



**Human Rights Commission
Meeting Minutes
Annual Meeting
March 9, 2024
Hybrid Meeting
City Space, 100 5th Street NE, Charlottesville, VA 22902
9:30 am**

Click [HERE](#) to access the public link to the Human Rights Commission shared OneDrive folder.

Click [HERE](#) to access rebroadcasts of past Human Rights Commission meetings on YouTube.

Click [HERE](#) to access an archive of past Human Rights Commission work on the City website.

1. MORNING SESSION

- a. Welcome
 - i. CALL TO ORDER
 - 1. Chair, Ernest Chambers, called the meeting to order at 9:57 am
 - ii. ROLL CALL
 - 1. Ernest Chambers
 - 2. Wolfgang Keppley
 - 3. Mary Bauer
 - 4. Heather Gaston (virtual)
 - 5. Patti Hartigan
 - 6. Suzanne Lynn
 - iii. MISSION (recited by all): *Act as a strong advocate to justice and equal opportunity by providing citywide leadership and guidance in the area of civil rights.*
 - iv. Chair conducts icebreaker activities
- b. Commission takes a five-minute break
- c. OHR Director explains the history of the Charlottesville HRC
 - i. A version of Charlene Green's "Racial and Ethnic History of Charlottesville" presentation is available on YouTube
 - 1. Charlene was present for the creation of the OHR and HRC; she was the leader for the Dialogue on Race
 - ii. The OHR and HRC were created in a new Ordinance by a task force in 2013 as an initiative of the Dialogue on Race
 - iii. Recent evolution in the Office has been to hire more staff to mirror the structure of Offices/Commissions with enforcement power in Northern Virginia
 - iv. Office is currently in the process of pursuing a workshare agreement with HUD
 - v. Commission membership and focuses have increased and decreased throughout the years; its current structure is nine members with a more specific focus
 - vi. Commissioner asks whether Director has recommendations for specific

actions the Commission should take

1. Director says it can be more effective when the Commission focuses on a single salient issue, and they can be more impactful when everyone is attending meetings and making the most of their limited time convening
- vii. Vice Chair adds that it is important to stay informed as possible about relevant community issues while on the Commission
- viii. HRC Resolutions are available on the website
- ix. Chair acknowledges that finding traction doing the systemic human rights work can be difficult, and the community may have high expectations, but the work is still essential
- d. Commissioners review sections of the Annual Report, including previous Commission actions and the OHR's HUD workshare pursuit
 - i. In the most recent set of Ordinance amendments, the OHR has been working on comments that HUD gave last time it was presented with the Ordinance, as well as other necessary fixes

2. Commission breaks for lunch from 12:00pm to 12:54pm

3. AFTERNOON SESSION

- a. Outreach Specialist reviews Public Poll results
 - i. 213 responses
 - ii. Housing was the biggest concern amongst respondents
 - iii. It seems that respondents were often thinking about issues holistically and intersectionally
 - iv. Commissioner asks how the focus results compared to last year's poll
 1. There are more responses this year about re-entry
- b. Vice Chair discusses topic model that they created of the comments
 - i. The most frequently discussed topic is housing, affordable housing, and people with disabilities
 - ii. Other highly mentioned topics include wraparound care for those experiencing homelessness and re-entry
 1. Wraparound care refers to everything from knowing how to access benefits to receiving undersupplied services like mental health support
 2. Commission could learn more about this by hosting another panel
 - iii. Another concern was about the City of Charlottesville respecting people from different backgrounds
 1. Ex. City holiday days off
 2. Director explains that inequities can arise when employees who celebrate Christmas automatically have it as a holiday, while employees of another religion may have to take work leave
 3. The Commission could take action about this in the form of a recommendation to Council
 4. Commissioner adds that some localities give observers of Ramadan off for Eid, as well as shorten their work day for two hours during Ramadan
 - iv. Two concerns were about City employee turnover or wages
 1. Director explains that the City is currently reassessing its pay

