

These minutes were approved at the April 5, 2024 meeting.

DURHAM HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2024
10:30 A.M.
Council Chambers – Durham Town Hall

Members Present: Chair Sally Needell, Administrator Todd Selig, Dr. Janet Perkins-Howland, Deborah Hirsch Mayer, The Rev. Richard Belshaw, Kathy Collins

Members Absent: Business Manager Gail Jablonski

I. Call to Order

Chair Sally Needell called the meeting to order at 10:30 a.m. The members introduced themselves.

II. Land Acknowledgment Statement

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

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.

III. Approval of Minutes – January 19, 2024

Chair Needell MOVED to approve the minutes of January 19, 2024. The motion was SECONDED by Administrator Selig and it PASSED 6-0.

IV. Public Comments

Helena England – She spoke about her history of being a Jewish person, specifically in Durham. She no longer feels safe in Durham. She does not feel it was right for the Council to pass a resolution on a Gaza ceasefire. She feels that the Town Council needs to be educated about the threat of antisemitism. She feels the protestors at the Council meeting crossed the line from criticism to antisemitism, and the Council endorsed this. She urged the Human Rights Commission to recommend the Town Council endorse the IHRA Statement on antisemitism which reads, *“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”*

Commissioner Belshaw asked if Ms. England was proposing that the HRC formally adopt or approve and support this definition of antisemitism. Ms. England stated that she is recommending that the HRC ask the Council to adopt the definition. Other towns refused to pass a resolution on the ceasefire.

Administrator Selig asked if there was a reason Ms. England preferred this definition of antisemitism rather than another. Ms. England stated that this definition is the one being passed by other countries and U.S. Government. She believes current anti-Israel activity is now a mutation of antisemitism. Administrator Selig mentioned that the Durham Police were following up to see if they could identify the individuals who made the antisemitic remarks on Zoom at the Town Council meeting.

Chair Needell asked if the people who had signs stolen from their yards expressing their support of Israel reported the theft to the police. Ms. England said that she didn't know.

Administrator Selig mentioned that the Town of Lebanon NH adopted a verbal resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. An advisory board has been tasked with creating a written resolution.

Richard England – He also opposes the Council passing the resolution because it is a complicated issue. He has family in Israel. He feels that there is an organized effort now to defame Israel. The pro-Palestinian request to release all hostages includes terrorists currently in Israeli jails.

Diane Freedman – She stated that she agrees with what Ms. England said. She didn't feel that it was appropriate for the Council to pass the resolution.

Chair Needell read Robbie Stanhope's letter that she submitted.

Administrator Selig mentioned that **Tolu Afolayan** had appeared at the last HRC meeting with a proposal to create software to allow members to work on a document outside of a meeting. Administrator Selig spoke with the Town attorney, and she said that everything needed to be discussed at the meeting. Mr. Afolayan was in attendance this morning. He presented his ideas for the way documents could be edited among the HRC members with his software, including a video demonstration. There was additional conversation by the Commission on the pros and cons of using the type of software described.

Chair Needell MOVED to adjust the agenda to continue the discussion on the Gaza ceasefire resolution made by the council and also to add discussion of Indigenous Peoples Day under Other Business. The motion was SECONDED by Commission Hirsch-Mayer and it PASSED 6-0.

Chair Needell mentioned that there hadn't been time to schedule another Human Rights Commission meeting prior to the Council's vote on the ceasefire resolution. Administrator Selig mentioned that Councilor Friedman abstained from the vote

because he felt that the resolution should have come to the HRC originally prior to the Council vote.

Commissioner Perkins-Howland appreciated that the Council took on this issue. However, it seemed more of an urgent situation, and she didn't understand what the hurry was.

Administrator Selig spoke about the process of how the resolution was created. The Council felt that time was of the essence, so they wanted to go forward with the resolution.

Commissioner Perkins-Howland mentioned that the HRC had mentioned the October 7th attack on Israel in a previous meeting, so the statement that the Town had not spoken to that attack was incorrect. She stated that she was very disappointed with the process that this resolution went through. She asked if there was any way that the HRC could now make changes to the resolution even though it has been finalized.

Administrator Selig mentioned that the HRC could make a statement of their own.

Commissioner Belshaw doesn't believe that everyone knows everything that is happening in Israel/Gaza. How does the HRC support the call for healing? He would support an addition to the resolution from the HRC. Is the HRC called to address these issues anywhere in the world? They need to be conscious of what has happened specifically in the Durham community.

Commissioner Perkins-Howland feels that some of the wording in the resolution has the potential of increasing antisemitic acts in the town.

Commissioner Hirsch Mayer stated that she spoke at the Council meeting. She let the Council know that if a resolution was going to be passed it should be focused on the Durham community. She would like to see people learn how to think in non-binary ways so it is not just one side or the other. She mentioned that the Seacoast Ministerium would be interested in partnering with the HRC moving forward with this issue. She would like to make clear that this resolution was not reviewed by the HRC. She would like to create a statement regarding the HRC's displeasure regarding how this resolution was done. She also thinks there is a place to adopt a statement on antisemitism.

Commissioner Belshaw wondered how the HRC deals with something so huge and beyond them. You need to stay calm and work on the local things. Does the line in the resolution referencing the Human Rights Commission infer that the HRC is in agreement with the resolution? He stated that he would be happy to write up a press release of some kind.

Commissioner Collins felt that the comment earlier that the people who were speaking at the Council meeting were children implied that their comments were childish, and she takes issue with that.

Commissioner Perkins-Howland asked if the HRC could create its own resolution. Chair Needell feels that would be fine.

Chair Needell would like to appeal to people to let the HRC know when things are happening that are hateful. Should the Police be invited to the next meeting to discuss this? Commission Hirsch Mayer related a specific incident that happened to her and she did call the police.

Commissioner Collins left the meeting at 12:18 p.m.

Chair Needell asked what date the next meeting should be. It was decided that Friday, April 5, at 1:00 p.m. would be the next meeting.

V. Discussion on Collaboration with other Committees/Commissions

Postponed

VI. Discussion on Housing as a Human Right

Commissioner Perkins-Howland would like the HRC to put out a statement that they support the Housing Task Force and Planning Board to further research into providing diverse and non-discriminatory housing in Durham. She handed out books on this topic. She will send out a draft to the HRC of the type of statement she was thinking of.

VII. Update on February 15, 2024 Roundtable Discussion on the Oyster River Massacre Marker.

Postponed

VIII. Other Business

Commissioner Perkins Howland wants to remind everyone that Indigenous Peoples Day will come up fast and they need to think about what they are going to do.

Administrator Selig mentioned that the Town is adding Juneteenth as an employee paid holiday.

IX. Adjournment

Chair Needell MOVED to adjourn the meeting. The motion was SECONDED by Commissioner Belshaw and it PASSED unanimously.

The meeting **ADJOURNED** at 12:30 p.m.

Prepared by Karen Edwards, Administrative Assistant