

Members Present: Sylvia Nery-Strickland (Chair), Virginia Jenkot (Vice Chair), Beatriz Amberman, Joe Burnsworth, Heidi Daniels, Jamal Gunn, Carla Hesselstine, Niam Lagoe, Emiliano “Jojo” Orenca, Mark Stevens, Ron Taylor, Frances Knight Thompson, Rabbi Israel Zoberman

Staff Present: Stacy Hawks (Human Resources), Regina Hilliard (Human Resources), Shelley Johnson (Human Resources), Dominique McKinnon (HRC Liaison)

Liaisons Present: Councilman Michael Berlucchi, Deputy Chief Sean Adams, Rod Ingram (Deputy City Attorney)

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Chair Nery-Strickland at 4:01 p.m.

II. Roll Call

Roll Call of the Commissioners was taken. Commissioner Taylor participated in the meeting remotely from his home for a medical reason. Commissioners Liu and White were absent.

III. Minutes Approval

Commissioner Amberman made a motion to approve the minutes from the March 10th meeting. Vice Chair Jenkot seconded the motion. The minutes from the March 10th meeting were approved by a vote of 12-0.

Commissioner Amberman made a motion to approve the minutes from the April 14th meeting. Commissioner Stevens seconded the motion. The minutes from the April 14th meeting were approved by a vote of 12-0.

IV. Election of Officers

Commissioner Orenca, Chair of the Nominating Committee presented the proposed slates for officers – Carla Hesselstine for Chair and Heidi Daniels for Vice Chair. Commissioner Zoberman made a floor nomination for himself as Chair.

Commissioner Amberman made a motion to approve Heidi Daniels as Vice Chair. Commissioner Burnsworth seconded the motion. By a vote of 13-0, Heidi Daniels was elected as Vice Chair.

Commissioner Burnsworth made a motion to approve Carla Hesselstine as Chair. Commissioner Stevens seconded the motion. By a vote of 11-1 with 1 abstention, Carla Hesselstine was elected as Chair.

Commissioner Hesselstine and Commissioner Daniels were sworn in as Chair and Vice Chair of the Human Rights Commission for the 2023 fiscal year.

Commissioner Zoberman stated for the record that there was no discussion about the candidates after the second motion and he expressed his profound dismay with the way that the election was conducted. He stated that the election process of the Chair appointing the Nominating Committee Chair is a disgrace. Deputy City Attorney Ingram apologized and made it clear that if Commissioner Zoberman made any indication that he wanted to speak or raised his hand, he would have been given that opportunity. Chair Nery-Strickland stated for the record that she did not appoint the Nominating Committee Chair, it is volunteer position. She stated that in her 3 years as Chair, no one has come forward when she asked personally and openly. Commissioner Orenca took it upon himself to Chair the committee. She added that the by-laws will be discussed, and the election process can be changed.

Commissioner Zoberman stated for the record that he appreciated Deputy City Attorney Ingram’s apology.

Chair Nery-Strickland stated that the new Chair and Vice Chair will take office on July 1st.

V. By-laws Review

The By-laws Committee Chair Joe Burnsworth suggested that the by-laws review be deferred given the discussion that just ended. He stated that the revised by-laws are ready, but additional meetings may be needed to address the election process. Commissioner Burnsworth made a motion to defer the by-laws review. Commissioner Amberman seconded the motion. By a vote of 12-1 the by-laws review was deferred.

VI. Committee/Liaison Reports

Commissioner Amberman reported that the Forums/Dialogue Committee decided to hold the forum in September and Commissioner Burnsworth will reach out to the VBCPS to see if the forum can be hosted at one of the schools to be more accessible to the community. The committee selected three speakers and will reach out to them to participate – Dr. Veleka Gatling with ODU, Tanya Gould with the Virginia Attorney General’s Office and Dr. Norman Oliver, former Health Commissioner for the Virginia Department of Health. They also recommended Bruce Smith as an alternative if one of these three are not available. Potential moderators recommended for the forum are Barbara Hamm Lee, Barbara Ciara and Dr. Veronica Coleman. The title Better Together: Community Conversations with subtitles, such as dialogue on race relations and others will be determined later. The committee will be sending Staff Liaison McKinnon a list of organizations that can partner with the Commission as a community resource at the forum. Commissioner Amberman asked the commissioners to send any organizations that should be included.

Commissioner Stevens reported that at the CAC 2nd Precinct meeting there was discussion about the new City noise ordinance and the plastic bag tax. He stated that he asked at the meeting if we are currently in the right economic climate for that tax. He added that the precinct will be going door to door in the Colonial Trailer Park to help people improve their homes and they will be holding a SeaTack Community Day in August. He asked for more information on that event so the HRC can participate. Deputy Chief Adams shared that the CACs for the other three precincts are also very active and are happy to share information with the Commission. Commissioner Stevens reported that he and Commissioner Daniels were out at the Oceanfront on Saturday night to observe. It was very quiet, clean and organized, and it looked like there were a lot of families out having a good time.

Chair Nery-Strickland reported that there has been discussion that the new noise ordinance targets people based on race or ethnic background. She stated that in her observation it is an issue across the board in Virginia Beach and the ordinance is difficult to understand. Deputy City Attorney Ingram explained that the current noise ordinance is a criminal offense, meaning it must be proven beyond the reasonable doubt and is very complex. The new proposed ordinance would have a civil penalty, like a fine and the standard of proof is lower.

