DOVER HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

The Dover Human Relations Commission (DHRC) meeting was held on September 29, 2015 at 5:15 p.m. with Chairwoman Smith presiding. Members present were Mr. Henderson, Mr. McGiffin, and Mr. Roach. Ms. Hicks and Mrs. Sadusky were absent. Council President Slavin was present (departed at 6:19 p.m.).

AGENDA ADDITIONS/DELETIONS

Mr. Henderson moved for approval of the agenda, seconded by Mr. McGiffin and unanimously carried.

Meet and Greet with Council President Slavin

Chairwoman Smith advised members that she met with Council President Slavin approximately two (2) months ago and he had expressed a desire to come and speak to members.

Council President Slavin expressed thanks to members for their service and stated his personal and professional support for the Commission. He indicated that he was encouraged by the new charter of the organization and its leadership, direction, and energy. Mr. Slavin indicated that he would like to see the DHRC, as an independent body, create a vision for how it should operate, noting that City Council should maintain an arm's length distance from this and would rely on the DHRC for advice and counsel. He felt that there was an opportunity for the DHRC to be proactive and promote a dialogue in the community about some of the key issues being faced. Mr. Slavin informed members that the previous way of doing business for the DHRC was to perform an intake of complaints, and there had been some confusion about what the State Human Relations Commission (SHRC) covered versus the DHRC. The Commission had been re-chartered to clear this up. He advised members that the SHRC had the professional capacity to deal with complaints.

Mr. McGiffin noted that the State also had the legal authority to handle complaints.

Mr. Slavin shared his observations regarding areas where he felt the DHRC could be helpful, noting the importance of dialogue that pierces through to root causes. For example, he stated that a 21-year-old man was recently shot by the police and the reaction from the community was heard, noticed, and received. Mr. Slavin stated his wish not to bypass the fact that someone was shot; however, felt that there was a conversation that all should be having about not letting this type of incident become the new normal in our society. He felt it was frightening that a 21-year-old had no hope and was left to engage in criminal activities and that this should be questioned, noting that somewhere along the line, the community lost that young man. Mr. Slavin expressed his opinion that this type of problem was not the strong suit for City government and was the reason for the existence of the DHRC. He explained that City government is good at delivering services but is not engineered to solve these types of problems alone and is part of a rich fabric that must be created. Mr. Slavin advised members that this dialogue should be in play in meetings like the current DHRC meeting, but also in churches, in living rooms, fraternal organizations, barber shops, and grocery stores.

Mr. Slavin expressed worry that society in Dover was very fragile right now and possibly only one (1) or two (2) or two episodes away from a reaction that might be worse than the last one, noting that the potential for emotions to flare up was very high. He stated that there was an incident at the University of Delaware during the past week that elicited a huge response in terms of news and social media reporting. Mr. Slavin commented that there was a recent Facebook scam that everyone bought into, noting that existing technology enables this sort of information. Mr. Slavin suggested that this technological grapevine could provide an advantage to the DHRC in getting the facts out and encouraged the DHRC to use social media avenues.

Mr. McGiffin stated that former First District Commissioner Eugene Ruane had brought forward the idea that the DHRC should find out where the City, as an organization, was with respect to issues of diversity, which would improve the DHRC's credibility. Mr. Ruane had envisioned a large research project involving interviews and surveys of City staff and then a compilation and analysis of the resulting data and a report. Mr. McGiffin explained that Mr. Ruane had left the area and that he was now managing this project, which he thought should be scaled down a bit. He had spoken with Mr. Scott Koenig, City Manager, and Mr. Kirby Hudson, Assistant City Manager, and had their support in conducting interviews with key staff people and preparing an online survey with the help of Mr. Andy Siegel, Director of Information Technology. This would be an audit to determine where those who work for the City think that the City is on a variety of diversity issues. Council representatives would also be consulted. Mr. McGiffin stated that he wanted to inform Mr. Slavin about the status of this project, noting that the next steps would be to put the existing survey in electronic form for use online and then to schedule interviews. Mr. McGiffin expressed his opinion that it would be a good idea to know where the City organization stood first, stating that leading by example would improve credibility when looking elsewhere. Mr. Slavin stated that he thought this was a good project.

