

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2024
7:00 p.m., City Hall
301 King Street, Room 1101
The Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

Marc Bendick, Vice Chair
Iulia Fratila
Matt Harris
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson, Vice Chair
Megan Prince (participated by phone)
Tom Reeder, Jr.
Conrad Sylvanus
David Rigsby
Scott Schwartz
Jon Thompson, Chair

Staff Present

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

Members Excused

Lisl Brunner
April Breslaw
Manisha Maniyar

Guests

Kevin Harris, ARHA Board of Commissioners & Alexandria Resident Council

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair Jon Thompson

Vice Thompson called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. Introductions were made. Chair Thompson announced that Commissioner Schwartz and Commissioner Harris are members of the Executive Committee. He told commissioners to contact them with any questions.

2. Approval of Minutes of the July Meeting

Upon a motion by Commissioner Harris, seconded by Vice Chair Bendick, the minutes of the September meeting were approved. All Commissioners present voted aye.

3. Kevin Harris, ARHA Board of Commissioners & Alexandria Resident Council

Chair Thompson welcomed Kevin Harris, ARHA Board of Commissioners and Alexandria Resident Council. Kevin Harris stated that his role as a commissioner is for residents, He is the President of the citywide resident association and said there are resident councils at each of the properties ARHA manages, giving the residents a sense of empowerment and organizational voice. Typically, if a property has an issue, they come to him and other members of the citywide resident association to communicate those. Mr. Harris brings the issues to the CEO or the director of the relevant department. He has been big on resident empowerment, and he makes sure residents go directly to their leaders about any issues, which the previous CEO was supportive of. Residents will contact the CEO about their issues and copy Mr. Harris, and things will get resolved. He reported that most of residents feel empowered, understand what their rights are and that their voices have value, and are not afraid to raise their voices.

Mr. Harris reported that ARHA has about 1,500 units scattered across the City, but there are main ARHA sites -such as Hopkins-Tancil, Chatham Square, Samuel Madden, Andrew Adkins,

West Glebe, and Saxony Square. Mr. Harris reported that the vast majority of ARHA funding comes from HUD, and the City approves projects and provides some funding.

Mr. Harris explained that there are different types of “Section 8” vouchers. Some stick to the property and others go with the families, so they can go where they want within the City, as long as the landlord takes the voucher. He said Virginia passed a law prohibiting landlords owning more than a certain number of units from refusing to rent to someone because they are using a voucher. Mr. Harris explained that one issue is that vouchers are for a set amount per month. Private landlords can raise the rent as much as they want and residents cannot longer afford to stay there, because their voucher amount does not change. Another issue is security deposits, which are very high - sometimes landlords ask for a \$6,000 deposit.

Mr. Harris answered questions regarding ARHA waitlists, stating that the waitlist is full. He answered a question about the Ladrey project, saying it is underway, but they have not started relocating residents. He said there are many misconceptions about how ARHA conducts business. He explained that, when ARHA does redevelopment, they have a one-for-one unit replacement on units and usually bring in more units than are torn down. Current residents have the first right of refusal. The Samuel Madden project will be the first to start relocating.

Mr. Harris said the Commission can help by advocating to restrict how much landlords can raise rents and how fast they can do so for voucher holders. He answered questions about how residents learn about their rights. They provide a handbook about residents’ rights and resident representatives communicate that information. He answered a question about the trends in the complaints received. He said that a lot of them are related to maintenance, fees, and evictions.

Mr. Harris explained that the ARHA Board of Commissioners sets policies and approves development projects and partners. They also select the ARHA CEO. The day-to-day operation is taken care of by the CEO for the most part. The City selects and votes for the Board of Commissioners, but ARHA is an independent agency. Commissioner Schwartz told Mr. Harris to inform residents that the Human Rights Office can assist with discrimination issues.

