

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION  
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2024  
7:00 p.m., City Hall  
301 King Street, Room 1101  
The Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

Lisl Brunner  
April Breslaw  
Matt Harris (participated by phone)  
Manisha Maniyar  
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson, Vice Chair  
Megan Prince  
Scott Schwartz  
Jon Thompson, Chair

Staff Present

Anna McClure, Investigator/Acting Director  
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Admin. Support

Members Excused

Marc Bendick, Vice Chair  
Iulia Fratila  
Tom Reeder, Jr.  
David Rigsby  
Conrad Sylvanus

Guest

Noah Klose, Director of Community Outreach, Home Not Borders

**1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair Jon Thompson**

Chair Thompson called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. Introductions were made.

Chair Thompson stated that this is the first meeting after the elections and that, later in the agenda, the Commission will discuss its role for the next few years and how that role might change because of the challenges we might face as a community.

**2. Approval of the Minutes of the October Meeting**

Upon a motion by Chair Thompson, seconded by Commissioner Breslaw, the minutes of the October meeting were approved. All Commissioners present voted aye.

**3. Noah Klose, Director of Community Outreach, Home Not Borders**

Chair Thompson welcomed Noah Klose, Director of Community Outreach, Home Not Borders. Mr. Klose explained that Home Not Borders is a greater D.C. area refugee resettlement nonprofit that partners and works with local agencies, volunteers, and nonprofit organizations. The families they work with are broken into three categories: refugees, asylum seekers, and parolees (a relatively new term). He explained that they are part of a national network, but the international network is administered by the U.N. to facilitate these resettlements. There are between 30 and 100 million refugees in the world right now, and the U.S. usually takes about half of the global refugee resettlements every year. He stated that it would be a good year if they resettled 200,000, but the U.S. usually takes in about 80,000-120,000 each year.

Mr. Klose noted that for a refugee to be allowed to enter the U.S. they go through an eight-step process: 1) obtain refugee status 2) referral to the U.S. 3) interview, background check, and fingerprints 4) case review 5) medical screening 6) agency match 7) cultural orientation, and 8) a second security check. The entire process, on average, takes about seven years. Once the refugees make it to the U.S., they receive a stipend of \$1,425 per individual, housing, medical assistance, transportation, food, and furniture. They also get a case worker, who starts enrolling them in medical assistance and food assistance, and getting kids enrolled in school.

Mr. Klose stated that the main program for Home not Borders is getting homes set up. He reported that Home Not Borders helped 338 refugee families move into fully furnished homes this year. This occurs largely with donated furniture, but they buy new mattresses and bed frames. It costs about \$3,200 to furnish a two-bedroom apartment, if bought new, but they charge a flat fee to the resettlement agencies of \$165 per person and \$130 for the beds.

He reported that 65% of the refugee families they serve are Afghan families. The next largest populations are from Venezuela and Syria. He said that they mostly work in Maryland and Northern Virginia. They have an Artisan Empowerment Program, especially for women, to make artisan goods using recycled materials. The presentation was followed by questions.

#### **4. Old & New Business**

Chair Thompson talked about the impact of the election and the incoming federal administration. He has talked to members of City Council and the new mayor. The biggest concern is how the City shifts and gets prepared for the worst possible outcome. First, if there is a mass layoff of federal employees, how will that impact the local community? The needs in the community will rise and there is concern about funding. The second concern is about minority communities, especially the immigrant population. If the federal government tries to “deputize” local law enforcement and how will the City prepare not to cooperate with that?

Chair Thompson stated that he talked to Jean Kelleher, and she agreed to come and talk to the Commission in a panel discussion at the January meeting. The Commission will invite someone from the ACLU and someone from the NAACP.

The Commission discussed what the City could do if people are targeted by the federal government. Chair Thompson suggested inviting the Police Chief and Sheriff to be part of the panel with Jean. Vice Chair Palmer Johnson will contact Mark Levine to get information about and invite him to the January meeting. Chair Thompson suggested the Commission take next month to research and compile samples of other cities. He suggested having a draft proposal to review and possibly vote on at the next meeting to send as a recommendation to City Council.

