MINUTES

Erie County Council

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Brian Shank, Chairman
Mary Rennie, Vice Chairwoman
Charlie Bayle
André R. Horton
Ellen Schauerman
Terry M. Scutella
Jim Winarski

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, February 17, 2022

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Shank.

OPTIONAL PRAYER OR INVOCATION

ROLL CALL

Members present: Chairman Shank, Vice-Chairwoman Rennie, Charlie Bayle, Andre Horton, Terry Scutella, Jim Winarski (via phone)
Also present: Nicole Inan, Amy Swartzfager, Megan Moore

HEARING OF THE PUBLIC

Freda Tepfer, Erie: Ms. Tepfer stated the Human Relations Commission (HRC) has a huge potential that is not being met currently. She has concerns that too much power and control has been given to the Executive Director, not the board, and it's not appropriate. There are lost opportunities, and she hoped to see better.

Mary Jo Campbell, Washington Township: Ms. Campbell stated she was the Chair of the Human Relations Commission. She stated, contrary to some beliefs, they are getting things done, and doing what they are supposed to be doing. The prior Director did no work, and left cases behind. Meetings are held and attended, and they have hearings. Some things are taking more time, but they are working with volunteers and new members to the Commission. Ms. Campbell voiced her displeasure at not being notified earlier of the meeting, that the Council had not come to her with their questions prior to that point, and not having been notified of the departure of Tony Logue, the department head. She affirmed they are doing their due diligence. She addressed the issue that the Executive Director has "too much power" brought up by Ms. Tepfer, and stated that it is a paid position, while the rest are volunteers.

Kyle Foust, Harborcreek: Mr. Foust stated his attendance was as a citizen, not as the controller. He expressed having a local HRC said a lot about the community. The HRC helped keep the courts cleared. He stated it should remain under the Council's purview, so that, monetarily, it will always be a priority. He stated a new, dynamic director was needed to reinvigorate the HRC. He stated it was important to Erie County, and he hoped they would continue with it.

Wayne Harbison, HRC: Mr. Harbison stated he was employed by HRC, and if anyone ever had questions, he was available. He voiced items he was working on, including a procedure manual, working with school districts, obtaining interns, and volunteers.

Freda Tepfer, Erie: Ms. Tepfer voiced her amazement that pertinent people were not notified of this meeting.

Mary Jo Campbell, Washington Township: Ms. Campbell expressed her gratitude to Wayne Harbison and Christine Mitchell, for the work they do at the HRC.

Veronica Rexford, Secretary of the Erie NAACP #2262: Ms. Rexford stated it was critically important that Erie has a local, efficient, and functional HRC. She stated that for a lot of people the path to resolution is through the HRC.

DaVona Pacley, Erie: Ms. Pacley stated she is the Co-Founder of Erie's Black Wallstreet. She stated she is disappointed that people are not holding themselves accountable, and saying "we can do better". She stated there is not enough marketing for this commission to be visible to the community.

Mary Jo Campbell, Washington Township: Ms. Campbell responded that while they are doing what they can, they are always open to suggestions. She stated community members are able to attend the meetings, which are posted and via zoom. She also voiced her duty today was to make sure the HRC was not shut down by the Council, and discover the purpose of this meeting since she was not advised of it.

DISCUSSION ITEM

Human Relations Commission

Mr. Scutella questioned what the procedure was for a case at the HRC. Mr. Harbison and Ms. Campbell gave a brief overview of the procedure for a complaint that was brought to the HRC.

Mrs. Rennie offered her apologies to Ms. Campbell, and others, that were not informed of the meeting, and that was not their intention. She stated the cause of the meeting was the resignation of the Director, Tony Logue. She communicated that although the Council Solicitor was unable to attend he had given his advice to her to share. There are three possible options going forward: 1) To eliminate and close down the HRC 2) Continue as is, and hire a new director, and some possible structure changes, and 3) restructure how the HRC reports and operates, possibly under the human resources department, and using the solicitors of the County government. She communicated the push for action was due to the lack of a director. She read the purpose of the HRC.

Mr. Shank voiced the reasons for the meeting that day was not to make any decisions, or as a voting issue, but for transparency. He disclosed that Mr. Logue gave his resignation over the phone, and they had waited a week or so for the physical letter from him to announce the resignation.

Mr. Horton expressed disappointment in the way notification was given for the meeting to others, and himself. He stated there was no discussion amongst them about having any kind of meeting, and he doesn't always get to read his emails. He expressed that he had been around to see the movement of control of the HRC by the Administration to the Council, and he too is against the new by-laws. He stated there was discrimination in housing and public accommodations. He stated the Commission was embattled, but he was proud of the work they have done. He stated he was not upset by the resignation of the Director. He declared the HRC was needed now, more than ever, and he vehemently supported maintaining the Commission. He voiced that the Council was the checks and balances. He said the Council was committed and loved their community, and he was excited about their new visions. He expressed that the community would not sit back and let them close the HRC down. He also said the HRC had to do better reporting to the Council, but he can't believe they are having discussion about whether the HRC is needed.

Mr. Bayle queried about the number of cases from last year. Mr. Harbison reported approximately 13, with some still pending. He stated that the annual report would be coming out soon.

Mrs. Rennie commented that it was a discussion, but it was a formal meeting as well, and they did have decision-making abilities, whether to take action on one of the points of Mr. Talarico presented, or an ad-hoc committee, but something had to be done.

She questioned Mr. Harbison on how long the HRC could go without a director, or if they could suspend accepting cases for 60 days.
Mr. Horton responded that not taking cases put a burden on the claimant. He stated that an ad-hoc committee should include the chairs of the advisory and commission boards, as well as the city, and Mr. Harbison.

Mrs. Rennie commented that they should vote on the formation of an ad-hoc committee to get the information needed by the Council. She made a motion to do so, and Mr. Horton seconded the motion, and carried 6-0.

Mr. Scutella addressed the possible options presented by Mr.Talarico and stated that ending it wasn't an option, nor was passing it to the Administration. It should stay under the scope of the Council.

The Council discussed who should be on the ad-hoc committee, which would include Mrs. Schauerman and headed by Mr. Horton.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Horton made a motion for adjournment, seconded by Mr. Scutella, and adjourned at 11:23 am.