

Belmont Human Rights Commission  
Minutes  
September 21, 2004

The meeting was called to order by Interim Chair William Rudman; other members present were: Cynthia Bannon, Garrett Barry, Judith Feins, Douglas Reynolds, Stephen Shestakofsky, Beverley Witten and Fran Yuan; also attending were Selectman Paul Solomon and Frank Amoroso (US Department of Justice).

1. Minutes: The Minutes of the Meeting of September 9, 2004, were approved.
2. Introductions: The Chair noted the appointment of new members Beverley Witten and Fran Yuan and welcomed them, noting that he would ask for an updated membership list with contact information to be forwarded to all members. All attendees introduced themselves. Ms. Witten volunteered to take the Minutes at the next meeting.
3. Charge of Commission: Selectmen Paul Solomon reported that there had been no action taken regarding the Commission's letter to the Board of Selectmen regarding the Town Counsel's recommendation that the Commission's charge be limited to exclude mediation and investigation.
4. Assistance from USDOJ/Community Relations Service: Mr. Frank Amoroso, Regional Director for New England (Region I) for the US Department of Justice's Community Relations Service presented to the Commission, introducing himself and his agency. He explained that the agency accepts civil rights complaints, does assessments (investigations), brings parties together to mediate or otherwise resolve issues, and helps to implement agreements through assistance with training and policy development, noting that the most common areas of complaint are related to police and education matters. He also noted that the agency works proactively with governmental bodies to provide training or other requested assistance, indicating that he has done much work with human rights commissions. He stressed that all of his work is confidential, although the "client" can permit disclosure.

Mr. Amoroso stated that the emphasis of his agency was to find local solutions to problems, often through the facilitation of community dialogues. He encouraged participation in the Mass. Association of Human Rights Commissions (MAHRC) as a way to get a good "sounding board" for issues and solutions. He stressed that a human rights commission must be seen as a neutral body, not an advocacy organization, if it is to be credible in the community.

In response to questions, Mr. Amoroso replied that:

- While his agency maintains records, they are not available to the public under the Freedom of Information Act.

- Various human rights commissions handle investigations in different ways; some have staff investigators, others use volunteer members (who need to be trained), while others use local police resources.
  - Major pitfalls for commissions to avoid include (a) having no power, (b) merely acting as a “rubber stamp” for government officials, or (c) acting as advocates rather than neutral third parties.
  - One successful model is to have the police and school departments assign a liaison to the commission.
  - He has not heard of any experience in any municipality that would justify Town Counsel’s concerns regarding liability due to commission efforts at problem solving or investigation.
  - His agency could facilitate meetings between the Commission and town agencies to help establish relationships of trust.
  - He would seek to develop training programs for the Commission, upon request, tailored to the needs of Belmont.
  - The most effective commissions have the power to investigate, but it could be difficult to accomplish without trained staff or funding, although a police liaison could do this work.
5. Development of diversity plan: Given the lateness of the hour, it was agreed that this topic would be postponed until the October 5<sup>th</sup> meeting.
6. Neutrality: Concerns were raised by some members about the perceived biases of other members that could compromise the effectiveness of the commission. After discussion, it was agreed that Mr. Shestakofsky would contact Mr. Amoroso and request “team building” training for the Commission; the Chair will circulate the potential training dates to the members and the date on which most members can attend will be selected.
7. Old Business: None.
8. New Business:
- It was agreed that Diane McLeod, director of the MAHRC, be invited to present to the Commission at its next scheduled meeting on October 5<sup>th</sup>; Mr. Shestakofsky was asked to invite her.
  - It was agreed that the Commission should have a liaison to the MAHRC; Mr. Barry volunteered for that role.
  - Mr. Shestakofsky suggested that the commission consider participation in the annual Belmont Martin Luther King Day event; the matter was postponed to the next meeting.
  - It was agreed that a regular meeting will be held on Monday, October 18<sup>th</sup>.
9. The meeting was adjourned at about 9:25 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Stephen Shestakofsky