#### **Community Policing Review Board ordinance update**

Chair Thompson stated that he and Commissioner Schwartz have been working on the Community Policing Review Board issue. They reviewed the ordinance and proposed edits and attended the public hearing to give their recommendations. City Council had a legislative meeting and discussed the proposed amendments. He spoke to several members of Council and told them about the Commission’s wish for a permanent liaison position added to the Board. He

reported that Council postponed the ordinance final vote until January because there was insufficient public comment.

Chair Thompson said that the Chair of the CPRB is willing to help secure a permanent liaison position. Chair Thompson stated there is disagreement on the Board having subpoena powers, which is a power that they currently have under the original ordinance. Commissioner Schwartz explained that the subpoena power in the original ordinance gave the board subpoena authority. The City Attorney does not want the Board to have subpoena power. He said that his opinion is that they represent the City and if somebody sues the City because of police misconduct, their job is to defend the City and there may be reasons why they do not want subpoena authority resting within an independent body. Commissioner Schwartz explained that the CPRB decided the subpoena power should reside with the person who conducts the investigations, the Police Auditor, so they want to amend the ordinance to transfer subpoena power to the Police Auditor.

Commissioner Schwartz stated that he and Chair Thompson believe that to be truly independent, rather than rely on the Police Chief to provide witnesses at his or her discretion, there should be subpoena authority vested in an independent reviewing body. He added that one of the things that they want to discuss tonight is whether to draft a letter in support of the Police Auditor having independent authority for a variety of reasons. Upon a motion by Commissioner Schwartz, seconded by Vice Chair Palmer Johnson, the Human Rights Commission will support the efforts of the Civilian Policing Review Board in retaining subpoena authority in the ordinance. The motion passed unanimously. Commissioner Schwartz explained the process of appointing a liaison from the Commission to the CPRB, if the seat is added, - the Chair or designee of the Chair can do it.

#### Discussion of public request for Palestinian support

Chair Thompson mentioned the ceasefire resolution the Commission passed and sent with a letter to City Council. The Commission has not heard anything from members of the Council. He added that last month they had a request from folks in the community about divestment.

He reported that he had spoken to current members of City Council and those who are soon to be City Council members about this issue. From what he has heard and what he has been able to gather, there are a lot of unknowns with this issue. He explained that there are a lot of different investments that happen in the City, including retirement plans other than pensions. Some of these plans are controlled by employees and some of these plans are controlled by unions, and for a lot of them, the City has no power in terms of what is invested. Chair Thompson also stated that he does not feel the Commission has authority or expertise. He stated that at this time it would be appropriate for the Commission to re-send the resolution and remind them about the what was previously sent. He also said that he spoke with four members of Council who said that they would be okay with the Commission re-upping this correspondence. Upon a motion by Vice Chair Palmer Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Prince, the Commission will resend the prior letter with additional comments and suggestions to the new mayor and City Council members, after their installation on January 2, 2025. The motion passed with six commissioners voting aye, one abstaining, and one voting nay. Chair Thompson will draft the letter, and Commissioner Prince will review it.

### Rainbow Crosswalk – Del Ray

Chair Thompson stated that he talked to a few City Council members, and they are all in support of it. The problem is that they want to find a time and a particular crosswalk that is not going to be impacted by road construction.

### Follow-up Letter/Invite – Alexandria City Public Schools

Chair Thompson suggested inviting Alexandria City Public Schools staff to the February meeting. Commissioner Brunner suggested that the Chair and one other member of the Commission meet with the ACPS members.

## **5. Liaison Reports**

Commissioner Prince reported that the ACPD heard from someone who was trying to get a sense of whether there was a mobility concern with the A-frame signs on King Street or any other street. They also had people who are wheelchair users give their opinion on that. She announced that it is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ACPD and they are doing a little celebration next month.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson reported that the Alexandria Commission for Women had a presentation by DASH, which has been posted online. She also reported that the Commission for Women supports the Sexual Assault Center and Domestic Violence Program, and they will be holding the Children Holiday Party on December 12.

Commissioner Schwartz reported that the Commission on HIV/AIDS met yesterday and did not meet a quorum. He said they discussed the existence of the Commission, since they have multiple times failed to meet a quorum. The question is whether it makes sense to continue that Commission's existence since it covers a single disease that is mostly controlled. He added that he has a meeting with Gloria Sitton from the Clerk's office to talk about what makes sense for Boards and Commissions, in general, that are not reaching quorums.

