

This set of minutes was approved at the January 13, 2022 HRC meeting

**DURHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**  
**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2021**  
**10:00 AM**  
**Council Chambers – Durham Town Hall**

Members Present: Council Chair Katherine (Kitty) Marple, Administrator Todd Selig, Dr. Janet Perkins-Howland, The Rev. Richard Belshaw

Members Absent: Business Manager Gail Jablonski

Others Present: Parks & Recreation Director Rachel Gasowski

**I. Call to Order**

Chair Marple called the meeting to order at 10:02 AM and introductions of those present were made.

Chair Marple read the Durham, New Hampshire Land, Water, and Life Acknowledgment:

*The town of Durham, New Hampshire wishes to acknowledge the spiritual and physical connection maintained by the Pennacook, Abenaki and Wabanaki peoples to N'dakinna (homeland), aki (land), nibi (water), lolakwikak (flora) and awaasak (fauna). New Hampshire has been home to these Indigenous people for thousands of years. The residents of Durham acknowledge the ongoing hardships endured by our Indigenous neighbors after the loss of their unceded homelands which we now steward and we will work to foster relationships to support the well-being of Indigenous people who carry forward the traditions of their ancestors.*

**II. Approval of Minutes – None**

**III. Brief update on Equity Summit – Dr. Janet Perkins-Howland**

Dr. Janet Perkins-Howland provided an update on the Equity Summit that was held recently at the Freedom Café, which was meant to bring some of the key changemakers and social activists from the tri state area together to find out what work is being done and what people's visions may be regarding this topic. She said there was an online Google working document for people to add their names, email addresses, and initiatives to, as well as what events may be happening and important links that can be accessed.

Dr. Perkins-Howland wondered if the Durham HRC could articulate what it believes to be the commission's goals of equity and ideals and how that might get transmitted out to the Town Council to be included as part of its goals.

Chair Marple asked Dr. Perkins-Howland if she was discouraged when she asked the question about reparations when she attended the Equity Summit and was met with no response from other participants. Dr. Perkins-Howland replied that she was not discouraged and in fact had spoken to a couple of people at the end of the evening who indicated they were interested in the topic of reparations.

The Rev. Belshaw said that the Equity Summit was a good way of getting together and hearing from other people about who they are and what they are interested in because everyone had a slightly different focus of interest on dealing with issues of equality.

#### **IV. Meet with Parks & Recreation Director Rachel Gasowski regarding the 2021 Frost Fest Event**

Chair Marple informed Ms. Gasowski that this topic came up at the HRC's last meeting and she had explained the history of how Frost Fest had come about.

Ms. Gasowski said that Frost Fest was not held in 2020 because of COVID-19, but it is scheduled for this year on December 4<sup>th</sup> using the model that was used after the Winter Celebration Committee was formed, which wasn't much different from previous year's events. She said that Santa arriving on the fire truck was removed and the tree lighting was not focused on heavily.

Ms. Gasowski distributed a list of what the event offered in 2019 to each of the commission members and outlined the general activities that will be offered to families this year.

Dr. Perkins-Howland asked Ms. Gasowski if she had received feedback from people regarding whether they were glad or disappointed with the 2019 event. Ms. Gasowski said there were a few people who were disappointed that Santa Claus did not arrive on the fire truck, but Santa was still present at the event. He just didn't make a grand entrance. She said even prior to 2019, a lot of the activities were winter neutral, so just by not having Santa Claus and tree lighting being the focus of the event seemed to work well.

The Rev. Belshaw said he believed the event should be as family-friendly and as respectful of everyone as possible and would therefore not emphasize any kind of symbol from any religious denomination. He said he believed that over the years some of these symbols have morphed into a kind of secular conscientiousness. He said the issues of light, peace, good will toward our neighbors and fellow kind are the things to be celebrated.

Chair Marple noted that there was one person on the Winter Celebration Committee who was very militant about the fact that Santa Claus and the tree lighting are Christian symbols and are not appropriate. She said the committee was trying to reach a compromise, but it was very difficult.

Administrator Selig said that he and his family are Jewish, and that for some non-Christians it is hard at the Christmas time of year, because while Santa Claus and the symbols of Christmas have become cultural symbols, non-Christians are bombarded by them everywhere they go during the season. Therefore, for some within the Jewish community when the town holds its annual event it can seem as though it is being rubbed in their face by saying you're welcome to attend, but Durham is a Christian town, and if you do not like it then you do not have to attend. Therefore, by not emphasizing those elements, it made some people feel more included. He also added this was just coming from a Jewish perspective and that he has no idea how other faiths may feel about it.

Administrator Selig said that two years ago he had the opportunity to go to Israel on a learning tour around Christmas time. The group visited a community that was divided by three faiths, but even so they made an overt effort to decorate in all the faiths, and their celebration included all aspects of multiculturalism.

Chair Marple said that one of the arguments by people who are not Christian is that the holidays in December are not a big deal. Hanukkah is not like Christmas at all. So, the idea of hanging dreidels on a Christmas tree is not appropriate, which was part of the reason it was so difficult to come to any solid agreement because it is hard to be inclusive.

Dr. Perkins-Howland asked Ms. Gasowski if the town might develop some type of basic rules or formulate a plan going forward around its celebrations in order to be more proactive instead of reactive.

Ms. Gasowski said that Frost Fest itself has evolved even more since she began employment with the town, noting that the tree lighting ceremony used to include a Christmas ornament decorating activity for young children, which no longer occurs. She said she would be happy to meet anytime and have a good dialogue around the town's various events and make plans accordingly. She said the egg hunt and Frost Fest events are really the only ones that have some sort of religious tie to them. All the other events seem to be neutral on the season.

Dr. Perkins-Howland said that the HRC was also hoping to include activities around Indigenous Peoples' Day and the newly created federal holiday of Juneteenth (June 19<sup>th</sup>).

The Rev. Belshaw said the commission would also offer its assistance to Ms. Gasowski if she needed it, which was really the purpose for inviting her to this meeting.

Administrator Selig said that when this issue first came up in 2019, the town received a lot of negative telephone calls, emails, and letters. He showed the members the lump of coal that had been sent to him anonymously.

Ms. Gasowski said she was anticipating having a large turnout for this year's Frost Fest given that there were a lot of people who attended the downtown Trick or Treat event and seemed very pleased to be there and having fun.

Responding to a question from Dr. Perkins-Howland asking if there was anyway the HRC could help with Frost Fest, Ms. Gasowski said she thought at this time it would be best to meet with the commission again after the event to do a basic critique and discuss possible other activities or changes that could be made when planning for next year's Frost Fest.

**V. Other Business - None**

**VI. Adjournment**

*The Rev. Belshaw MOVED to ADJOURN the meeting. The motion was SECONDED by Dr. Perkins-Howland and PASSED unanimously, 4-0.*

The meeting adjourned at 10:37 AM.

Prepared by Jennie Berry, Administrative Assistant