4. Executive Committee Meeting

Discussion with ACPS Leadership

Chair Thompson reported that officials from ACPS came to speak with the Executive Committee. Dr. Jackson is the Chief of Student Services and Equity, and she seems to be more engaged with students’ behavior. Dr. Page is the Chief Accountability and Research Officer. Chair Thompson said that, after speaking to them, the Executive Committee determined that they probably were not the most qualified officials to talk to about the issues the Commission has raised. The Committee thinks it is necessary to ask of the high school deans to come to speak on how they handle discipline of students. They also want to talk to the HR Director. Chair Thompson said the Commission will send another letter to request that a Dean and an HR representative come before the Commission, which Commissioner Schwartz volunteered to draft.

Chair Thompson gave an update on rainbow crosswalks and said would like to focus on the Del Ray area and hopes to make a push with businesses. He said it does not have to be fancy bricks.

Community Policing Review Board Update

Commissioner Schwartz attended the CPRB meeting earlier this month. The CPRB had the list of questions that the Commission provided, many of which dealt with why certain delays had occurred. He said the CPRB Chair told them that, essentially, the delays were because they were trying to get their bylaws set up and were working through the MOU.

Chair Thompson said that, when looking at the ordinance, it is clear the MOU has to be signed by APD before CPRB can be up and running. There is nothing in the ordinance that gives APD a timeline for signing the MOU. He said that they are still in the process of making changes to the ordinance, and one of the changes to be proposed is adding a non-voting member position from the Human Rights Commission. He reported that a new Police Chief has been hired and this might cause some delay, but he hopes that it does not. Chair Thompson said that if there is not movement by January on the MOU being signed or the ordinance changes, he thinks this is when the Commission should write a letter to Council to express their frustration. Upon a motion by Commissioner Schwartz, seconded by Vice Chair Johnson, the Human Rights Commission will submit a request to the City Council, to coincide with the delivery of the recommended CPRB amendments to their Ordinance, that there will be a non-voting position on CPRB for a member of the Human Rights Commission. The motion passed unanimously.

5. Old/New Business

City Manager's FY2026 Budget Priorities Memo

Acting Director McClure reported that she forwarded the City Manager's memo to all Boards and Commissions letting them know that there is a window for high-level, initial budget input. The City Council budget retreat is November 23rd, at which they will set priorities for the budget.

Human Rights Office Updates

Acting Director McClure reported that staff is very busy and there is an opening for a third investigator. The Director position should be posted this week. She reported that cases and intakes continue to be high. Commissioner Harris asked for a list of the types of cases that the Office has been receiving. Acting Director McClure reported that Housing is working on getting fair housing test back up and running through a contractor.

6. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Reeder reported the Commission on Aging is discussing affordable continuing care, which Alexandria doesn't have. The City is hosting programs on Medicare at rec centers.

Commissioner Schwartz reported that the HIV/AIDS commission chair is stepping down.

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson reported that the Alexandria Commission for Women held its 50th Anniversary celebration on September 24. The Mayor and members of City Council attended and presented a proclamation to the Commission recognizing their "significant contributions." Dr. Jane Flinn, one of the original members of the Commission, was the special guest.

Commissioner Sylvanus reported that the Economic Opportunity Commission recently changed its Chair and Vice Chair and attended the Housing 2040 Master Plan virtual meeting.

Commissioner Prince reported that the ACPD discussed budget issues. They are also trying to do better outreach, and they will be working on creating a brochure.

7. Public Comment

The Commission heard from several members of the public, who gave statements. They expressed concerns about taxpayer dollars being used to fund the Virginia Israel Advisory Board and asked the Commission to recommend City Council divest Alexandria from all investments in Israel. Chair Thompson said this item will be on the agenda and Commission will discuss this at next month's meeting. He said there is a process and if they want to propose a letter, a motion, or a resolution, they can do so, and the Commission has a body that can decide "yes or no." He said commissioners need to take time to educate themselves.

8. Announcements /Adjournment

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:54 p.m.