

**CITY OF NEWARK
DELAWARE
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION COMMISSION MINUTES**

September 28, 2021

MEETING CONVENED: 7:02 p.m. GoToMeeting

MEMBERS PRESENT: Sasha Aber, Marihelen Barrett, Jacob Higgins, Tamesha Garnett, Blaine Hackett, Annalisa Ekbladh, Patrick McCloskey

STAFF: Devan Hardin, Chief Human Resources Officer
Tara Schiano, Deputy City Secretary

Ms. Schiano called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. She read a prepared statement from Mayor Jerry Clifton welcoming the commission in their roles in the newly formed Diversity and Inclusion Commission. She went on to give a brief overview of the agenda and suggested each member introduce themselves.

1. INTRODUCTIONS:

- Blaine Hackett, Pastor of St. John Church, Cleveland Avenue and New London Road. He stated he is the Vice President of the Newark branch of NAACP and looks forward to serving on the commission.
- Sasha Aber, owner of Home Grown Café has been a lifelong resident of Newark, attended local schools and UD and has two children. She informed she is a Jewish female business and loves the City. She believes a lot has been accomplished and there is much to build upon. She looked forward to working with the commission.
- Marihelen Barrett, stated she has been a Newark resident for most of her life. She is a public health nurse (pediatric) by background and is currently working with the school system to help in their response to COVID. She also works with school based health centers.
- Jacob Higgins, UD student stated he is also a research assistant for the Delaware Racial Justice Collaborative, which is housed within the United Way of Delaware. He stated he is a new resident to Newark and hopes that a new perspective will be beneficial and looks forward to working with the commission.
- Tamesha Garnett, lives in the Newark suburbs currently but has been a Newark resident off and on for her entire life. She is very much interested in what the commission has to offer and can accomplish.
- Patrick McCloskey stated he was previously a UD student, currently does not live in the City, but is a sergeant with UD police. He reported his current role with UDPD allows him to be out and about in town every day. He was asked to join the commission to represent the LGBTQ community. He believes he can offer a unique perspective with his law enforcement background and how the different dynamics and communities interface together in terms of racial and diversity matters. He believes he can offer his opinion from his 14 years' experience as a local police officer. He also stated he looks forward to working with the commission members.
- Annalisa Ekbladh is a 22 year resident of the City and has raised two children in Newark. She has worked for UD Center for Disability Studies and has served on many boards representing the disability community as well as the mental health community. She is currently serving on the board of directors for Champions for Children's Mental Health. She also has worked in the disability community as an advocate and offer support to families for more than 15 years. She was asked to join the commission to represent the disability community. She stated that she was a strong advocate in the City for equity

and diversity in local public schools. She said she is looking forward to working with the Commission.

Devan Hardin, Chief Human Resources Officer introduced herself and said she will be the commissions City Manager office liaison. She stated she is very excited to work with the commission and loved the different aspects that each member brings to the commission. She added she was from Pennsylvania and has lived various places and has settled back in the area and has worked for the City for five years.

2. ELECTION OF CHAIR/VICE CHAIR:

Ms. Schiano briefly explained the role of Chair/Vice Chair. She also asked that the commissioners identify themselves when speaking as the minutes would be transcribed and it was important to be able to accurately identify the members.

After discussion, the following motion was made.

Pastor Hackett was unanimously voted to hold the position of Chair of the Commission.

MOTION PASSED. VOTE 7 to 0.

Aye – Aber, Barrett, Ekbladh, Garnett, Hackett, Higgins, McCloskey
Nay – 0.

MOTION BY MS. EKBLADH, SECONDED BY MR. HIGGINS, TO NOMINATE TAMESHA GARNETT AS VICE CHAIR.

MOTION PASSED. VOTE 7 to 0.

Aye – Aber, Barrett, Ekbladh, Garnett, Hackett, Higgins, McCloskey
Nay – 0.

3. DISCUSSION OF GOAL SETTING FOR COMMISSION

a. Staff Suggested Items

Devan Hardin, Chief Human Resources Officer reported she was tasked with providing the commission some suggestions from staff. She added that City Manager Tom Coleman, Renee Bensley, Tara Schiano and herself had met a few weeks previously to brainstorm and come up with some topics to suggest to the commission to start with.

Ms. Hardin mentioned the recent unexpected passing of Councilwoman Sharon Hughes. She relayed that Councilwoman Hughes was extremely passionate about the Diversity and Inclusion Commission and would be very pleased to see this commission begin its journey. She asked the Commission pause for a moment of silence in her honor.

Ms. Hardin said some of the items discussed in the recent brainstorming session was the hiring, recruitment and retention processes in the City. Ms. Hardin said the City would be happy to provide the demographics to the Commission. She added the City had struggled with recruiting and retaining diverse candidates for both paid employment and volunteer boards and commissions. She noted although efforts have been made to increase the diversity in the applicant pools, particularly for the police department;

ideas from the commission on how to better reach out to under-represented communities to increase awareness of opportunities would be very helpful; as well the identification of any barriers that may be present that are not being addressed. She also suggested the Commission could review some current anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies as well as other personnel policies to provide input on how they could be strengthened and more effective.

