

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2023
7:00 p.m., City Hall
301 King Street, Room 2000
The Chet and Sabra Avery Room

Members Present

Danielle Beach
Lisl Brunner, Chair
Matt Harris
Katherine O'Connell
Elisabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson, Vice Chair
Megan Prince
Jon Thompson
Sam Schwartz

Staff Present

David Miller, Investigator
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez, Adm. Support

Members Excused

Iulia Fratila
David Rigsby, Vice Chair

Members Unexcused

Marc Bendick
Conrad Sylvanus

Commissioner Tom Reeder, Jr. and Commissioner Kellom participated remotely by telephone.

Guests Speakers

Zeina Azzam, City of Alexandria Poet Laureate
Rose Esber, Researcher, Writer, and Historian

Guests: Matt Sarago, Roshan Pandey, Mohmoud Alyazji, Samar Najia, Neda Althiabat, Leah Harris, Alison O'Connell, Boyd Walker, Laila Boufraine, Macarena Palacios, Hope Doherty.

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair Brunner

Chair Brunner called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. Introductions were made.

2. Approval of Minutes of October Meeting

Upon a motion by Vice Chair Palmer Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Harris, the Commission approved the minutes of the October meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye.

**3. Guest: Zeina Azzam, Zeina Azzam - poet, writer, editor, and community activist
Rose Esber - oral historian and international development professional**

Chair Brunner welcomed all of the guests and thanked them for being here tonight. The Commission was joined by guest speakers Zeina Azzam, Rose Esber, and about ten other Palestinian Americans and community members.

Guest speakers provided the Commission with a historical perspective on the conflict between Israel and the State of Palestine, and shared the losses that they are experiencing as they learn of the deaths and suffering of family members and friends in Gaza.

They told the Commission that in general, elected officials do not meet with them and provide only perfunctory responses when they express concerns about U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine (or the City's decision to keep light City Hall in the colors of Israel for three weeks). They feel that U.S. elected officials at every level support the State of Israel and that the dehumanization of Palestinians has been normalized.

Ms. Azzam stated that in 1985 the Human Rights Commission in Alexandria recommended to the City Council condemn Apartheid in South Africa and to divest from firms doing business there, and now Apartheid has become a predominant characterization of Israeli policies towards Palestinians. She urged the commission to study this issue.

Ms. Azzam mentioned that there is also a pending bill in Virginia that prohibits boycotting Israel, HB-1898.

Speakers express to the Commission that Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok take down their posts and label them as hate speech, while videos and posts that say "Death to Arabs" remain. They indicated that those who speak out in favor of Palestinians are labeled as anti-Semitic and placed on do not hire lists and that less visible aggressions discourage them from speaking about their experiences at all.

Rose Esber would also like for the City of Alexandria to sign the Apartheid Free Pledge. Also, they approached the City Council last May to issue a resolution recognizing the Nakba of 1947, and the catastrophe that the Palestinians have to suffer and to issue a resolution calling for a cease-fire. Ms. Esber said that they would like for the Council to acknowledge the pain and suffering of Palestinian residents in Alexandria.

Commissioner Harris recommended expressing the Commission's opposition to HB-1898, which prohibits public bodies from contracting with entities that boycott the state of Israel. Commissioner O'Connell suggested recommending something similar to the 1985 Apartheid statement and asking City Council to support a cease fire as well.

Speakers would like to request that the City Mayor and City Council issue an apology because they think that what the City did was disrespectful. Commissioner Harris suggested holding a Town Hall meeting on the subject.

Rose Esber stated that Attorney General Miyares has advocated for the removal of student visas from students who are linked to Students for Justice in Palestine and has opened an investigation into the nonprofit American Muslims for Palestine for possible links to terrorist organizations.

The speakers related recent instances in which people shouted obscenities at them when they were wearing the keffiyeh or participating in demonstrations in support of Palestine. While she was in DC, and in Fairfax County one woman was told, "I wish your child would get beheaded." The Speakers also stated that condemning or condoning Hamas should not be a reason to stop the rights of the Palestinian people and stop the idea of a cease fire.

Commissioner Schwartz encouraged reporting acts of intimidation and also asked them to contact the Office of Human Rights with any discrimination incidents from an employer to an employee. Investigator Miller told them that the Office could listen to concerns about hate incidents, but that if it

was a hate crime the Office would not have jurisdiction over a criminal matter, however, because the office has a good relationship with the Police Department, the office would assist in making sure they felt safe reporting any hate crimes.

Chair Brunner thanked the guest speakers and the community members for attending the meeting tonight.

