

Franklin Township Human Relations Commission Meeting

Minutes of February 26th, 2025

Present: Gary Rosenthal, Sharon Czebotar ,Kamla J. Sharma, John Samba, John Tibbs, Shubhendu Singh, Councilman Alex Kharazi, Samina Sattar, Edna Hitchner, Pete Clark, Rohan Kaldas, Elangkathir Elamaran, Nora Catiis,

Excused: Linda Montgomery Williams, E Poustchi

Absent: None

Police Officer: Officer Mathew Russo

Guest: Mrs.Kelley Guerrero, Interim High School Principal and Dr.Nicholas Solomon, Michelle Petersen

Meeting called to order at 7:00 pm

Mr Rosenthal introduced the new HRC commissioner, Sharon Czebotar. Michelle Peterson introduced Sharon to Mr. Rosenthal.

Minutes of January 22nd were approved.

Guest report: Mr Rosenthal introduced Dr. Solomon (prior high school principal of four years) and Ms. Guerrero (new Franklin High school interim principal). Ms. Guerrero comes here today with her mission and goals. Once a new principal is appointed, Ms. Guerrero will be reappointed the

role of vice principal. Ms. Guerrero states that it has been a pleasure serving her role at the high school. She states that there is “always something going on” such as events, assemblies (such as the Black History Month assembly that started today), and historic celebrations. These events offer our students infinite opportunities to those of all different backgrounds. They are currently partnering with the senior center, youth center, and various college campuses to provide students with opportunities to look toward their future while aiding the community. They are also offering students the time shared program through RVCC which is an advanced manufacturing program for highschool juniors or seniors. There is also a construct and trades program at the middle school which hosts several students. These programs allow hands-on activities for students. There is a model fine visual arts program at the highschool which is currently working on Cinderella - the Spring musical. There are many opportunities for students to put their skills and interests on displays. Another example of the high school’s FVPA program is the numerous murals around the school, a unique aspect of franklin highschool which allows the students to utilize their interests to beautify the school. Mrs. Guerrero is extremely proud of the AP Ambassador program. Ms. Guerrero has a personal goal to increase student enrollment in AP Courses. She wants all students from every background to take these challenging courses to not only challenge themselves but to prepare themselves for their future. To open these doors to prospective students, they host information sessions for parents and students alike. The AP ambassador day took place a few weeks ago, in which students showed other students

what taking AP courses are like and gave a general overview of them. Athletics wise, FHS recently hosted the Metro Classic tournament. They have also hosted the state wrestling tournament as well as the upcoming state basketball tournament. This last Saturday, FHS hosted their first robotics competition, which was very interesting and a great opportunity for students. Dr. Kharazi mentioned the “My Brother’s Keepers” program, an initiative started by Barack Obama which has a chapter at FHS. The program is looking towards becoming certified this year. This program is spearheaded by the police department as they look towards mentoring young students. Dr. Kharazi mentions that Franklin Township is the second most diverse community in NJ. He asked about the programs that FHS offers in order to integrate the school and increase its diversity. Another question that he asks is how he will be integrating Ramadan (which is coming up) to make the Muslim community at FHS feel more comfortable.

He also asked what resources FHS will offer for students who will be fasting and observing religious activities during Ramadan. Mrs. Guerrero mentioned how FHS has over 60 clubs which offer numerous resources to its students. Recently, the school celebrated Muslim Heritage Month in which they hosted multiple lunch activities and student ambassadors read quotes in the morning. They also read motivational poems and other things related to historical and inspirational figures. Generally speaking, she works closely with the Muslim student association club advisor and works closely with the club advisor. This is connected to Elijah's soup kitchen