2. However, it is impacted by the three current collective bargaining contracts because the City needs to ensure non-unionized employees receive the same benefits as the unionized employees
3. Could invite Human Resources to come explain the Comp and Class Evaluation and unions to talk about their work to see if there is a part of their work that could be improved based on equity and, as a result, affect City employee retention
4. The lowest mentioned topic was advocating for more policing in the city for a rise in homelessness, drugs, and crime

i. Housing development

1. Some Commissioners express that sometimes cutting down trees is necessary if it means more housing will be construction
 - a. Outreach Specialist says that the lack of trees and tree cover in Westhaven and other low-income communities is an issue that has come up from different groups; there have been studies linking the lack of tree cover, higher temperatures, and increase in higher crime
 - i. Commissioner says there is an equity issue that those renting do not invest as often in the land
 - b. If the Commission were to collaborate with other bodies about trees in Charlottesville, there is a volunteer Tree Commission, an Office of Sustainability, and non-profits like C3
- ii. Commissioner asks about the status of substance use disorder treatment in the City
- iii. Another Commissioner brings up supporting the City's construction of a new homeless shelter
- iv. Also brings up movie about Vinegar Hill and paying reparations as a City
 1. Director says there were once plans to construct a large exhibit to recognize Vinegar Hill on the Downtown Mall, but the plans were dropped
 2. Another Commissioner adds that the descendants of people who were displaced and denied generational wealth are still in the area
- v. Director advises Commission to pick one overall topic to focus on, but can also have one or two other smaller-scale projects to take action on more immediately
 1. Vice Chair takes notes on discussion
 2. Director will facilitate filling out work plan document
- vi. Commissioner brings up the general hostility toward unhoused people in this area
 1. Director says the Commission could take on its guidance and awareness role by acting as a messenger for some kind of public announcement

2. The presence of unhoused individuals on the Downtown Mall was a large conversation for the Downtown Mall Committee
 3. Commissioner notes an increase in unhoused person encampments
- vii. Commissioner talks about re-entry
1. Another Commissioner says that many comments seem to refer to the one-stop event that the Outreach Specialist attends
 - a. Different organizations who can help individuals who have recently been incarcerated table at Carver Rec
 - b. Finding housing is one of the biggest issues people who are re-entering are experiencing
- viii. Commissioner says that the shift from individual renters to property management companies has made it more difficult for those with a criminal record to secure housing
1. Director adds that this is a good local issue to address that combines a protected activity (housing) with a protected class (race; criminal background)
 2. Commission has talked about housing testing before, but has not done it yet
 - a. Would have to be a collaborative project
- ix. Commissioner asks about private equity firms which take advantage of tenants by often requiring exorbitant application fees
1. Asks if it is possible for firms to be required to register their units and costs with the City to ensure they are not charging potential tenants different rates
 2. Commission already has contacts of people and organizations who are already working on this kind of project
 3. Another Commission asks about how rezoning is increasing the inventory of affordable units and how the City is holding developers and property owners accountable
 - a. Also, who is defining affordability?
 4. Director says he has advocated for a rental registry and rental inspections, and other localities (such as in Wisconsin and New York) already do this
 - a. Advocating for this cause would likely take the form of state-level legislation support which would allow or require localities to create a registry
 - b. After getting state legislation, the next step would be to advocate for City Council to create this registry and hire the staff required to maintain it
 - c. Without the state's specific allowance for registries, there would not be anything to require landlords to participate
 - d. Commissioners and Director discuss how the housing market is so strongly controlled by demand that landlords do not really have an incentive to advertise their housing any more than they already do
- x. Director is currently working with the OHR Investigator to research how HUD sets payment standard for housing vouchers