Noting Mr. Slavin's previous comment regarding the desire that a 21-year-old carrying a gun was not perceived as the new normal, Ms. Smith questioned how Mr. Slavin would suggest framing the DHRC's support or partnership with the other organizations he had mentioned, i.e., churches, barber shops, and fraternities, in order for young people to be educated and successful in life, versus ending up feeling hopeless.

Responding, Mr. Slavin related an anecdote whereby a good friend who works with youth in the community showed him pictures of two (2) 18-year-olds who had been arrested. This individual stated that these kids were in his program at the Boys and Girls Club but he lost them at age 12 because it was no longer "cool" to go to the club. Mr. Slavin expressed his opinion that there was nothing to fill the gap that exists for kids who are older than eight (8) or nine (9) years old. He noted that sometimes the solutions are not large and global but are a matter of programs for a specific age group. Mr. Slavin stated that he did not want to make this approach big or unattainable. He noted that the City was working with the National Council on Life and Labor Research (NCALL) on the Restoring Central Delaware Initiative that was focused on housing and physical improvements. He questioned if the City could tap into some of the energy in that initiative to also restore faith in society and some of the intangible things that were wanted.

Mr. Slavin encouraged partnering with the Dover Public Library, noting that they had been wonderful in looking at non-traditional ways to bring a wider audience into the library or going out to that audience. He mentioned that some college campuses hold programs where all incoming freshman read a book that is incorporated in all of their classes, whether in science, literature, or art history. Mr. Slavin questioned if one (1) book or one (1) dialogue experience could be held that would trigger a series of conversations. He noted that the Dover Public Library had offered a program on the civil rights movement that culminated with an event at the Schwartz Center for the Arts. A documentary was shown, and there were speakers and freedom writers in attendance. He stated that this was a wonderful event and the Schwarz Center was filled with attendees.

Ms. Smith stated that the Boys and Girls Club, along with the YMCA, might be resources to tap into and partner with. Mr. Slavin advised members that the YMCA had built a new gymnasium, resulting in more middle through high school kids using the YMCA and its attached gym.

Mr. Roach stated that there were a lot of resources for the "haves" and not the "have-nots", noting that many kids would love to use the YMCA but do not have a membership and cannot pay the $10 fee to get in. He stated that he often talks to kids aged 12 to 17 who are being lost because there is nothing for them to do.

Ms. Smith expressed her opinion that a lot of human behavior results from what people are exposed to, how they are educated, what expectations are laid out before them, and how they are held to these expectations. She questioned if it would be effective to create different expectations and put systems in place to place people on a path to success, versus assuming that they would rebel. Ms. Smith felt the challenge was to determine how to educate, empower, and inspire the new generation, noting that hope must be restored and that comes through education.

Mr. Roach noted that segregation in 2015 is different from in the 1960's and that problems that used to start at age 16 now start in the fourth grade. He stated that fourth graders have older brothers who they look up to, and they need education on different options. Mr. Roach advised members that it is difficult even for adults to understand long-term gratification and kids may be persuaded to participate in illegal activity to get money for things that they long for. He emphasized the importance of "reach one, teach one" and building relationships. He stated the importance of giving kids something tangible that they can reach for, since they do not understand the concept of getting an education to be successful. Mr. Roach informed members that he explains to them that they should not take the easy, quick route by making money illegally, that can be taken away from them, rather than the slower course of earning money by working.

Mr. Roach's suggestion was to make it personal, stating that every adult in the City should find one (1) child to eat lunch with twice per week and give them something they can work toward, which might change the entire life of a child. He noted that impoverished kids may not have anyone there for them and their parents may have their own issues. He felt that human relations should be put into play by forming relationships with those outside one's circle.