where they help provide for the cause. For students who do prayer, she opens the library and other specified places to these students. Dr Solomon added that the clubs are a vital part of the FHS community. There are many culture-centered clubs which look to allow students to connect with and share their cultures and practices with their student body. This fosters a very accepting community within FHS. He spoke on Ramadan and how he sends a reminder every year to FHS Staff when it is around the corner.. Regarding praying, Dr Solomon recalls times where he's even given up his office to allow students to pray. This is just one of the few examples of FHS's accepting community. Dr. Kharazi asked about a pledge taken some years ago about diversity which was initiated in 1996. This pledge spoke on anti-bullying between the student community. He recalls that students had all kinds of activities centered on this pledge. It became integral to the anti-bullying movement in the school. He said that it could be useful just as much in today's time. Mrs. Guerrero said that she prides herself in the inclusiveness that includes the student community, and emphasizes how the students do a great job in celebrating their diversity. A question regarding the impact that the recent DEI executive order has on Franklin High School's diversity. Ms Guerrero stated that this does not affect the school because the FHS community focuses on enhancing diversity – not barring it. She brought up the one warrior, where special needs students are assisted in their day-to-day gym class. This class is an example of how the school continues to thrive in diversity regardless of events happening nationwide. The biggest goal is for students to feel safe and secure in their community. Dr Solomon and Ms Guerrero stated their biggest challenges

have been dealing with disagreements between students. Helping students gain maturity to mitigate violence with each other is a big initiative for them. Encouraging students to talk to each other instead of getting into fights is a solution that they have come up with. Another problem that FHS is facing—along with the rest of the country—is vaping. There are programs and initiatives in which students can learn about the health risks associated with vaping. These initiatives also work with the numerous fliers around the school. There are also quarterly parent check in meetings in which administration reiterates the importance of this issue to parents. Regarding recent progressions about immigration, Mrs. Guerrero recently met with her staff and had a discussion about how to deal with students who are afraid/facing anxiety regarding their immigration status. Parents approached her about ICE and deportation, and Mrs. Guerrero ensured them that their student would be safe and there is a plan set in place. She reiterates that the school is a safe place for students facing such issues. Regarding career and technical education internships, Mrs. Guerrero stated that there is the RVCC advanced manufacturing program in which students can earn various certifications. There are instructors in the field that can build connections with students and assist them in gaining a future role in the field. There are various internships in the animal shelter and the legislative assembly. Dr. Solomon spoke on the CTE program which offers three specializations: TV production, marketing, and dance. They are looking to add more in the following years. There is a CTE coordinator that is supporting this program. The school offers dual enrollment with RVCC and Seton Hall in order to help students gain college credit while in high

school. They look to grow this program over the years. Mr Rosenthal asked if the FHS leadership speaks with administration at the local charter schools. Dr. Solomon spoke on his relationship with the principal of CJCP, even stating that he helped him receive his doctorate. John Tibbs asked a question regarding being raised in an economically challenged neighborhood in franklin. He was delighted to hear all these positive things going on in the high school. A huge issue that students may face is issues regarding their attendance. The counselors work hard and meet with parents to ensure that attendance is properly met and that the student is not falling behind. The entire staff works hard to ensure proper student attendance through proactive measures to prevent problems in the future. Guerrero said that dealing with post-covid offers their students different resources and they have their own therapist who offers individual counseling during the day for the student body. In general, there are weekly check-ins with counselors and case managers. They also connect with community resources which students can take advantage of. The entire HRC thanked Dr Solomon and Ms Guerrero for their time and both Junior Commissioners, especially Rohan Kalidas who will be graduating this coming June.

Other Business: Assemblyman Danielsen's office was reached out to, and project manager Saffie suggested reaching out to GateFlags.com, as that is a common organization utilized by the community. Edna introduced the hometown heroes project to the new Commissioner who stated that she has seen a similar program in another community. These