1. Because of the market, HUD's payment standards are constantly lagging behind current rent prices
 2. It could be source of funds discrimination to have rent higher than HUD-established payment standards because landlords are systemically excluding every voucher holder
 - a. Vouchers currently cannot cover a rent price over a certain amount (ex. A \$1,000 voucher will not partially cover a \$1,200 rent price)
 3. Currently researching current market-rate units with HUD payment standards
 4. The Ordinance has a Director-initiated complaint mechanism for housing (upon a vote by the Commission)
 5. Could also be systemic discrimination on the basis of source of funds when a landlord maintains a unit in such disrepair that it cannot pass a voucher inspection
 6. If there is a finding of reasonable cause for housing discrimination to have occurred, Charlottesville's Ordinance requires an immediate filing of a civil suit
 - a. Commissioner believes this has likely already been tested in state courts
- xi. Commissioner says that many developers in Charlottesville are not affordable housing-friendly
1. Could look into which developers are creating affordable properties
 2. Director points out there difference between developer and owner
 3. Commissioners discuss how when properties change hands, new managers may make the property no longer affordable for a fee that goes to the City's affordable housing fund
 4. Evictions in Virginia are also easier than other states
- xii. Commissioner points out trend of those facing homelessness tending to be older, such was the case for residents of Premier Circle in Charlottesville
1. Midway Manor and Crescent Hall have remained sole sources of subsidized housing for older adults and those with disabilities
 2. Midway Manor is owned by a private provider, Crescent Hall is administered by CRHA, Woods Edge (located in the county) is owned by PHA; additional subsidized housing for these populations is limited
 3. PHA has tier-based model for subsidies
- xiii. Commissioner asks about supporting the ADA Transition Plan, which is due to come out before the end of the year
- xiv. Commissioner asks about the status of the Dialogue on Race in the city
1. Director says they are currently in talks with the Deputy City Manager for Social Equity about internal equity amongst City employees
 - a. There have been multiple sessions of the Groundwater training
 - b. Have not yet talked about using the Office of Social

- Equity to engage the wider public
 - c. Has collaborated with the Albemarle Office of Equity and Inclusion on community events like the MLK Day walk
 - d. Outreach Specialist is collaborating with Office of Sustainability to distribute copies of and have discussions about *All We Can Save* book, which applies equity approach
- 2. Commission could make recommendations to Council or separately collaborate with OHR Outreach Specialist on the Dialogue on Race
- xv. Commissioner talks about how to get higher public engagement for Commission talks and presentations
 - 1. Another Commissioner asks about holding events in a space where people have already often gathered already, such as a church
 - a. The City Manager must approve locations, and locations must have some kind of safety plan in place
 - b. **Director can ask City Managers about other spaces**
- xvi. Commissioner talks about the OHR offering Safe Space training to the public as a long-term goal
 - 1. OHR staff would have to be trained to offer the training, which could be a possibility given the skill set of the Office and Commission
 - 2. OHR also has copies of Charlene's slides from when she did Safe Space training
 - 3. Director says they could develop curriculum as an OHR side project to present to the Commission
- xvii. Director says it may be helpful for Commissioners to engage with initiatives the City Manager is planning those rather than begin completely separate projects
- xviii. Commissioners continue reading over survey responses:
 - 1. A large-scale study would require significant bandwidth and expert consultation
 - 2. Commissioner talks about the HRC speaking up about how the voting system disenfranchises Black people—could be a legislative recommendation
 - 3. Commissioner asks about grocery store location in the context of food insecurity
 - a. Director says Commission could call upon members of the Charlottesville food justice network to get more information if they are looking to make a legislative recommendation
- d. Commission takes an eight-minute break
- e. HRC Work Plan creation
 - i. Commissioners use notes, previous discussion, and work plan template to decide on primary and secondary focus areas for the year
 - ii. Discuss how points from the survey responses may be converted to actionable items

1. Official focus areas are in the work plan document
- iii. Primary focus is housing, and sub-topics are homelessness and systemic barriers
- iv. Secondary focus areas will be legislative recommendations, including removing voter exclusion from the state constitution and addressing rental application fees, Safe Space training program development, and exploring reparations
- v. Commissioners look at potential action items in relation to calendar outline
 1. Public hearing training would likely be asking Chairs and Directors from larger Commissions in Northern Virginia to conduct it---Commissioners express interest in having public hearing training
 2. Commission is interested in holding expert panels more than town halls
 3. Commissioners and Director continue refining dates and action items listed in the calendar based on this year's focus areas
- f. Commission decides to hold a work session meeting on 4/4/24 to continue creating Work Plan

4. NEXT STEPS

- a. **Work Session 4/4/24**
- b. **Todd**
 - i. **Ask City Managers about potential alternative meeting locations that would attract more members of the public**

5. ADJOURN

- a. Meeting adjourned at 4:00 pm