

Franklin Township Human Relations Commission Meeting

Minutes of January 22, 2025

Present: Gary Rosenthal, Samina Sattar, Elangkathir Elamaran, Rohan Kalidas, John Samba, Ron Poustchi, Councilman Alex Kharazi, Linda Montgomery-Williams, Edna Arguello Hitchner

Excused: Shubhendu Singh, Pete Clark, Sam Velu, Nora Catiis

Absent: John Tibbs, Kamla J, Sharma

Police Officer: Absent

Guest: Michele Petersen

Meeting called to order at 7:01 pm

Mr Rosenthal introduced the new HRC commissioner, Samina Sattar who has been active in the township, especially with Palestine issues. She has lived in Franklin for about 12 years, and in New Jersey for 20. She works at a company called Mathematica, doing research in the workforce development space. She is also on the New Jersey Islamic networks group which does interfaith speaking. She presents Islam to high schools and other professional organizations. Her goal is to convey the history of the Islamic people. Mr Rosenthal asked her to talk about the Palestine event that occurred in October 2024 and some of the other organizing she had. Last year, there was a *Connect With Palestine Day* where those who have been aware of what is going on in the Middle East can recognize the history of Palestine and celebrate the community here at home. This event was in Colonial Park and there were numerous speakers including some youth from Gaza to get

medical care in the US. It was a few hours of opportunity to recognize the diversity of our community and the history of the Palestinian community. She is also part of QIDMA, a Franklin-centered organization that works regarding our community's needs. They have worked with the food bank and other parts of our township to work to support and organize other parts of our community. They were part of a first-day-of-school event at the elementary school where people could donate clothes for the first day of school. Since the first day of school is special, QIDMA felt that this was a small thing they could do to support those who are in need. Last year was the first year that Muslim Month was recognized. An event was organized last January to celebrate the Muslim community. She hopes that there will be a long continuity of these sorts of community-wide events. There is a Somerset County-based organization that works for families who are in need. There will be an event on February 16th in the senior center with food and other needs for these people. The soup kitchen in New Brunswick, owned by the New Brunswick Islamic Center, collaborates with QIDMA. QIDMA donates food. This is very helpful for the people in New Brunswick, especially during this time of the year. This Sunday there will be a community conversation in the Senior Center hosted by the Interfaith Council and the Human Relations Commission. There is a sizable Jewish and Islamic community in Franklin Township. Certain topics are difficult to talk about, and there is a need for tools to have conversations regarding these topics. In this event, the NJ Division of Civil Rights will be in attendance to facilitate small conversations between committee members. There will be dinner and the civil rights division team will introduce the topics and share a meal.

Motion passed to renew as Chairman and Edna as Vice Chairman for 2025

Minutes of October 23rd and December 18th approved.

Other Business: Edna reported on the hometown heroes flag project to Franklin. She and Gary met with Saffie Kallon, Special Project Manager of Township who

could open the window to this project. She, at their request, was going to get some examples from Manville where the project has already shown success. It is a beneficial project as these flags can continue to be posted and they honor both the living and the deceased who have served in the military – along with their families. When Saffie, Gary, and Edna met they discussed having the flags fly in the township complex. After the township complex has been occupied, they will spread to Demott Lane. This is a place for memorials for the military as well as a place where people come together and interact. All is now on hold until they have a subsequent meeting with Saffie. Edna sent an email regarding what steps to take to make this happen, including financing. Possibilities for financing include familial donations and community funding. There is a question regarding how often these flags would be put up. Edna reflected that usually around Memorial Day or Veterans Day word will be sent out to the community regarding the flags, letting the community know that the flags can still be put up for our soldiers. Many communities throughout Somerset County already have these flags up and Franklin needs to partake in this practice. It is now up to the council to decide how often they want to renew this project. This is an opportunity for the township to honor those who served. There are some towns where the flags fly until families take them down and others where the flags fly until they are not in good shape anymore. It is yet to be decided how many flags they plan to put up. There is not an active VFW or American Legion organization in Franklin Township, but there is a gentleman in Franklin Township associated with the JFK club who would be able to assist in this project. Ultimately, it is up to the township to decide how to organize these flags. Edna seeks to avoid replacing flags too often due to the maintenance requirements. An issue that could arise could be the effects of the environment on these flags.

Regarding the K-Mart shopping center, the meeting regarding this was postponed until March by the Zoning Board.

