

Chairperson
Guillermo Crear Jr.

Vice-chairperson
Elizabeth O'Callahan

Clerk
[vacant]



Human Rights Commission

Members:
Charles Hopkins
LaToya Lewis
Jorge Lopez-Alvarez
Jamaine Ortiz
Edward G. Robinson
Ellen Shemitz
Jacqueline Yang

Monday December 5, 2022, 6:00pm

VIRTUAL MEETING MINUTES

Virtual meeting link: <https://cow.webex.com/cow/j.php?MTID=m9d233db4f78bb0528628acf433e3ce8a>

Attendance

Members present: Guillermo Creamer Jr., Charles Hopkins, LaToya Lewis, Jorge Lopez-Alvarez, Edward G. Robinson, Ellen Shemitz,

Members absent: Elizabeth O'Callahan, Jamaine Ortiz, Jacqueline Yang

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Guests: Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk

Call to order and introductions

Chairperson Creamer called the meeting to order and asked Ms. Turchek to offer the history of our ancestral land and work of the Commission. Mr. Lewis shared the terms of the Commission.

Approval of meeting minutes from October 3, 2022

Motion was made by the chairperson and seconded by Commissioner Robinson to approve the minutes of the October 3, 2022. These minutes were unanimously approved.

Follow up discussion on voter access with Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk

City Clerk Vangjeli was welcomed. Tonight he will update the Commission on voting regulations since the beginning of the pandemic. The most significant change is the approval of the mail in ballot. In both the 2020 and 2022 elections there was an increase in voting taking advantage of the mail-in process. In 2020 there were over 35,000 ballots mailed to voters. Since 2020 the Secretary of State mailed a postcard to voters 45 days before an election. The City's election staff then enters absentee ballot request into the data base and about 30 days prior to the election the staff and volunteers put together the ballot for mailing. In 2022 there were about 18,000 ballots mailed.

The Mail-In ballot video was shown to the public. When ballots are returned with the envelop with the voters' signatures, the receipt is logged into the state voting data base which also alerts the voter the ballot has been received.

There are ballot drop off boxes at all fire stations, City Hall and early polling locations.

Another topic is early voting that has been around since 2016. The numbers have dropped over time. 16,000 in 2016, 13,000 in 2018 and in 2020 people did not take advantage of this option. As for 2022 there were less than 2,500 people. This option is available for 14 days on weekends and evening hour prior to Election Day.

With mail in voting, early voting and the 62 poll locations on Election Day, he feels there should not be a reason voters should not use the available options to vote. There are many city Departments involved in conducting elections.

Commission and public response:

How do we promote our civic responsibilities like voting?

This is our concern as well. The state election was 39% similar to Boston. There are a lot of mailers, commercials etc. We were down from 2018 and did not have early voting. The ballot questions brought some excitement and voters out and there was early voting option. Every single voter got a postcard about elections in September and again in October. The question is why the low turnout?

Could there be more visual signage leading up to Election Day? All election operations are the responsibility of the Election commission. Mr. Vangjeli reports to the commission when it comes to elections. In the past Alert Worcester and mobile signs have been used. However, he is not sure of the effectiveness of these approaches. Banners are used with initial cost. It takes overtime pay to have DPW install. This is the time to speak with the Election Commissioners to request additional funds in the city budget for increased signage.

What was the percentage of mail in ballots were returned?

The Clerk did not have exact figures and indicated between 50% and 60 % are usually returned. Sometimes those who received mail in ballots change their minds and vote early or on Election Day.

What does the Clerk see as the barriers to people voting?

The need for civic engagement at the high school level. This has improved thanks to Senator Chandler's effort. Many people are not aware of the importance of voting especially in local elections. Federal elections draw a lot more interest and people voting.

Putting politics aside and had a magic wand, what did the Clerk feel would be the most effective way to increase civic engagement and voter turnout?

State and local elections have become more accessible since 2020. This is a question the Clerk has been asked time and time again. Perhaps there needs to be a survey that addresses this concern. Local elections are complex and may contribute to low turnout. The Clerk will be working to educate the voters to help make it easier to vote.

What do you think the impact of Vote 16 will have?

The Clerk is well aware of this initiative. Worcester works with the schools each year and registered about 700 students a year. The state data base does not allow this information to be uploaded into this data base. If a state law would get passed than all that would be needed is a conversion for data to be inputted. Concern and confusion could occur when one year the students could vote and the next they could not because it is a state election. Need to make sure eligible voter rolls differentiate in years when 16 and 17 year olds would be eligible to vote.

Could you speak to students being poll workers and how that worked?

The Clerk was one of the first youth poll workers in 2008. The program was very helpful this year where the number of polling locations went from 52 to 62. The hope is the students have learned about the election process and will either come back from college, go elsewhere or stay in the city and be poll workers.

On the mail in ballot, where does the voter's signature go and what happens to the ballots in the drop boxes?

The Clerk described the mail in ballot as containing two envelopes, an instruction sheet and a ballot. Once the voter opens the envelope, there are two envelopes. The manila envelope has the voters name and signature space. The voter votes using the ballot puts the ballot in the manila envelope and seals the envelope. This envelope is then put into the white prepaid envelope and either mailed or put in a drop box at a fire station or City Hall. The keys are locked in a vault with the ballots at City Hall.

The process of getting the ballots from the drop boxes is as follows: There is a designated truck. The truck goes to the fire houses. There is a pouch and sign in sheet which says the number of ballots picked up. The ballots are brought back to City Hall and logged in. A voter using a drop box can call the office to verify their ballot was received.

