

**Human Rights Commission Meeting Minutes
Monday, June 12, 2023, 6:00pm**

Esther Howland Chamber (3rd flr.) City Hall
455 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01608

Virtual meeting link:

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

Meeting number: 2311 007 3698 Password: C6GputMFp79 Phone: 415-655-0001

Attendance:

Present: Chairperson Ellen Shemitz, Guillermo Creamer Jr., Elizabeth O'Callahan, Charles Hopkins, Bernard Reese

Absent: Jamaine Ortiz, LaToya Lewis, Jacqueline Yang

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Call to order and introductions

Chairperson Shemitz opened the meeting at 6:00pm and welcomed members and the public.

The Chairperson began with an acknowledgement of the traditional, ancestral, territory of the Nipmuc, the first people of Massachusetts and those whose land we are convening on tonight. While the Nipmuc history predates written history, records from the 1600s inform us that the original inhabitants of Worcester dwelled principally in three locations: Pakachoag, Tatesset (Tatnuck), and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave). It is important to make this acknowledgment and to honor the ancestors that have come before us. It is all too easy to live in a land without ever hearing the traditional names and the history of the people who first resided and prospered in these lands and continue to reside and prosper. The Human Rights Commission was established to promote the city's human rights policies. It is the policy of the City to assure equal access, for every individual, to and benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment and exercise of civil rights and to encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all individuals in the city. Our work requires us to address institutional racism so that as a community we can achieve racial equity. Our work also requires us to make visible the unheard, unearned, and unquestioned privilege enjoyed by some members of our community to the detriment of others. We take time to make this acknowledgement, to educate, so a path can be cleared for healing.

The Chairperson shared the terms of the Commission:

The term "institutional racism" refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies create difference outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies

may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and the oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color. The term “racial equity” is the active state in which race does not determine one’s livelihood or success. It is achieved through proactive work to address root causes of inequalities to improve outcomes for all individuals. That is, through the elimination or shifting of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them. The term “privilege” describes the unearned social power and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group. For example: “white privilege” and “male privilege.” Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we are trained to not see it but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage against those who do not have it.

Approval of meeting minutes from May 1, 2023

Commissioner Reese moved to approve the meeting minutes from May 1, 2023. Commissioner O’Callahan seconded the motion. With a vote of 4-0-1, quorum was not established, and the approval of the meeting minutes will be pushed to the subsequent commission meeting.

Conversation on Voter Education with City Clerk Niko Vangjeli

A. Voter Education

City Clerk Niko Vangjeli joined the Commission via WebEx to discuss voter education to resolve issues surrounding barriers to voting and the dwindling voting rates in municipal elections.

Chairperson Shemitz shared the following statistics from the Research Bureau’s brief on Worcester’s local elections: for the last 3 municipal elections, an average of 17% of the population voted. Districts 1 and 5 reported a 10% voter turnout.

City Clerk Vangjeli explained that for the last 3 decades, there has been a general trend (not only in the city of Worcester, but in Massachusetts as well) of there being higher voter turnout for federal elections, yet low votership during local elections. The City Clerk further elaborated his point by mentioning Boston’s most recent mayoral election only averaging a 23% voter turnout, despite it being a historical election due to there being more minority candidates being represented on the ballot. The City Clerk is optimistic that with the implementation of mail in ballots for local elections, voter turnout will increase. He goes on to mention that 7,500 voters have already opted to vote by mail and hopes that for the upcoming election in September, that more voters will be compelled to cast their ballots.

The City Clerk pivoted to discuss voter education initiatives for the upcoming local election. To eliminate some of the pressure associated with voting, individually

tailored post cards will be mailed to registered voters in Worcester detailing the voter's specific polling address, the election days, and the city council and school committee districts. The election commission webpage on the City of Worcester website was updated to be more user friendly and provide easier access to voting information such as a candidate list and a voter detail search tool for voters to locate their polling address, city council and school committee districts, and voter status. The City Clerk provided a demonstration of the search tool's functionality. Maps of the city council and school committee districts were also added to the webpage for voter ease.

The City Clerk paused the presentation to take questions.

Question to the City Clerk by the Chairperson: in a previous Human Rights Commission meeting, a Harvard professor mentioned media outreach being an effective tool to encourage voting. Does City Hall have any media outreach plans?

Response:

Yes, City Hall will be utilizing "Alert Worcester," the city's alert system, to share voting information. City Hall is also working with cable providers to share public service announcements and cable coverage on the voting process. The city does not have a budget to purchase advertisements from cable services, so the city is relying on local news outlets to assist with sharing voting education resources.

Question to the City Clerk by the Chairperson: is it typical for cities of a similar size to have a budget that could afford a means for better media outreach?

Response:

No, even in state elections there is not a budget for media outreach. The Election Commission's budget prioritizes election administration costs, which leaves out funding for media outreach.

Question to the City Clerk by Commissioner Reese: for clarification, do the election costs total \$60,000?

Response:

No, it costs \$60,000 to mail ballots to the voters. Its costs over \$35,000 for the postage to mail the ballots and that processing is done by a vendor. In terms of election costs per election a few variables need to be accounted for: first, there are 7 days of in-person early voting, which can cost an average of \$3000-\$4000 depending on the voter turnout each day; then there's mail in voting 30 days in advance of in-person voting; there are additional costs in designing and printing the ballots as well as putting the ballot kits

together; postage for mail in voting costs \$0.80-\$0.90 per voter; managing the 65 polling locations needs to be accounted for as well. Everything included makes election costs total a few hundred thousand dollars per election.