Alex Kharazi reported that the Township Council had their first meeting on Jan 7th and they have a new deputy mayor as Shepa Uddin was elected. Their main goal is to keep the taxes low keep the township safe and work on projects that improve the health equity of our community. He had mentioned before about both Ward 1 and Ward 4 and the drastic difference in their life expectancy. Those in Ward 1 live an average of 8 years longer than in Ward 4 – even though they are neighbors. Thanks to Saffie, data has been collected regarding the way to close this gap in life expectancy and living conditions. The Council is working with the Somerset County Board of Health to help with Flu vaccines, the food bank, and numerous other health-related concerns. One other thing was bringing a speech to every meeting – specifically from Somerset County. They come to share what services they have and what Franklin can do to introduce them to the township. Another thing that is happening starting this January is a health screening at the food bank. There will be fliers handed out to spread the word. The other things that he hopes to happen in our township are groundbreaking ideas. For one, the YMCA is something that Dr. Kharazi claims we need to bring to Franklin Township. He notes the significance of their facilities and amenities and says that if this is brought to Franklin, it will offer benefits to our community members. Various rooms in the YMCA can be used for multiple purposes, as well as sports facilities. He hopes that the YMCA will come to Franklin within 3-5 years. He notes that this is almost a 45 million project, so they are hoping for some seed money in order to start this project. The township has given them land to build the YMCA. The Franklin Township Council is actively working on this project, and they are all on the same page to help jump-start this project. The other groundbreaking project that would be great is the expansion of the food bank. The amount of people that use the food bank has expanded; it is inferred that 2500 families use the food bank. It would be beneficial if the food bank had facilities for mental health and others, but the food bank has limited space. They are planning to build a new facility near Pine Grove Manor School. It is expected that

this is a 12 million dollar project, but the Food Bank already has a grant for 1 million dollars. They are seeking other organizations to help fund this. Regarding the YMCA, the YMCA offers multiple employment opportunities as well as helps little kids learn how to swim. These two projects should be endorsed by the HRC. There was a veterans program that occurred, and one thing that they offered was a veteran's prescription savings card. This card can help veterans save a lot of money on their prescriptions. Another flier that they had is a list of resources in NJ, from health to housing. There is also a section regarding utility bills which can help those with low income. Finally, there is one more flier regarding those who are deaf/hard of hearing. One of the concerns that people have expressed is that people who own dispensaries do not lock them up properly, so vulnerable victims such as children and pets gain access to this. As a result, the health advisory board has released a card called "Lock it Up" which reminds dispensary owners to properly secure their shops. For now, the current understanding is that there are not going to be more dispensary licenses given out. Right now, 18 dispensaries possess licenses for dispensaries. Regarding the food bank, Edna brought up the issue of the health disparity between the two wards and asked about possible funding if it is made clear that we will fight towards closing the health equity gap between the wards. Dr. Kharazi says that there are many services/resources available in Somerset and New Jersey as a whole which we should take advantage of. While we may not know how much help we need, finding organizations to help us can help Franklin get a grasp. A few things are happening as of now regarding outside organizations. As of now, though, there is not too much information regarding the money. Regarding the opioid settlement fund, there was a town hall meeting which was part of our last meeting where ideas were brought up. It was asked if anyone had a project where this fund could be used, to bring it up. There will be a team that will focus on the utilization of this money. As of now, the service *Arrive Together* which focuses on the need for police to answer a call with a mental health specialist. In these situations, these

specialists will allow a situation to be handled without violence or an arrest. Money from this fund is being used for this project.

Mr. Rosenthal reminded all that the HRC is an open public meeting. He was again honored to have Michelle Peterson in attendance. Michelle is active in the community as she has two sons who are in the army and the national guard, who she spends a lot of time with. She had an impressive and inspirational presentation regarding homeschooling.

Dr. Kharazi also recognized Assemblyman Joe Danielsen for organizing the veteran's meeting currently happening in the municipal building

. Dr. Kharazi also congratulated the MLK team for organizing the MLK breakfast this past Monday. There were over 300 people in attendance. Unfortunately, the HRC didn't have too much of a representation even though it was encouraged for people to come.

Dr. Kharazi also had the opportunity to attend a program called "My Brother Keeper". This is an organization started by President Barrack Obama whose whole idea is to provide the opportunity for young African Americans to do well in the workforce. This program has started in our township and they have twenty to twenty-five members, primarily in the high school. This program was primarily created for high schoolers and early college students. It is encouraged to spread the word regarding this program as it offers great opportunities. They are going to have programs with various activities in the high school. Dr. Kharazi would like to commend the organizers of the Muslim heritage event in the library. They had paintings, artwork, displays, and more. There will be one more event, and it is noted that this is a great opportunity to learn from each other. It is highly recommended that the HRC take

part in these events, as it is a great opportunity to interact with the different cultures in our township

. Mr. Rosenthal noted that there is a new high school principal, Nicholas Solomon has been promoted. The junior commissioners are encouraged to invite the new FHS principal, Mrs. Guerrero, to attend an HRC meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 7:45 PM

The next meeting will be on February 26th, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

Junior Commissioners Rohan Kalidas & Elangkathir Elamaran