When does an automatic recount happen and does this happen with ballot question as well?

All recounts in Massachusetts are by petition as far as the Clerk is aware.

Is there anything the Commission can do to support you and the election process?

The Clerk said he was present so he could take back concerns and ideas to the Election Commission. He also indicated the importance of educating the voting public about the new process for voting for School Committee. He sees this process complex with district members. Although voters are familiar with city council districts, the School Committee districts will be different. He will be tasked for making this clear to resident and voters along with the Election Commission. He would look forward to meeting with the Human Rights Commission in the months to come on this issue.

How do voters know if their mail in ballot has been counted?

When mail-in ballots are received, they are logged in to the State data base. Voters can log in to this database or call city hall Election office for verification. There are discussions taking place at the State level with a selected vendor about ballot alerts which would include verification of a ballot being received.

Is there a way to target areas where people are not voting?

This is the challenge. How do we get people out to vote?

Are we targeting intersections we know have low voter turnout or canvassing the polling location a day before an election? Worcester has an ordinance that political signage cannot be placed on public property. A conversation with City Council would be in order is there was to be any change in political signage on public property.

What is meant by an acceptable ballot?

The ballot is signed. Usually a note is sent to the voter with another ballot saying the original ballot was not signed and rejected.

A member of the public brought fourth concern that some people of color feel disenfranchised and don't think their vote means anything.

In response the Chairperson asked if a packet about voting could be sent home with public school children. The Clerk indicated this would mean having a conversation with the schools to see what is allowed.

The Clerk has mentioned a Clerk’s Civic Camp. Also there was a law passed a while ago to teach civic education in the eighth grade. What have been the results?

The Clerk’s Civics Engagement Camp works with Worcester University’s Urban Studies Department. The curriculum includes guest speakers like the District Attorney, etc. This happens during the April vacation. In October they go back and register youth as potential poll workers and voters. He has shared videos with Director Turchek about the Civic Camp. As for as the new law and the progress, the School Administration would be a better place to get information on the program achievement.

What process is in place for getting feedback after an election? This question comes as a result of being surprised about a polling location change.

The redistricting began in 2019. The particular location change was because the site could no longer support the polling site because the need to use the space internally. The redistricting process happens every 10 years. The Election commission meets every month and is open to receive feedback. It has been working with consultants on the School districting project.

The Chairperson summarized the reason why the subject of voting is on the Human Rights Commission emphasizing voting is a human rights issue and thanked the clerk for the presentation and the work he does and looks forward to further conversations with Mr. Vangjeli.

Update on Vote16 Initiative

In September the Commission had a discussion about disparities in the voter turnout with a Professor from MIT and some strategies on how to move those numbers to greater participation. The Voter 16 Initiative was mentioned. A few years ago, Worcester Research Bureau published a report that mentioned this Initiative as a recommendation. That item was reviewed by the Commission last month and it was suggested this might be a way to increase participation in municipal elections. This cannot happen without State authorization.

The Worcester Youth Council was informed of the Vote16 Initiative and decided to run with it. They are doing weekly social media education articles to encourage interest. The expectation is they will be sending out a petition to various groups and High School Councils for youth to sign in favor of this initiative.

Commissioner Shemitz had gone with Director Turchek a few months ago to hear students in the civics course give a presentation on this topic. She thinks that the Youth Council may need additional support and asked the Commission what might be helpful involvement for the Commission to offer.

The Commission will take the question under advisement and continue to receive updates. One Commissioner acknowledged the importance of this effort and sees it as a priority.

Notice: Justice Department Launches Investigation of Worcester Police Department

The Special Litigation Section of the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Massachusetts will jointly conduct this investigation. Individuals with relevant information are encouraged to contact the Department of Justice via email at community.wpd@usdoj.gov or by toll free phone at 888-221-6023. Individuals can also report civil rights violations regarding this or other matters using the Civil Rights Division’s reporting portal available at <https://civilrights.justice.gov>
Press release: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-launches-investigation-worcester-police-department>

The Commission wants to acknowledge what is happening in the community. One member of the public stated he was glad this was happening and that the investigators will listen. He hopes this will be an opportunity to reform the police department.

Another member of the public asked: What is the role of the Commission? The Chairperson indicated they would have to see how the investigation evolves. The Commission will act when the time comes. There have been conversations with the police at the Commission's meetings. We each probably have our own views however the Commission cannot speak on behalf of the city.

One Commissioner suggested if members of the public have suggestions for what our role could be, this would be helpful. Please let the Commission know.

Cara Henderson, Community Outreach Coordinator with the United States Attorney's Office attended the meeting and shared with the Commission and public that the US Attorney's Office is interested in receiving public input virtually or otherwise in a convenience and respectful way. Please share thoughts.

Sharing information on cold weather warming centers, food pantries, and winter clothing donations and distribution

Two warming centers at this point are at the public library and senior center. Other places in neighborhoods are being sought as the winter go on.

The Café at All Saints Episcopal Church on Pleasant Street operated by the Worcester Fellowship is open on Thursdays from 12 -2:30pm, includes a warming center and other resources. They need warm socks and disposable hand warmers.

There are other resources and will be posted on the city's website.

Information on the December Homelessness Vigil will be coming out shortly.

Food pantries are accepting donations.

There will be more information about resources for persons who are unhoused at the next meeting on January 9, 2023.

Adjournment

The Chairperson motioned to adjourn, Commissioner Lewis seconded the motion and all approved on a roll call.

Next meeting: Monday January 9, 2023, 6pm, Annual homelessness update (In person at City Hall and over WebEx)