



The City of Worcester

City of Worcester

Human Rights Commission

Virtual Meeting on September 23, 2024

1. Call to order, introductions, instructions for public participation

Members present: Elizabeth O’Callahan (Vice Chairperson), Guillermo Creamer Jr., Randy Feldman, Charles Hopkins, Bernard Reese, and Jacqueline Yang.

Staff present: Patricia M. LaFore, Director of Human Rights & Accessibility

Call to order and roll call.

Chair Shemitz designated Vice Chair O’Callahan to run the meeting as Chair in her absence,

Heritage history read by Comm Hopkins

Human Rights mission statement read by Comm Yang

Key terms read by Comm Yang

2. Review of minutes for August 27, 2024

Motion to approve the minutes by Comm Creamer

2nd by Comm Yang

Roll call, unanimous with Comm Feldman abstain (not present at the meeting)

3. New Commission Business

- a. Worcester Pride Month – Guest speaker did not appear. Comm Creamer offered to talk about Pride month from the perspective of being a member of the community and not a representative of any agency or organization. Worcester Pride celebration event of roughly 10,000 participants was very successful and fun. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community were present as participants, vendors and entertainment acts. Other updates relevant to the LGBTQ+ community-CoW discussing the creation of a “Gayborhood” and Comm Creamer joining business representatives and other members of the community to discuss what this may become. Comm Creamer also stated that the HRC should be

vested in the development and success of this idea. There was discussion about this being an area of residences, mixed use, and something akin to a BID like other cities have created. Comm Creamer and the group will be further meeting, discussing and developing this idea with the City Manager.

- b. Discuss City of Worcester five-year plan for homelessness & housing – Vice Chair O’Callahan stated the HRC usually addresses this issue in December, when it’s already cold, or when there is some crisis.

The current count of chronically homeless is down from 184 to 153 individuals. Vice Chair O’Callahan noted that there is a difference between temporary and chronic homelessness. Director LaFore added that the HUD definition for chronic homelessness is one year of homelessness, or four homeless events within three years.

Comm Creamer asked if the homeless have access to showers or washers/dryers to wash their clothes. It was noted the HRC had invited guests to address these issues in the past including Dr. Castille in January 2024, who discussed the projects she has in place. Vice Chair O’Callahan stated the report/plan that was circulated to the HRC members is about six pages long and includes some data. There are two projects that have been completed, one was done in October 2024, a 24 unit single occupancy unit, and the other was finished in February 2024 by SMOC, a 16-unit single occupancy project. Some projects are in the works, such as Abby’s House, working on 11 units, the Quality Inn Hotel, working on 90 units scheduled to be done in 2025. SMOC has another 20 single occupancy units on the MLK site for 2025. A microunit project also by SMOC is scheduled for 2026. WCHR in development of 18 modular homes to be completed in 2028. The work is happening but there are also some barriers. There are not enough beds for the homeless community.

Comm O’Callahan stated she thought there is a project coming up that will have 200 units opening, a good amount but will still fall short of the need.

HRC members also discussed prior protests at the RMV winter shelter, now that this shelter is closed, where are these people going. There was also discussion about a recent Mayor’s Mental Health Task Force meeting that took place earlier this year from community organizations and members

questioned whether the taskforce was still looking for a social worker, and how the HRC can address this issue along with any others. Comm Reese mentioned some people have limits because they have lost, or have had their ID cards stolen making it harder to get services; can we help them? Director LaFore added that this task force is going into encampments, finding people, was not sure staff are social workers, but they are very dedicated. Director LaFore will inquire if a social worker was ever hired for the task force. Comm Feldman believes MLK has assigned social workers and stated it is difficult to help with encampments without addresses. Comm O'Callahan asked if there is a social worker at the RMV shelter when it is open or other services. Members also discussed the statuses of the cooling/warming centers and that members would like to see a day center where showers and other services are available such as clothes for job interviews, job training, access to medical and mental health care.

Comm Feldman motioned (Vice Chair O'Callahan added emphasis) to ask the City Manager for clarification regarding a timeline for the opening of the Day Center, and if there are barriers impeding this from opening, and further asked what HRC can do to assist.

2nd by Vice Chair O'Callahan

Roll call, unanimous

4. Old Commission Business

- a. Washington Heights Fire – Director LaFore gave an update stating that they have found extended stay housing in Westboro and backfilled with transportation and/or meal assistance as needed. She further added that the community was concerned with the decontamination issue and remediation in the building and noted that the concerns were alleviated when the community was made aware of the process where a person goes into one room to take off or cover their street clothing, and then into the contaminated areas. On the way out, workers must enter a room, remove contaminated clothing and or coverings before exiting. It was noted that 12 households are housed at the hotel, and four are going to transfer into apartments. One household will be moving out-of-state. There's still ongoing search for permanent housing but still very difficult, due to the difficult rental climate and need for use or access to subsidy.

Vice Chair O'Callahan mentioned past examples of public-private partnerships where new affordable housing units were developed, such as the conversion of the old courthouse, some market rate and affordable rates there. Vice Chair O'Callahan asked Director LaFore to find out historical information from the last year or so.

Comm Feldman apprised the HRC that some new or remodeled projects have workforce or affordable components adding that mixed use is great, but perhaps more affordable housing projects (direct subsidy) should be the focus. Director LaFore stated that there exists immense bureaucracy and drawn-out timelines that are not going to solve the housing issue for the near future. Affordable and subsidized housing development is chosen by the lowest bidder with lower quality standards that also limit the longevity and increase maintenance which is counterproductive in the long term.

Comm Hopkins motioned to request CM to take action to increase the development of affordable housing within the CoW, with such action to include working with private developers, local legislative representatives as well as state agencies to leverage public and private resources and negotiations to increase the project set aside to 15% for low income and affordable units.

2nd by Vice Chair O'Callahan
Roll Call, unanimous

Comm Feldman motioned that the City Manager provide the HRC with an outline of prospective projects for creating more subsidized or affordable units and that the City Manager develop a list of government owned property, lots and including the use of vacant or abandoned property that could be developed into subsidized affordable housing.

2nd by Vice Chair O'Callahan
Roll call, unanimous

- b. Update on previously submitted HRC recommendations/requests
Director LaFore has not received any responses from the WPD or the CM office about prior motions submitted.

Comm Hopkins, asked specifically about the new WPD data system as a follow-up to the August discussion of same. Director LaFore answered by

stating that the information was part of the August HRC Memo already submitted.

In response, Comm Hopkins made a motion for the City Manager to request or direct the purchasing department to provide the data system (Hexagon software, etc.) for the WPD that were procured or are in the process of procurement.

2nd by Vice Chair O’Callahan

Roll call, unanimous

5. Notice of Upcoming Presidential Election November 5, 2024

The HRC highlighted resources for residents regarding the upcoming presidential election and directed the public to helpful links attached to the meeting agenda for voter information including ballot questions (see below). Vice Chair O’Callahan mentioned that there was some confusion in prior election years where one would vote, and that information has been updated.

- The last day to register to vote is October 25, 2024, and the vote by mail deadline is October 29, 2024.
- Early in-person voting starts October 19, 2024, and ends November 1, 2024.
- Additional resources:
 - [Voter Resources for Worcester Residents](#) and
 - [Information on In-Person Early Voting](#)

6. Public Comment – None.

7. Adjournment – next meeting 10/28/24.

Vice Chair O’Callahan motioned to adjourn the meeting

2nd by Comm Creamer

Roll call, unanimous

Meeting adjourned at 7:49pm