4. Executive Committee

Chair Brunner reported that the Executive Committee met with Police Chief Hayes and Assistant Chiefs McDonald and Laguna, and Sgt. Harrington. Commissioner Schwartz asked if the lawsuit against the City was discussed at the Executive Committee meeting and Commissioner Harris stated that it was not discussed. Commissioner Schwartz suggested encouraging the Community Policing Review Board to take a look at the situation. Commissioner Johnson suggested asking the members of the Community Policing Review Board to come to a commission to have a conversation. Commissioner Harris said that the Community Policing Review Board would come to talk about their lack of progress. Commissioner Schwartz suggested that Chair Brunner reaches out to the Chair of the Community Policing Review Board and find out what is going on and what their communication is like with the Policing Auditor.

Human Rights complaints - recent filings/closures

The Commission went over the recent filing and closures of cases list that the office had provided to them; questions were asked, which Investigator Miller answered.

Chair Brunner asked Commissioners if they are going to be available for the December meeting, which is going to be virtual. Chair Brunner stated that she will not be able to attend the December meeting. It appears that there will be a quorum at the December meeting.

Chair Brunner announced that Erika Kleiner, the City's LGBTQ+ Task Force Coordinator will come to the January meeting and will invite other guests to talk about transgender youth in public schools.

5. Old & New Business

Commissioner Thompson reported that he had attended and testified at the Zoning for Housing meeting on November 14th, and Chair Brunner also testified at the November 18th meeting, both in support of the proposed reforms and consistent with the Commission's written comments.

Commissioner Schwartz stated that he had invited the Mayor over his house to talk to the neighbors about the changes to single-family-only zoning, but said that it seemed like he was not on top of the issue like he should have been.

There was an extensive discussion about affordable housing and Commissioner Schwartz said that the real movement is to convert office buildings into residential and to get new space with the promise that if they build real affordable housing throughout the entire City; then it is affordable and it allows for increase in diversity citywide.

Discussion of draft letter re: inclusion of Palestinian-Americans/condemning Islamophobic and anti-Semitic hate

Chair Brunner asked Commissioners to talk about what the Commission can do in response to what they heard this evening. Commissioner Prince listed what the guest speakers' requests were, which are the followings: Request that the City sign the Apartheid Free Pledge; that the City Oppose HB-1898, a No Boycott Israel Bill; and also requested for the recognition of the Nakba of 1947. Commissioner O'Connell stated that the guest speakers are asking for the commemoration of the Nakba and said that the speakers have requested meetings with the Mayor twice, but they were told that he will not meet with them over the resolution. Commissioner Harris suggested tagging this on the Human Rights Proclamation Month in December. Commissioner Schwartz recommended that the City oppose HB-1898.

After an extensive this discussion on this issue; Commissioner Schwartz suggested converting the Inclusion statement that was going to be sent to City Council into a Resolution and asked to amend the third paragraph to add the word "Jewish" so that it will "Our Palestinian AND JEWISH community members belong here, and we value them". Upon a motion by Commissioner O'Connell, seconded by Commissioner Schwartz the Commission decided to send the statement drafted by Commissioner O'Connell with the edit of AND JEWISH after Palestinians in the last sentence of the third paragraph of the document be submitted to the office of human rights for conversion to a proclamation or other appropriate document for submission to City Council to pass as soon as possible, and perhaps during December in recognition of the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights moth. Motion passed and all Commissioners present voted aye.

Chair Brunner promised to reach out to the Mayor and members of Council to let them know what the Commission heard tonight.

Commissioner Schwartz suggested pulling out the resolution on Apartheid in South African in 1985, that the Human Rights Commission put out, so that they can take a look at it to fully talk about the issues.

6. Liaison Reports

Vice Chair Palmer Johnson announced that on December 14th, the Domestic Violence Shelter will be holding a Holiday party. She also reporting the Commission for Women will be joining the Domestic Violence program to distribute bookmarks at the Alexandria Metro stops. She announced that National Human Rights Trafficking Awareness month is in January.

Commissioner Prince reported that the Commission on Persons with Disabilities meeting had multiple members of the community and said that one member of the community was having issues getting her tax relief program for the elderly; the City was not issuing her back taxes that they charge her that they should have not charged. She also reported that the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities is not meeting in December.

Commissioner Schwartz reported that he attended his first meeting with the HIV/AIDS Commission last night and said that there was not much to report on and asked if the commission had any issue that they would like him to communicate to the commission on HIV/AIDS; he is available.

Commissioner Reeder reported that the Commission on Aging followed up on affordable housing and said that the Ladrey apartment building is going to be demolished and rebuilt and it will have 100

additional units, it will go from 170 units to 270. He reported that this will start late 2024 but said that they have started to relocate the residents.

7. Announcements /Adjournment

Commissioner Schwartz announced that City Council is voting on November 28th, to approve the Rainbow Crosswalk.

MOTION: Adjourn the meeting.

Commissioner Scharz/Commissioner Prince **PASSED** unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:40 p.m.