## **6. Public Comment**

The Commission heard from several community members, who provided statements on the conflict between Palestine and Israel. They expressed concerns about taxpayer dollars being used to fund the Virginia Israel Advisory Board and asked the Commission to recommend to City Council that the City divest from all investments in Israel.

## **7. Announcements /Adjournment**

**MOTION:** Adjourn the meeting.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson/Commissioner Prince **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:16 p.m.

## **Rose Esber, Human Rights Commission public comment November 19, 2024**

We are asking the Human Rights Commission to recommend city divestment from all companies supporting Israel's genocide, apartheid, and illegal military occupation. Your predecessors on the Human Rights Commission recommended divesting from an apartheid state, and you can too.

Saving lives requires divesting from the weapons of genocide, apartheid, and military occupation. Would you have supported divesting from a portfolio of rope and shackles during slavery, or poison gas during WWII, or the systems of oppression that maintained Bantustans?

Or would you have been more concerned with pensions and investment portfolios while genocides and crimes against humanity were happening. A skilled financial advisor can craft a profitable portfolio that doesn't finance genocide. Investing in crimes against humanity is collaboration!

Upholding human rights requires putting people before profits. Palestinians are human beings with human rights. Palestinians are our families and friends.

A ceasefire is not possible while the United States continues to provide weapons of mass murder to apartheid, genocidal Israel.

Israel's indiscriminate bombing of Gaza and Lebanon is a human catastrophe **and a climate catastrophe**. Israel's carpet bombing is generating massive amounts of planet-heating emissions and accelerating the climate crisis—which affects all of us.

The carbon emissions from Israel's bombs, tanks, fighter jets, and other military actions in the first **two months** of Israel's war on Gaza were **higher** than the annual carbon footprint of **20 nations**.

U.S. cargo planes flying military supplies to Israel accounted for **nearly half** of all the carbon emissions. And American taxpayers are paying for 74% of Israel's genocide and ecocide in Gaza and Lebanon.

Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh said, "Wars are catastrophic for the global environment, not just for the local environment...the hurricanes that are now affecting the United States...are all related."

Your voices are important in setting the human rights policy of the city. We ask you to recommend that city council divest our tax dollars from **any** investments contributing to Israel's ecocide, genocide, apartheid, and military occupation. It is the morally and legally correct course of action for the Human Rights Commission.

## Alexandria Human Rights Commission Meeting, November 19, 2024

My name is Zeina Azzam and I speak to you as a Palestinian community member in Alexandria.

As Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim Americans, with diverse allies from all over Alexandria, we are profoundly anguished and grieving. We've watched the killing of over 43,000 Palestinians in Gaza, including at least 17,000 children— though this likely is a massive undercount. Gaza now has the largest cohort of child amputees in history. The International Court of Justice has ruled that a genocide is plausibly unfolding in Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people are now facing real starvation. Israel is also imprisoning and assassinating Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and bombing their homes, businesses, and farmland. And now it is bombing numerous areas of Lebanon and Syria and killing thousands of civilians there, too.

In addition to a genocide, what is happening in Gaza is also a scholasticide, where hundreds of schools and universities have been demolished and students and teachers killed. A domicide, where most of the homes and buildings have been destroyed. An ecocide, where fully 50 percent of the trees and farmland in Gaza have been decimated, with Israel dropping explosives the equivalent of two nuclear bombs on Gaza, with ecologically devastating results.

As a commission devoted to safeguarding human rights, I know these facts are disturbing to you. I believe your motivation to serve on this commission is a moral one, that you want to help “save lives.” What will you do to stand up for the human rights of the thousands of people who are being killed, maimed, and displaced by the state of Israel?

One history lesson is from South Africa, which faced growing international economic pressure until it dismantled its apartheid regime. And now, we must stop Israel's war crimes and violations of international law. It's time for Alexandria to consider divesting from Israeli companies that support the oppression of Palestinians, and for the Human Rights Commission to lead the way. The HRC's 1985 resolution to divest from companies that buttressed South African apartheid is a perfect model. Economic pressure worked on South Africa, and it will work on Israel.

The HRC's South Africa resolution said: “As Americans, and as Virginians... we cannot ignore gross and unconscionable violations of human rights in other parts of the world, particularly when the policies and programs of our city may, through its investments, provide support for the continued violation of those rights.” You could now use these lines verbatim to introduce a new resolution, one urging City Council to divest from Israeli companies in Alexandria's pension funds and investments. Thank you.