

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2023
7:00 p.m.
Alexandria Black History Museum
902 Wythe Street
CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Members Present

Danielle Beach
Justin Beland
Lisl Brunner, Chair
Marc Bendick, Jr.
Michelle Cho
Matt Harris
Susan Kellom
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
William Tom Reeder, Jr.
David Rigsby, Vice Chair
Scott Schwartz, Vice Chair
Conrad Sylvanus
Jon Thompson

Staff Present

Jean Kelleher, Director
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Katherine O'Connell

Guests

Audrey P. Davis, Museum Director
Lynette Foster
Donnie Hill

Commissioner Kellom participating remotely by telephone.

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Commissioner Harris

Commissioner Harris called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. Chair Brunner asked Commissioner Harris to call the meeting to order and to give a brief background about the Commission's decision to hold the February meeting at the Black History Museum for Black History Month. Commissioner Harris shared that the Commission has been holding its February meetings at the Black History Museum since 2004, and there have been incredible great presentations over the years.

2. Approval of Minutes of January Meeting

Upon a motion by Commissioner Reeder, seconded by Commissioner Cho., the Commission approved the minutes of the January meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye and one abstained.

3. Freedom House Audrey P. Davis, Museum Director

Ms. Davis welcomed everyone to the Black History Museum and shared that she is amazed that they were able to get the museum ready today.

Ms. Davis shared a PowerPoint slide and talked about slavery in Alexandria. She also talked about Benjamin Banneker who was here as part of the federal survey in 1791. He was an educated free Black man who was able to write about his life; he was a mathematician and almanac author.

Ms. Davis talked about the reality of slavery and admitted that some of them are incredibly brutal. She shared a very interesting story that happened in Washington, DC which is the story of a slave woman named Anna: was sold with her two children and jumped from the third-floor window of a tavern in Washington, D.C. after learning that she was going to be separated from her family. Miraculously, she survived, although she broke both arms and badly injured her back.

Ms. Davis also talked about the United States Colored Troops in Alexandria around 1864 and the Alexandria's First Civil Rights Action, the site of Contraband and Freeman's Cemetery. She shared that there was a Mobil gas station on the corner of S. Washington and Henry Street. This was the burial site of over 17000 formerly slave African American men, women, and children. She said that in 2007 the City of Alexandria bought the property and removed the gas station. In 2014, the City dedicated the Contraband and Freeman Cemetery Memorial. There is a sculpture by Mario Chiodo's (The Path of Thorns and Roses) dedicated to the bravery of the Black refugees who fled to that city during the Civil war to escape enslavement. The Memorial's bas-reliefs depicting the flight to freedom were done by local sculptor Joanna Blake who unfortunately was killed in a motorcycle crash after the memorial was dedicated.

She talked about the slave trade and talked about the article in the Smithsonian magazine "Slavery's Trail of Tear, the great missing Migration." She mentioned that Alexandria is one of the largest tops for internal slave trade; focused on the story of Isaac Franklin and John Armfield, the first traffickers who were operating out of 1315 Duke Street, and it was one of the largest slave trading companies in the country. Today, 1315 Duke Street is called the Freedom House Museum in honor of Lewis (Louis) Henry Bailey, a former slave who was sold from the Alexandria Slave Pen at 1315 Duke St. when he was a young boy. The Freedom House Museum was just reopened in June 2022, and there are exhibits on all three floors. In 2020 the city purchased the Freedom House Museum. She also mentioned the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, which started with the Equal Justice Initiative and is influenced by Bryan Stevenson. She shared that there are two documented lynchings that happened in Alexandria. She stated that there is a pillar for the Alexandria hanging at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, commemorating the two lynchings in Alexandria. There is a duplicate pillar that Alexandria will eventually earn the right to have through the Community Engagement Process.

Ms. Davis presented a brief history about Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas who were lynched in Alexandria. She said that they were able to locate family members related to Joseph McCoy. Every year, the City remembers them by illuminating the City Hall and their names are projected. She added that the Masonic Memorial is illuminated in purple, which is a color of mourning. She shared that the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project had a soil collections ceremony for more than 300 people. This event took place in Market Square: 165 members of the community including the City Mayor, the City Manager, City Council members, Department Heads, and over 30 Alexandria City High School students, School Board Chairs, Vice Chairs of the school board, ACPS staff and residents took the soil to Montgomery, Alabama and stayed there for four days. City of Alexandria was the first group in the United States to bring the soil to EJI and to have a formal ceremony.

She shared that after the death of George Floyd, they created the George Floyd Collecting Initiative. The name was later changed to Black Lives Remember Collection because they wanted to expand the

collection. They are exhibiting pictures on two monitors in the museum, and they are collecting in real time so if people have images or a plaque or something they want to donate, they would love to have it.

4. Executive Committee Report

Chair Brunner reported that Sheriff Sean Casey is confirmed to meet with the Commission on March 21, 2023. Director Kelleher stated that Sheriff Casey will give an overview of the Department and will also give a report on immigration. Director Kelleher asked Commissioners to provide their questions for the Sheriff in advance.

Director Kelleher shared that it is in the Commission purview to talk to any City Department Heads and to ask for reports, and pointed out that Sheriff Casey, being an elected official, is not required to report to the Commission.