Another suggested item for the Commission to address could be affordable housing, housing insecurity and homelessness in the City. Affordable housing is in very short supply in Newark and there is a current barrier to diversity in Newark. She noted many of the lower income residents in Newark have also been suffering housing insecurity during the pandemic due to lost income and unemployment. The Commission could review current and past City programs such as the homeowner incentive program, promoting owner occupied housing programs and utility assistance programs to determine if improvement is needed; as well as offering improved communication on the availability of these resources. The Commission could also work to compile a resource guide of available federal, state, county and local funding that could be promoted by the City and the Commission to connect available opportunities for funding. Ms. Hardin offered that Mike Fortner, of the Planning & Development Department is knowledgeable and has worked with many local groups in the City.

Ms. Hardin mentioned COVID-19 outreach is needed as statistically minorities and low income communities have lower vaccination rates and poorer health outcomes related to COVID-19. This commission could provide ideas for better outreach to these residents including educational opportunities to counter misinformation and analysis of potential barriers to vaccine access as well as compile available resources that could be promoted by the City and the Commission. Ms. Hardin reported the City has numerous COVID-19 resources as they remain at the forefront of efforts to keep their employees safe. Ms. Hardin reported that Jeff Martindale, in the City Manager's Office could be an asset to these efforts as well.

Additional topics include challenges facing minority and women owned businesses. The City currently does not have any programs that specifically address the challenges facing these businesses and perhaps this Commission could review federal, state and county programs to see if there are process gaps where the City could assist prospective business owners. The Commission could also work on a resource guide similar to the housing guide working in conjunction with The Newark Partnership (TNP) specifically by reaching out to Executive Director, Leann Moore.

It is Ms. Hardin's opinion one of the biggest opportunities available to the Commission is public outreach. The Commission could potentially serve as a conduit for a more dynamic exchange of ideas between citizens and the City by taking the form of town halls (for example) by asking for feedback on topics of interest, collecting information on ways to more equitably allocate City resources and promoting greater input from lower response areas and items such as the City community survey, police department survey and by building connections between City departments and the community.

She informed these ideas are just intended to be a starting point to get the creative ideas flowing. Ms. Hardin said the City welcomes additional ideas from the Commission and it would be staff's recommendation that the Commission brainstorm a list of items that members would like to address. Staff can then take the list and provide an assessment to the Commission as to what resources would be needed and potential timelines for completion at the October 26th meeting so the Commission can have an initial list of goals to target for action. She reminded the Commission she is always available for questions as the City Secretary's office is as well.

Ms. Barrett said she liked the ideas presented by Ms. Hardin. She said she would be available to set up a presentation on the social determinants of health and how it affects many of the topics discussed by Ms. Hardin. Ms. Barrett believed most of the Commissions initial work needs to be fact finding and input from the community.

b. Commission Suggested Items

Chairman Hackett reminded the Commission that to be effective they should prioritize what they want to accomplish and cautioned against taking on too much.

Ms. Aber reported a lot of data is readily available in the form of the Comprehensive Development Plan and in addition, information on housing is available through Mike Fortner at the City. She also relayed the possibility that information from the census may be less than reliable as previous reports due to COVID circumstances. She asked the Commission keep this in mind. She believes that public outreach in the form of meet and greets, is a very effective way to engage the public. She also suggested using a survey monkey approach but mentioned that not everyone they want to include may not have access to this approach. She wanted to ensure that all parts of the community are targeted.

Chairman Hackett asked for consensus from the Commission on what they believed to be the most critical item to tackle first.

Ms. Aber believed it was most important to determine the form of communication to reach the community. Chairman Hackett stated he would make St. John's Fellowship Hall available for any kind of town meeting. He added the facility can easily accommodate 50 people.

Ms. Barrett agreed with Ms. Aber and that the Commission should take some information that is readily available from the City and springboard from that. She also inquired about the budget the Commission has available to them. It was also suggested by Ms. Ekbladh to consider in person canvassing but it was the belief of Ms. Garnett some tactics have already been tried but were not necessarily successful. She believed going out in the community may be the most fruitful way to garner information but she was not certain what the Commission was permitted to do. Mr. Higgins believed boots on the ground was the most successful. Pastor Hackett asked what area would be targeted as the demographics vary in the City quite greatly and he believed that was the major challenge facing the Commission. He believed assessing the greatest need is paramount in accomplishing what the Commission hoped to do. He believed District 4 has a great need as there is some low income housing and a lot of renters. He also noted there are significant areas that have college students including District 5 where his congregation is located.

