

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, JUNE 20, 2023
7:00 p.m.
VIRTUAL (Zoom)

Members Present

Danielle Beach
Marc Bendick
Lisl Brunner, Chair
Matt Harris
Katherine O'Connell
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
Megan Prince
William Tom Reeder, Jr.
Jon Thompson

Staff Present

Jean Kelleher, Director
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Susan Kellom
David Rigsby, Vice Chair
Scott Schwartz, Vice Chair
Conrad Sylvanus

Guests

Sosseh Prom, African Communities Together (ACT)

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Commissioner Harris

Commissioner Harris called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. Introductions were made. Chair Brunner joined the meeting at 7:15 p.m.

2. Approval of Minutes of May Meeting

Upon a motion Commissioner Harris, seconded by Commissioner Reeder, Jr., the Commission approved the minutes of the May meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye.

3. Guest: Sosseh Prom, African Communities Together

Ms. Prom started by saying that she is the Housing Justice Director for the African Communities Together (ACT) and said that they are a national non-profit. She added that they are here to empower African immigrants in the USA to fight for the dignity and respect that they deserve, and they do this in a different way. They also do a lot of advocacy work and provide direct resources to African American members; they help them lead campaigns that are near them. She added that there is a community of African tenants at Southern Towers that they are currently assisting.

Ms. Prom talked about what that housing campaign is and what it looks like. Also, Ms. Prom talked about some of the housing issues that some community members are facing. She also asked for the Commission's support in their advocacy with the City directly.

Ms. Prom talked about Southern Towers apartments and said that it has over 2,500 units and over 5,000 residents. She said that it has always been known as kind of a safe haven for the immigrant community.

In, August of 2020, a private equity landlord called the CIM Group bought Southern Towers, and since then they have been seeing a lot of predatory actions, which are attacking the most vulnerable residents and putting them at risk of displacement.

CIM Group filed evictions during the eviction moratorium and gave tenants insufficient notice. CIM Group has been giving tenants five-day notices without mentioning the right to thirty-day notices.

Ms. Prom also mentioned that maintenance has been an issue since CIM Group took over, and tenants have been complaining about mold issue and unresolved maintenance requests.

Ms. Prom stated that they are seeing that CIM Group has been hiking up rent prices and said that tenants are seeing rent increases of 9% or more.

She stated that CIM group is trying to get away with doing the bare minimum, and also engaging in a lot of predatory actions. She also stated that tenants are being moved to a month-to-month lease, which is more expensive and less stable.

Ms. Prom also explained that CIM Group have changed how utilities are billed, combining them with the rent, which has substantially increased the price for the tenants. She also stated that she believes that at this point in time, CIM Group is trying to push out lower income tenants.

Ms. Prom asked for the Commission's support in making a recommendation to City Council for an Alexandria specific Language Access Act or Statute at the state level. Maybe putting a recommendation or a guideline that will recommend that landlords translate their leases in relevant languages to the extent possible.

Ms. Prom also asked for the Commission's recommendation to the City's Mayor and Council to meet the African Communities Together request to publicly condemn this type of actions.

Chair Brunner stated that the Commission had spoken about, perhaps in the Fall, or sometime in the future having tenants or maybe the tenant's association come before the commission and talk about their individual complaints.

The presentation was followed by questions from the Commission. Chair Brunner thanked Sosseh Prom for the presentation.

4. Executive Committee

Director Kelleher gave a summary of the Executive Committee meeting and said that Chair Brunner went over what was discussed at the Chair's meeting on housing issues with African Community Together and the Legal Aid Justice Center.

The Executive Committee also talked about the outreach at the ALIVE food hub on South Van Dorn, the second Saturday of every month. Director Kelleher stated that she needed a volunteer to do the food hub on Saturday, July 8th. Commissioner Palmer Johnson volunteered to do the outreach at the ALIVE food hub on Saturday, July 8.

Commissioner Thompson stated that the Pride Event was well attended, and it was a great event and said that Commissioners met a lot of people from the community.

Director Kelleher reported that there is movement on the Rainbow Crosswalk and said that she had forwarded the memo that Councilman McPike had presented to City Council on June 13.

5. Elections of Chair and Vice Chairs

Commissioner Harris reported that he has contacted the Commissioners about serving as an officer and said that the committee has now four or five people interested in the two Vice Chair positions, and Chair Brunner has indicated that she is happy to serve as a Chair for one more term. Commissioner Palmer Johnson stated that she had received a notice of someone who was interested and there was one additional person who was interested in being Chair. Commissioner Harris stated that Commissioner Palmer Johnson and he will come up with a slate for the July meeting.

6. Old & New Business

Commissioner Bendick, Jr. stated that he was interested in knowing what is happening with the Sheriff's Office ICE issue. Director Kelleher stated that she had shared with the Commission a statement about what Fairfax County is doing and it is consistent with what Sheriff Casey is doing, and as far as we can tell, all of the jurisdictions in Northern Virginia are approaching it the same way. They do not have an agreement with ICE anymore, but they do follow Federal law when someone completes a sentence and has a release date. All of the jurisdictions are saying they are not holding anybody past their release date.

Chair Brunner stated that she had followed up with the Legal Aid Justice Center and with the Tenants Workers United and told them about the Commission's conversation and they are deciding now whether they would like for the Commission to offer to mediate a meeting with them and with the Sheriff, whether they want to seek more information or whether they like to request one of the Commission's public meetings at which both groups come.

6. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported that the Commission for Women met on Tuesday, June 13. She reported that they primarily discussed their 50th anniversary planning commission. She said that they do not have funds for the event, and they do not have the ability to fund raise and are asking other Commissions if they have suggestions that they can use in order to raise money.

Director Kelleher reported that the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities had its awards ceremony on June 13. The award winners included a young woman that goes to Alexandria City High School, and she will be attending American University in the fall, and Mac Slover was the recipient of the advocate award, and he is the key founder of the Miracle League.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging heard from Colonel James Paige, who is with the Concerned Citizens Network of Alexandria (CCNA), a non-profit organization established in 2009.

Vice Chair Rigsby reported that he attended the Boards and Commissions meeting at the new facility on the West End in the Del Pepper building. He stated that they invited all of the Commission to use their meeting space to do their meetings, and Commissions can also arrange to have a tour of the facility in the fall. He said that Kate Garvey talked about all the services that they offer.

Commissioner Harris brought up an issue about whether the City's website should have a twitter link or follow us at twitter. He said that he will probably write a letter to the editor on his behalf about this issue.

7. **Announcements /Adjournment**

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

Palmer Johnson/Thompson **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:18 p.m.