was hacked at the high school and Nazi and Facists symbols appeared on the web site. A police investigation found that though the symbols were indicative of bias, that motivation and intent to harm or discriminate did not appear to be present.

Judie Feins asked clarification about the proposed mandated data collection. Another check-off box would be added to reporting forms. Discussion related to how legislation might be implemented. For example, how will transgendered persons be accommodated in rest room facilities? How will the law treat persons born with characteristics of both genders? What about a person who appears to be one gender but identifies as something else? Laurie Wolfe emphasized the concern of the Coalition for persons to have the right to self-definition.

Laurie Wolfe ended her presentation by informing us that May 15 is a lobby day. Fran thanked Laurie for the presentation and the printed information.

3. Presentation

Alana Janulewicz, Chenery Middle School, who was prepared to present at previous meetings but time did not permit, was asked to present. Alana is a liaison representative to the Commission. She is a 5th grade teacher at the school and works with the School Advisory Council.

The purpose of her presentation was to inform the Commission about ways the school approaches diversity and values. Chenery CARES is the chosen initiative: Cooperation, Acceptance, Respect, Effort, Service. All grades in the school are expected to follow these values and code of behavior.

Alana described the Empowering Multi-Cultural Initiative. Teacher training focuses on racial identity and how to establish an accepting curriculum. Advisory groups are formed. Students are formed into small groups and partnered with a teacher. Because the school is big, much of the focus is on how to create community.

There is an extended day program for METCO students on 3 days of the week. This is a tutoring program.

Judie Feins raised a question regarding the different degrees of diversity in the elementary schools, two are quite diverse in population while two others are not. Alana reported that much is done including mentoring to foster diversity. One has to take into account the developmental stage of 5th graders. At this age they are not particularly interested in focusing on difference but are rather more interested in fitting in.

Mike Collins asked about whether students interested in forming a diversity club would be able to do so. Donna Ruvolo reported that it is difficult to start a club at the middle school. However, there are a number of activities, TPO Clubs, running and yoga clubs for example.

4. Co-sponsorship of Freedom to Marry Ice Cream Social

Donna Ruvolo stated that our lack of participation as a sponsor sent a message. A discussion followed regarding criteria for sponsoring an event. Is such a decision made by consensus or a majority vote? Donna suggested that as a Commission, we should try to avoid having letters of dissent from members appear in the newspaper regarding an HRC decision. The Ice Cream Social honors the fact that in MA same-sex unions are legal. Our support would not be an example of the Commission advocating a position, but rather supporting what has already been declared as a right, that is the right to marriage equality. Selectman Solomon

expressed his satisfaction with the evolution of the Commission in discussing issues and arriving at decisions.

We agreed that we should vote on whether or not to be a sponsor and that a majority rather than a unanimous vote would be decisive. Laurie Graham moved that we co-sponsor the Freedom to Marry Ice Cream Social. The vote was as follows: 6 for, 1 against, 1 abstaining.

5. Police- Community Facilitated Dialogue

Fran Yuan announced that there would be a date set in June for a forum with the Belmont police. This will be a community dialogue. Mike Collins stated that this would be an opportunity to have a dialogue, a conversation that is not a public event.

The meeting was adjourned at 9 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Constance Williams