Commissioner Stevens reminded the Commission that Pride in the ViBe is Sunday and HRC members will be at the StandUp for Kids booth for the event. He added that there is an artwalk at the Oceanfront for Juneteenth on the 19th. Staff Liaison stated that she has shared information about all the events occurring in Virginia Beach for the Juneteenth Weekend.

VII. Report from Virginia Beach City Public Schools and Virginia Beach Police Department on School Safety Measures

Dr. Donald Robertson, Chief of Staff for Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS), joined the meeting on behalf of Dr. Spence to give a presentation on what has been going on in the schools over the past year. He highlighted the following updates:

- The VBCPS system is 100% accredited
- The 2025 Strategic Action Plan – partnerships within the community are critically important in matching community skills and knowledge with the students’ needs. Their graduate profile showed the skills and positions they want students to graduate with beyond the necessary grade scores.
- Last year, despite the pandemic, VBCPS had a 94.9% graduation rate with over \$62 million dollars in scholarships being offered to seniors, over 30% more than last year. They did that by focusing on excellence and innovation. They issued over 1,000 hotspots to families and had volunteers for tutoring programs.
- The school administration launched mental health task force to address the mental health challenges that students and teachers are facing.
- Senior leadership regularly met with the Health Department to look at COVID cases in schools and make real time decisions. They were able to keep all schools open last year.
- Beach Bag Program – they distributed more than 19,000 bags to families in need and through the Virginia Beach Education Foundation, they gave over \$174,000 in grants. Since the onset of COVID, they served their families over 8 million meals – breakfast, lunch and dinner, 7 days a week. They had pick-up locations at their schools and loaded buses to take the meals to the families.
- Workforce Development – they partnered with NAS Oceana on an internship program and the students in the program from this graduating class will be fully employed by NAS Oceana.
- A new Family and Community Engagement Center and a Language Ambassador Program opened to help families whose first language is not English. The program helps parents understand the information that is sent home with their children.
- For 2022-2023, VBCPS will have a robust summer learning program, focus on staff preparedness, and address staffing challenges.

Along with Deputy Chief Adams, Dr. Robertson reported on the safety protocols within the schools. He stated that the schools and VBPD have a very strong relationship resulting in SROs in all secondary schools. They also have an Office of Safe Schools department, and all members are former VBPD officers or former military police officers. The security assistants that are currently in all 55 elementary schools do not carry weapons. They are working to develop a school security officer program where existing security assistants in each school are trained to carry a weapon. Dr. Robertson stated that putting metal detectors in every school would be too time consuming with 1,000 -2,000 kids going through one door every morning and there are many doors in a large high school building that can be opened or propped open at any time. VBCPS works with behaviors, they have trainings with the students going through different drills and they work with the police department.

Deputy Chief Adams reported that the VBPD has a very robust SRO program and takes a layered approach to filling any vacancy gaps. The SROs are trained every year in all threat assessments and active shooter drills. They proactive use technology and all their resources from SROs, security assistants, a blend of sworn officers and retired officers to meet the security needs in schools.

Commissioner Gunn asked if one SRO in each secondary school is sufficient. Dr. Robertson stated that the record of VBCPS never having a shooting incident suggests that it is sufficient. VBCPS also has a program where they monitor all student documents through their electronic learning management system for any threatening language. He also stated that a lot of the students will come to staff to tell them if there are any security concerns. The staff works to make sure every student feels like they belong and are included. Their counselors are trained to talk with students who are struggling internally and connect them with the resources that they need. Deputy Chief Adams added that when any threat rises to the level where the VBPD needs to be involved, a detective will work with the school, the parents and the student.

Commissioner Amberman asked what the schools are doing to support students who feel targeted or bullied. Dr. Robertson reported that schools have trained counselors, school psychologists and division level administrators who can provide additional support. She also asked what process they have for students to feel safe in reporting incidents to staff. Dr. Robertson stated that each school has established a different process for how they educate students on reporting bullying, but all reports of bullying are investigated. Anonymous reports are more difficult to investigate as they need details to substantiate the incident. The schools have mediation with students involved in bullying – both the victim and the aggressor. Parents are included in the mediation, and they review the possible consequences if the bullying continues. Commissioner Burnsworth stated that some schools used a drop box where students can report the bullying and then a teacher will approach the student to start the process for investigating the bullying. He added that there isn't a lot that schools can do if bullying isn't reported and all they can do is work very hard to make sure all students feel like they belong and that there is someone there who cares.

VIII. Citizen Remarks

Volunteers from the Art of Living Foundation attended the meeting to inform the commission about the World Culture Festival that they planning to bring to Hampton Roads in the fall at the Virginia Beach Convention Center. They will be bringing diverse communities together to celebrate diversity and the oneness of humanity through dance and music. They are in need food vendors from different cultures and performers. They asked for the HRC to provide any support or connect them with other organizations that could help them plan this event, such as the VBCPS.

IX. Adjournment

Chair Nery-Strickland and Vice Chair Jenkot thanked everyone for their support during their time as Chair and Vice Chair. Chair-Elect Hesseltine thanked everyone for their faith in her as the new Chair.

Chair Nery-Strickland adjourned the meeting at 5:57 pm.

Next Meeting:
July 14th @ 4pm