

City of Lawrence
Lawrence Human Relations Commission
February 16, 2017 – 5:35 p.m.

Minutes

Members Present: Carl Edwards, Jackie Becks, Katie Barnett, Martha Taylor, Mike Machell, Kait Perry,

Members Absent (excused): Sarah Bloxsom, Nicole Humphrey, Caleb Stephens

Staff Present: Scott Wagner, Elizabeth Hafoka

Public Present: None

Commission Meeting Called to Order

The Lawrence Human Relations Commission (LHRC) Meeting was called to Order by its Vice-Chair – Carl Edwards at 5:35 p.m. in the Carnegie Building, located at 200 West 9th Street, Lawrence, Kansas 66044. The meeting was held in the lower level conference room. Commissioner Machell moved and Commissioner Perry seconded the approval of the minutes for the November 17, 2016 meeting of the LHRC. The motion was unanimously approved.

Receive Staff Report

Elizabeth Hafoka provided an update on pending and closed human relations cases since the last LHRC meeting. Two cases have been closed. One of the closed cases was for an employment related claim. No probable cause was found in this case. The other case was a public accommodations case and there was a finding of probable cause. The case involved a service animal and conciliation efforts are underway in that case.

Ms. Hafoka noted there are currently three open cases – one employment and the other two are housing related.

Ms. Hafoka noted that she has hired a new City Prosecutor and her name is Lauren Summers. Lauren plans to attend the week one National Fair Housing Training Academy from March 13-17, 2017.

Director Toni Wheeler provided an update on the litigation matter. On March 10, 2016, complainant Christopher Evans visited the Ashbury Townhomes in Lawrence to view a potential townhome to rent. After the tour, Mr. Evans gathered the rental application, application fee, and a letter from his therapist recommending that he live with an emotional support animal to help alleviate some of the symptoms of his mental disability. Lyndon Mullis, a defendant in this case, refused Mr. Evans' rental application, stating that he cannot rent to someone with a dog.

Mr. Evans subsequently filed a complaint with the City of Lawrence Human Relations division, which was thoroughly investigated by the City. After a probable cause determination was rendered in the case, the parties had an opportunity to conciliate but efforts to do so failed. The Defendants in this matter elected to have the matter heard in Douglas County District Court.

On November 8, 2016 Plaintiffs City of Lawrence and the Lawrence Human Relations Commission filed a petition in district court alleging that the Defendants, Lyndon Mullis, Kathi Mullis, and KanMar Management, violated Chapter 10 of the Lawrence City Code by engaging in unlawful housing practices as well as a violated state and federal laws related to fair housing. Plaintiffs seek damages in excess of \$75,000.

Defendants filed an answer denying the allegations. Defendants also filed a counterclaim alleging that Plaintiffs engaged in abuse of process by filing the original petition without having evidence to support the claims. Defendants seek damages in excess of \$50,000 in their counterclaim. Plaintiffs believe the counterclaim is wholly without merit, and filed an answer to that counterclaim denying all allegations.

The parties have since engaged in discovery and have discussed a potential protective order to help guard the documents, including Christopher Evans' medical history, from disclosure outside the court proceeding. It is the Plaintiffs intent to request a hearing before the judge as soon as possible to resolve the pending discovery matters so that the case may proceed to the next steps.

Scott Wagner provided an update on recent outreach activities. The USD 497 Martin Luther King, Jr. Day awards banquet at South Junior High was very well attended. Seating had to be extended out into the gallery area. Prior to the event, various vendors were set up in the gallery area outside the auditorium. Due to the increasing attendance at this event, it is expected that a new venue will be selected for the 2018 celebration. USD 497 was very thankful for the LHRC support of the event this year.

Scott Wagner provided an update on the Fair Housing 50th anniversary Commemoration Committee and recent events. Tom Arnold presented to Lawrence Central Rotary Club on February 8, 2017 regarding his oral history project. Commissioner Stuart Boley also attended the talk and it was very well received. Another presentation is scheduled before the Jayhawk Breakfast Rotary on March 9, 2017 at 7 a.m. at Macelis. All of the oral history interviews are now on a new Douglas County digital history site that was unveiled on Kansas Day – January 29th. This site is a joint project between the Lawrence Public Library and Watkins Museum.

The mobile history project is proceeding. The City received a proposal from Watkins Community Museum in response to its Request for Qualifications that were issued in December 2016. An initial project kickoff meeting was held on February 15, 2017 at Watkins to discuss the project and to introduce the Watkins project team to the City's team. The goal is to have the mobile display complete by June 1, 2017.

As part of Fair Housing Month in April, a lecture is being jointly planned between Watkins Museum staff and City staff. It is tentatively schedule to be held on April 15, 2017 beginning at 6 p.m. at a location yet to be determined. The leader of the lecture will be Rusty Monhollon, author of "This is America" a book that chronicled life in Lawrence in the 1960s.

Scott Wagner noted that for the past two years, the LHRC has sponsored a Fair Housing Month Poster competition. Staff needs to know if the LHRC would like to sponsor a similar event for 2017. Vice-Chair Edwards noted that he will bring that item up for discussion under commission items.

It was noted on the agenda that elections for officers will take place at the May 18, 2017 meeting.

Commission Items:

There was general discussion about LHRC sponsorship of a Fair Housing Month poster competition for 2017. Toni Wheeler noted that in the past – a small subcommittee was formed to manage and organize the event. Commissioner Becks and Commissioner Taylor both volunteered to be on the subcommittee. It was moved by Commissioner Perry and seconded by Commissioner Taylor to have the LHRC sponsor a Fair Housing Month Poster competition in 2017. The motion passed unanimously.

There was general discussion about the USD 497 meeting held on January 30, 2017 at the Lawrence High Cafeteria on Racial Equity in Lawrence Public Schools. Vice-Chair Edwards passed out notes from Chair Sarah Bloxsom who attended the event. Commissioner Machell also attended and gave his recollection of it. He thought the meeting was attended by a very diverse group of residents. He said the audience was broken up into various discussion tables and each table was given 5-6 questions to address. He noted the tenor of the meeting changed when the tables started to report their answers and one table wanted to address the school board members that were present that night directly. Commissioner Machell cautioned about LHRC involvement in some of the issues discussed as there is already an elected body (USD 497 board) that can and should have further discussions on this topic.

Commissioner Perry was also in attendance and noted that the evening was moderated by a minister from the Kansas City, Kansas area who had a lot of prior experience moderating similar discussions in other Kansas communities. She noted that the board did not allocate enough time for each table to really provide input and discussion on the questions presented. She also noted that USD 497 has a racial equity team and that perhaps the LHRC could find a way to provide input to that team.

Commissioner Perry noted that the issue of affordable housing is also a current issue in our community and that issue is not far removed from Fair Housing. However, she noted that the LHRC should also not be duplicating efforts of other groups working on this issue.

Director Wheeler noted that the City has 30-40 advisory boards working on various issues. One of the issues that the City Commission will soon address is the topic of sanctuary cities and other immigration issues. She noted that perhaps a report on what other boards are doing would be helpful to the LHRC.

Vice-Chair Edwards thought that a staff report could help the LHRC hone in on issues they want to focus on or assist with.

It was moved to request that staff prepare a report or provide an update, at the May LHRC meeting – on the work of other City advisory boards on issues related to affordable housing and issues of discrimination. The motion passed unanimously.

It was moved by Commissioner Becks and seconded by Commissioner Perry to adjourn the meeting at 6:30 p.m. The motion passed unanimously.