flags will feature the images of deceased or living veterans. Edna met with numerous officials to get this program started in Franklin Township and she will now put a proposal together with prices. While there are still things that need to be determined, they are now in a phase where they are looking at the facts of putting these flags up. These flags will be costly in relation to their size and there is another question about where these flags would be located. One idea is to put them in the municipal complex as well as Demott Lane. She will collect more facts to relay to the HRC. Once there is a plan on paper, she will work to deliver it to the township manager for consideration. Edna stated that eligibility will be handled through the Franklin township channel or other forms of media, such as local news sources. Edna said that she met with the Chamber of Commerce for their endorsement of the project and she met with someone from Canal Walk who functions as the leader for veterans in the community because we do not have a VFW in our community. He endorsed the project. There is no exact estimate for the number of flags that will be put up. Once the project is announced, a form will be put up on a website for all the information required for the flags. The funding for this project will be managed by the families who request the flags. Edna is yet to find another community that has funded these flags in another way. Some things to consider in the near future (as a community) is how long do we hang these flags for. Some communities take these flags down during the winter months so that they will not succumb to weather conditions. Pastor Gregory James is an endorser for this project.

Regarding the new HRC subcommittee, Pete Clark , Edna and Nora working on a current pamphlet regarding the HRC. Also, Somerset County does not have a directory for funeral services, but the state does. This is something else that needs to be worked on. In May there will be a diversity night. Pete Clark said that someone from another HRC of a different community will come and speak with us hopefully next month. This will give us insight on what other commissions are doing in their town.

Dr Kharazi stated that there are about 27 miles of trail in Franklin Township. However, there is one open space where there are no open trails on the county road by route 18. This past Sunday, Dr. Kharazi went with a team for two and a half hours to walk through a wooded open space to see if there was a way to add trails there. They took images and notes and will be reviewing them on March 12th to see what the next step will be in adding trails. Mr Kharazi also spoke about black history month celebration called “a walk through history” which was a panel discussion. This was a wonderful way to learn about black history. There was also the Ramadan lightning which took place last Sunday.

Along with Councilman Anbarasan, Dr. Kharazi is on the executive committee for bringing the YMCA to Franklin Township. This addition would bring a lot of benefits to the township, especially for the youth and the elderly of our community. He stated that he and his wife enjoy the YMCA currently and see the numerous benefits it brings. He reiterates

the number of elderly people and youth who come in and experience their amenities. He really hopes that there will be one constructed in our township. There will be a meeting for the advisory council of health next March 5th. Superintendent John Ravally as well as Zufall Health will be present at this meeting. This will be a good opportunity for the HRC to learn about the changes that need to be made in our township to bring greater health services. The township is working on the budget. The health insurance cost has gone up a good amount, and the town council is looking for ways to avoid raising taxes for the community. They were looking for partnerships with Rutgers and RWJ in order to bring a senior health clinic to Franklin Township .Michelle Petersen states that the Palestine-centered event was excellent.. Regarding Ramadan, one of the things that the Muslim community is doing is engaging with charity. A few years back, there was a food sponsorship created for families in need. This year, there are 100 families that the community wants to sponsor. All the money that will be collected will,be given to these families. This is one of the things that the community does for people in need.

The 65th anniversary for the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church celebration which the HRC was invited will take place on March 9th, which is an event to look forward to. Everyone is welcome. The Empty Bowls event will take place next Monday. They will have local artists do pottery. Buying a ticket buys lunch and a piece of pottery to participants. This event will display many pieces of pottery available for purchase, and will

take place at the Doubletree hotel. This event showcases a combination of art and helping the community. The Martin Luther King Breakfast went wonderful on January 20th.

Police Report: Officer Russo was unable to attend the HRC meeting last month due to surgery. He is feeling better now. March 19th will be the start of the Chess Club in the youth center which will be spearheaded by other officers. There will be a chess tournament that will go with the club. The community food distribution, held by the Baptist church, will be held on March 5th. People will be able to receive two boxes of produce with no questions asked. The police department will participate in the Kean career fair. This is especially valuable for students who plan on achieving a career in law enforcement. There will be an event called Read Across America taking place on MacAfee road school on March 3rd. The Garden State Track Club 3 mile run will also be taking place later this March. The pacer program is another program held by law enforcement in which officers go to all the elementary schools and answer questions children may have about law enforcement and their jobs.. All police activity is at NO cost.

Meeting adjourned at 7:57 PM

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

Respectfully submitted,

Junior Commissioners Rohan Kalidas & Elangkathir Elamaran