

Owatonna Human Rights Commission – Minutes

The Owatonna Human Rights Commission (OHRC) met on Tuesday, June 11, 2019 in the Second Floor Conference of the City Administration Building. Commission Chairman Cords called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. Commissioner Gillespie took roll call: Commissioners Ethan Cords, Fred Ventura, Jim Gunderson, David Emanuelson, Ryan Gillespie and John Worden were present as were City Administrator Kris Busse and Administrative Specialist Jeanette Clawson. Commissioner Jamie Vanoosbree was not present.

Following the Pledge of Allegiance, Commissioner Cords welcomed everyone to the meeting. Minutes of the May 14th Meeting were reviewed, Commissioner Gillespie made motion to approve the minutes as prepared. Commissioner Ventura seconded the motion; all members present voted aye in approval.

Commissioners Vanoosbree joined the meeting at 5:34 p.m.

During Commissioner Comments, Commissioner Ventura advised Fairway Billboard was recently acquired by Reagan Outdoor Advertising, based out of Salt Lake City. He recently spoke with Jeff Vortherms, Account Executive regarding the OHRC ad showing on the LEC billboard on Hoffman Avenue. A new sign, “How a society treats its disabled is the true measure of a civilization” will replace the current MLK spot. Commissioner Gunderson commented the MLK ad was sharp looking and was well received by the community.

Commissioner Vanoosbree commented the OHS School District just hired Kory Kath as the new High School Principal. Mr. Kath, a previous OHS History teacher, State Representative and current principal in the Mankato School District grew up and currently lives in Owatonna. A group of seven diverse high school students participated in the interview process by meeting with each applicant on a one-to-one basis. Mr. Kath was one of two applicants the students recommended for hire. This student involvement in the school’s hiring process shows appreciation and consideration of these student’s perspective.

Commissioner Vanoosbree advised there will be a Community Table Event at the Steele County History Center next Thursday, June 20th from 6-9 p.m. City Administrator Busse explained the event sponsored by the Mayo Clinic and United Way, is an ongoing initiative to solve self-care and health care issues. They hope this event will generate great conversations for ways to create a community to stay health in body and soul. The event, free to attend, will offer foods to fit every diet.

During Old Business, Commissioners Emanuelson, Gunderson, and Ventura reported they attended the Community Engagement event held May 23rd at the Steele County History Center. Sergio Aguilar, Director of Latino Affairs, MSU-Mankato presented “Building a Community for Dignity & Respect”. They felt this was a good presentation and wished more than 22 people; including three OHRC Commissioners were able to attend. Everyone thought the venue was good and the event was promoted well. Suggestions for future events included offering food and scheduling on a day which didn’t conflict with a large school event; the 2019 Big 9 Track Meet, the largest track meet of the season drew a huge crowd was happening at the same time.

Commissioner Vanoosbree advised the first presentation by the Better Together Community will be tomorrow, June 12th at McKinley School from 6-8 pm. Commissioners Vanoosbree, Cords and Gunderson have attended organizational meetings with this group. This will be the first of a three presentations by Bukata Hayes, speaker with the Greater Mankato Diversity Council. They have

identified six or seven stakeholders within the community and hoping for a good turnout. They have submitted a grant application for funds to cover their speaker expenses.

During New Business, Commissioner Ventura explained two individuals recently contacted him with concerns about potential Workplace Violations of their Human Rights. On May 15th, he received a call from an individual and arranged to meet with them and Commissioner Vanoosbree on May 17th. During their meeting, they felt the circumstance did not constitute a Workplace Violation of their Human Rights and suggested alternative options. On May 23, Commissioner Ventura was contacted by a school employee requesting assistance; OHS applied for Federal grant funds which required they change the title of their liaison positions to Success Coaches. This involved the Somali Liaison and Hispanic Liaison and he was concerned these positions were being singled out; current employees were told they would need to apply for the new positions. Commissioner Ventura contacted City Administrator Busse and she explained she contacted the school to verify these two positions were not being singled out; they were not as these are the only two liaison positions offered at the school. Commissioner Ventura did attend a meeting between the employee and School Superintendent Elstad prior to their interview to aid in understanding the application process. The employee contacted Commissioner Ventura saying he has been verbally offered the position and waiting for the letter with his employment offer. Commissioner Worden requested clarification Commissioner Ventura's involvement was during a meeting and not during an interview.

Commissioner Cords explained the New York Times ran an article on Friday, June 7th as follow-up to the racial incident at OHS in February. All commissioners reported they have seen the article and for the most part felt it was a good article. Commissioner Gunderson said he view 713 comments on-line in review of the article, this has generated a national dialogue bringing positive awareness to this issue. Commissioner Vanoosbree said her son and friends were interviewed and most students commented conditions have improved.

Commissioner Emanuelson said he had conversation with Ibrahim Hussein who had some complimentary comments about Viracon. Commissioner Emanuelson plans to reach out to Viracon HR Director about this and encourage employer focus in developing a Welcome Center in Owatonna.

With no additional business, Commissioner Ventura made a motion to adjourn at 6:16 p.m.; Commissioner Gillespie seconded the motion and the meeting ended.

The next OHRC Meeting will be Tuesday, July 9th at 5:30 p.m.