Ms. Garnett believes the answer lies in which topic the Commission decides to pursue first. Ms. Aber believed she was hearing the first need was to determine how to reach people and what is the information the Commission wants to glean from the residents. After further discussion, the Commission decided the first step was to pick a topic. Ms. Barrett believed the housing issues are very important. She also suggested obtaining information on the diversity of the workplace as she believes it would be readily available from the City and would be an easier topic for the Commission to get their feet wet. Ms. Barrett stressed the importance of engaging the youth of community to find out what they may need as well.

Pastor Hackett believes the City does not have any affordable housing especially with the developers buying land and increasing the student housing. He also stressed there are homeless people in the City and believed that should be addressed as well. He hoped to be able to get data from the City

to include affordable housing, housing insecurity and homelessness and believed that would be a great start for the Commission.

Ms. Barrett believed some communities have policies surrounding the amount of rent that can be charged/number of affordable units/number of accessible units, etc. She was unaware if Newark had any similar policies, but if so, those policies should be reviewed. Pastor Hackett again expressed concern with the number of developers that are buying up land in the City for student housing but was unaware what the City could do to stop them from when the parcels go up for sale. Ms. Barrett believed the City's hands may be tied; therefore, it is a policy problem and that is what the Commission needs to determine.

Ms. Aber said she was definitely in favor of affordable housing being a topic. She asked if the City Solicitor may be available to attend or comment on some of the suggestions that the Commission is proposing. She does not want the Commission to waste valuable time on concepts/policies they may not be able to implement because of legal consequences. Pastor Hackett wanted to stress that he did not want the issues of housing insecurity and homelessness to get lost in the affordable housing discussion; because it was all connected. Ms. Garnett noted the Commission's role needs to be defined; meaning would they just be the liaison to inform the community? She also expressed concern that the focus would just be on home ownership not renting and she wanted to make sure both topics are covered. Ms. Barrett suggested engaging in fact finding as she believes a lot of people are just looking for a place to live as they may not be in a position to purchase a home. She further added that many programs in place to help people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness are completely backlogged and just providing a list for people to call may prove to be fruitless.

MOTION BY CHAIRMAN HACKETT, SECONDED BY MS. ABER TO GATHER INFORMATION ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING, HOUSING INSECURITY AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE CITY OF NEWARK.

MOTION PASSED. VOTE 7 to 0.

Aye – Aber, Barrett, Ekbladh, Garnett, Hackett, Higgins, McCloskey

Nay – 0.

Ms. Garnett asked that any programs currently available from the City should be considered (POOH program, utility assistance, etc.).

Ms. Aber asked Mr. McCloskey if he had any information readily available on the topic of homelessness in the City. Mr. McCloskey stated he interacts with the City's homelessness population on a frequent basis. He reported one of the issues with the homelessness community is a severe health mental health problem. As such, gathering information can sometimes prove to be very difficult. However, he said when he does interact with homeless residents from this point forward he can initiate a conversation along these lines and jot down some notes and attempt to get to the root of what is going on with their situation. Frequently when engaging with the homelessness community they do ask them where they are currently living and if they are working with anyone and what may their needs be. He added that frequently the homeless population has on and off contact with case workers. Ms. Aber asked Mr. McCloskey if he noticed there may be some long term resident homeless individuals in the City. Mr. McCloskey said in his 13+ year career he has seen some individuals since he started with UDPD. He believed that with some of the long term homeless people, that is where the mental health aspect really comes into play. He reiterated he would be happy to try to gather some information and return back to the Commission.

Chairman Hackett stated mental health issues are very complex and thought perhaps the Commission may not be qualified. He wondered if the City offered any programs for the mentally ill; he was aware the United Methodist Church had a food pantry. Ms. Aber asked how the Commission was going to split up the tasks so they would not be duplicating their efforts.

After discussion the following was decided:

Affordable Housing: Ekbladh, Garnett, Higgins

Housing Insecurity: Aber, Hackett

Homelessness: Barrett, McCloskey

Ms. Barrett said she would research some policies that other cities have implemented and come up with a list of information and data that the Commission would request from the City. Mr. Higgins reported that affordable housing is what he would be basing his thesis off of at the Biden School at UD. He just started working on the thesis this semester and he would be able to provide some additional information.

Ms. Hardin announced that Jayme Gravell is the City's Chief Communications Officer. She said if there was anything in terms of communicating any information out to the public the City does have the InformMe, next door and other social media platforms that the Commission may choose to use if there was information or town hall meetings the Commission would want to broadcast.

Ms. Ekbladh suggested the Commission add public comment to the next agenda. After a brief discussion, the following motion was made.

MOTION BY: MS. EKBLADH, SECONDED BY MR. HIGGINS: TO ADD PUBLIC COMMENT TO THE AGENDA AT THREE MINUTES PER PERSON.

MOTION PASSED. VOTE 7 to 0.

Aye – Aber, Barrett, Ekbladh, Garnett, Hackett, Higgins, McCloskey
Nay – 0.

4. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2021

5. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:28 pm.

Tara Schiano
Deputy City Secretary/Administrative Professional II

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