Ms. Smith agreed with Mr. Roach and felt that members should brainstorm how to go about doing this and engaging the community. She indicated that the library was a resource and noted that the Delaware State Police targets a low-income audience and stated her intention to invite them to come in and discuss their strategies. Mr. McGiffin reminded members that the Police Department was interested in revitalizing the Police Athletic League and in actively reaching out into the community.

Ms. Traci McDowell, City Clerk, advised members that a discussion about reactivating the Police Athletic League (PAL) was on the agenda for the Parks, Recreation, and Community Enhancement Committee meeting scheduled for October 12, 2015 at 3:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers.

Mr. Roach stated that the John W. Pitts Center was great when it first opened up, but there were incidents where kids got into fights and were put on six (6) months' probation. He disagreed with some of the structural changes that were made at this facility, noting that the open gym schedules were not conducive to kids' availability; therefore, this resource was not being used. Mr. Roach expressed his opinion that those who created the problems should be punished rather than throwing away the offerings. He noted that kids behave badly because they are bored, and felt that if they were given something that they wanted to do, the would stay out of trouble.

Ms. Smith stated that there are programs in major cities in New York and New Jersey where schools take inner city kids from conditions that are worse than those in Dover and create expectations for them, and they end up graduating from high school and going to college to become judges, lawyers, and teachers. She indicated that this could be done, but it must be a joint effort.

Mr. Roach expressed his opinion that, in Dover, everyone is not affected enough to want to make a change. He felt that if the problems on Reed and Queen Streets were occurring in Fox Hall and Wild Quail, these neighborhoods would stand up and do something about them. Mr. Roach believed that those dealing with kids sometimes do not care and reiterated that relationships and rapport must be built with the community and kids. He questioned why people would feel comfortable talking to the DHRC, not knowing who they are, stating that the Commission must make people comfortable. He noted that bonds must be built using things people care about, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.

Acknowledging that there was a historical perspective, Mr. Roach advised members that it was easier to get a gun today than it was in 1960 and kids were fighting over drugs to get money to buy name brand shoes. Mr. Roach felt that until kids are shown that they are loved and respected, they will not change. He indicated that some of the kids he tried to mentor in high school were stealing, robbing, smoking weed. They do not feel that going to school is important and it is hard to break that mindset.

Ms. Smith expressed the desire to revisit this conversation, stating that this may relate to the TED talk project that members discussed during their meeting of August 25, 2015.

Update on Commissioners' Tasks - Acknowledgment and Goodbye to Commissioner Eugene Ruane

Mr. Roach advised members that he had a card for members to sign and send to former Commissioner Eugene Ruane and questioned if it should be sent to former members of the Commission.

After further discussion, members agreed to sign the card tonight and provide it to the Clerk's Office. Current and former Commissioners would be advised by the Clerk's Office that the card was available in the Clerk's Office for a week, should they wish to stop in and sign it before it is mailed.

Discussion - Future Meeting Dates

Ms. Smith advised members that meetings were scheduled for October 27, 2015 and November 17, 2015 and questioned if members were feeling overwhelmed by monthly meetings.

Mr. Henderson felt that monthly meetings should be continued for the immediate future until members get to know one another and crystallize their direction. He stated that it would be helpful to obtain the meeting minutes.

By unanimous consent, member agreed to continue the monthly meetings.

Mr. McGiffin advised members that the Government Policies, Programs, and Practices (GPPP) Committee's interview/survey document to measure the workforce's perceptions of diversity in the workforce had been completed by himself and Mr. Roach and suggested that it be placed on the next agenda. Once this was approved, he stated that he would schedule related interviews.

Mr. Henderson moved for adjournment, seconded by Mr. McGiffin and unanimously carried.

Meeting adjourned at 6:41 p.m.

S. Renee Smith
Chair

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