Chair Brunner stated that the Commission has expressed interest in inviting the Auditor of the Community Police Review Board.

Director Kelleher stated that Ms. Neal, the auditor of the Community Police Review Board, might be able to join the Commission for the April meeting. There was a discussion about what happens if there is a police officer involved shooting and who is going to review that and if there is away to ask the Police Chief to continue to have the Human Rights Commission serve as the independent body to review that type of case.

Director Kelleher stated that at present, there is no active Memorandum of Understanding with the Police, but the Commission will probably be consulted in a police officer involved shooting situation. Commissioner Palmer Johnson suggested that the Commission attends the Community Police Review Board meetings. Commissioner Schwartz suggested having something in place before a police officer involved shooting happens in the City such as getting a Memorandum of Understanding.

Chair Brunner suggested writing a letter to the Police Chief or the City manager.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson suggested writing the letter to the City Manager and copying the Police Chief. Chair Brunner agreed to draft the letter.

Chair Brunner stated that the Commission had expressed an interest in inviting representatives from the Alexandria City Public School Board to talk about SROs for the May meeting. Commissioner Schwartz suggested also inviting the SROs.

5. Old & New Business

Chair Brunner stated that they had received information about housing discrimination a few months ago and the Commission had representatives from Legal Services that came to talk about it and said that the number one problem is the increase in evictions due to loss of income during the pandemic.

She added that some of the issues are not issues of discrimination and are not on the commission's purview but are more related to landlord and tenant relations. She said that the concern is that since English is not the tenant's first language and that they are not receiving information in their language.

The tenants are getting the less desirable units, and denial of reasonable accommodations.

She stated that the city properties that are identified are: Morgan Properties, Southern Towers, and Foxchase Apartments.

Chair Brunner shared that the Economic Opportunity Commission recently sent a letter to City Council regarding this issue. She also encouraged the Commission to think about what can be done at the State , and City level and also think about legislative reforms or bringing proposals to the State as well as asking City Council to support some of the proposals. Chair Brunner shared that the Landlord and Tenant Relations Board are organizing a meeting together with the African Communities Together at Southern Towers in March.

Director Kelleher stated that the Housing Department is working on a lot of these issues along with Code Enforcement and other departments in the City.

After an extensive discussion on the housing issue, Vice Chair Schwartz suggested getting ideas from other organizations and Director Kelleher suggested joining the Chairs meeting with other Commissions to discuss this issue.

Vice Chair Schwartz reported that Commissioner Palmer Johnson, the LGBTQ+ Task Force and he met with Councilman McPike last Tuesday to talk about the rainbow crosswalk. He also stated that Vice Chair Rigsby and he went to look at the 100 block of Kings Street location and came up with the idea to have the crosswalk from Union Street up to Lee Street as a recognition of the diversity of the City. He suggested having a competition of artist and designers and have the City make a determination for a style of a recognition for the diversity of the City. Vice Chair Schwartz stated that Councilman McPike will discuss with T&ES and talk with other City Council Members.

6. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Beland reported that ACPD has an ongoing problem with a tenant who was not able to get a served parking space near his house and he started getting tickets. He stated that they invited Katie North from the Mobility Services, who gave some clarity on the parking issue. He also reported that the bill to remove the word “handicap” is moving very positive and has passed the Senate.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women thanked everyone for their support on the Human Trafficking event. She shared that one of the things that they discussed was a letter and wanted to know if any other Commission has received a letter about abortion services providers day proclamation. She stated that City Council is considering an Abortion Services Provider Day proclamation, which is the same thing that was tabled last year. She reported that the Commission for Women did not have a unanimous vote to support such of proclamation.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson shared that next year will be the 50th Anniversary of the Commission for Women and said that they have four possible projects which they will be asking for help from other commissions. They are looking for 50 under 50 and 50 over 50 to celebrate and they are also recognizing one individual per decade. They would also like to recognize as many of the first commissioners as they can for their services. She reminded the commission that April is Sexual Assault Awareness month and Child Abuse Awareness month.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging is focusing on public transportation and that that DASH has reached its pre-covid ridership again. DASH is focusing on their stops and said that less than half of the stops are wheelchair accessible, and they are focusing on trying to make the stop areas bigger to allow for buses to carry wheelchairs on board. He also reported that they are beginning to focus on the redevelopment of the Ladrey Assisted Living facility and there are 170 tenants now that

have to be moved to a temporary location for three to four years. He said that the developer and the ARHA made an effort to ensure that there is a place for everybody.

Commissioner Sylvanus reported that the Economic Opportunity Commission recently found out that the grant program for minority-owned businesses was canceled and that they are trying to figure out what is the next steps are. Director Kelleher stated that the grant for minority-owned businesses has been paused. They are also focusing on doing another letter about the Southern Towers issue regarding the evictions and rent increases.

Vice Chair Rigsby thanked Ms. Audrey Davis and the Alexandria Black History Museum for hosting the Human Rights Commission meeting.

7. **Announcements /Adjournment**

MOTION: adjourn the meeting.

Palmer Johnson/Cho **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 8:59 p.m.