Commissioner Creamer abstained from asking questions.

Question to the City Clerk by Commissioner O'Callahan: are there individuals who are taking up the issue of decreased voter turnout in a non-partisan manner?

Response:

Part of the City Clerk's plan is to work with non-profit organizations to brainstorm ways to reach voters directly. The City Clerk has provided fliers, both in English and Spanish, to non-profit organizations to hand out to the communities they serve.

Question to the City Clerk by Commissioner O'Callahan: what are the polling places with the least amount of voter turnout?

Response:

Where there is a heavy population of college students, there is decreased voter turnout since they are voting by mail for their hometown's local election and not Worcester's. The Holy Cross polling precinct has low voter registration and turnout. Some precincts only have a handful of registered voters.

Question to the City Clerk by Commissioner O'Callahan: for clarification, what are the areas with high-density populations, but lower voter turnout?

Response:

Inner-city Worcester has lower voter turnout than the west side. The issue of decreased voter turnout is multi-faceted and is influenced by socio-economic status. The City Clerk is striving to make voting as accessible as possible, but is still struggling to encourage residents to vote despite developing initiatives for densely populated areas.

Question to the City Clerk by the Chairperson: what is the city doing to ensure there are translators to assist voters?

Response:

There are multi-lingual volunteers at each polling location. About 80% of the polling locations have Spanish translators. High School students are volunteering to translate, not just in Spanish but in other languages as well. The city is also relying on the

Language Line on election day and all poll workers have an iPhone they can use to call into the service.

The City Clerk resumed the presentation.

The City Clerk further discussed his hopes for increased votership through the option of mail in voting. Mail in voting is a convenient way to vote since voters are directly receiving the ballot and have access to drop off locations throughout the city. Residents have resonated with the mail in voting process. As well, the City Clerk mentioned the schedule for early voting has been finalized and will be available to the public soon. For election day, the City Clerk is working on making a flyer to explain the voting process. The City Clerk is stressing that voting for school committee districts will not alter the voting process. Voters will still receive one ballot and the poll workers will be fully trained to clarify the voting process.

The City Clerk paused again to take questions.

Question to the City Clerk by Commissioner Hopkins: how effective is the youth voter registration program?

Response:

The Election Commission ran the civic camp again in April and the students who participate in the camp usually volunteer at the polls, which promotes civic engagement. The Commission goes to the Worcester public high schools and registers 700-900 students, who are eligible, to vote. When students are eligible to get their permit, when they go to the RMV, they can get pre-registered to vote—when they turn 18, they will get automatically registered to vote.

Question to the City Clerk by the Chairperson: what can the Human Rights Commission do to support the work of the Elections Commission?

Response:

Having a bigger conversation with the Board of Election Commission for the November election on voter education would be helpful, perhaps one or two sessions during September and mid-October.

The City Clerk will seek commission from the Board to see if the meeting(s) can happen. The Human Rights Commission showed interest in a meeting with the Board of Election Commission.

Question to the City Clerk by the Chairperson: would it be possible to partner with civics teachers to get voting information out to students and their families?

Response:

A similar idea was already presented to the School Committee and the Super Intendant about three weeks ago. There are plans to expand the civics camp and hopefully bring in all 7 public high schools.

Question to the City Clerk by the Commissioner Reeves: how you tried going to religious services or safe spaces for minority groups to encourage voting?

Response:

The Election Commission has partnered with Worcester Interfaith and other non-profits to get the word out to over 100 religious' institutions.

The City Clerk closed his presentation by sharing his intentions to reach out to Director Turcek about planning two joint meetings between the Human Rights and Elections Commissions as well as asking the Chairperson of the Elections Commission to move to approve the meeting.

The Chairperson moved to approve a joint meeting between the Human Rights and Election Commissions. Commissioner Hopkins seconded the motion. Quorum was not established for the vote, and it will be carried to the next meeting in July.

Planning for future meetings:

A. Annual Meeting with Worcester Police Department (July 10, 2023)

Planning discussion:

- Director Turcek has already sent out an invitation with a list of questions.
- Are there additions questions or concerns that need to be relayed before the department attends the meeting? With increased attention on the Justice Department's investigation and the civil rights lawsuit filed weeks ago, the Chairperson wants to ensure all potential questions are addressed.
- No additional questions were proposed.

B. Human Rights Commission August Meeting (August 7, 2023)

- There is no formalized topic for the meeting, so the Chairperson is seeking ideas.
- Commissioner O'Callahan suggested readdressing the topic of municipal broadband in a future meeting.
- Commissioners who are attending a summit on the topic will reach out to presenters to see if they are available to meet with the Commission for the August meeting or perhaps future meetings.

Other: Commissioner Robinson offered a brief farewell speech as his time serving in the Human Rights Commission came to a close. Commissioner Hopkins requested feedback from the City Manager about the Human Rights Commission receiving extra responsibilities or enforcement capabilities.

Adjournment at 7:00pm Next meeting: Monday July 10, 2023, 6pm, Worcester City Hall– Annual Meeting with Worcester Police Department