

Franklin Township Human Relations Commission Meeting

Minutes of March 26th, 2025

Present: Gary Rosenthal, Samina Sattar, Sharon Czcbotar, E. Poustchi, Nora Catiis, Edna Arguello Hitchner, John Tibbs, Shubhendu Singh, Linda Montgomery-Williams, Councilman Alex Karazi, Rohan Kalidas, Elangkathir Elamaran, Pete Clark, KJ Sharma

Excused: John Samba

Absent: None

Police Officer: Officer Kenneth Reid

Guest: Bina Mehta, Chair of South Brunswick Human Relations Commission, Michelle Petersen

Meeting called to order at 6:59 pm

Minutes of February 26th were approved.

Police report: Officer Reid has been in Franklin Township for his entire life. He reminded everyone to ensure to lock and secure their homes to prevent criminals from entering unprotected homes. He indicated the police department's new initiatives, such as a new podcast, which will showcase new things about the police department that may not be known. They have also started a police academy, which

shows township residents how the police department operates and introduces the officers to Franklin Township's citizens. There is also a youth basketball program that teaches youth basketball. Along with this there is a chess program which allows the police department to engage with the youth of Franklin Township. There will also be a "touch a truck" program and a fishing derby. While these programs don't have set dates, they are on the way. Officer Reid displayed the readiness of the police department to engage with any concerns of township members. Mr. Kharazi, on behalf of the public safety committee, reported that there will be police on the lookout for those who are texting while driving, as there will be a heavy fine. From May 19th to June 1st there will be a lookout for anybody who does not have a seatbelt on. Mr. Kharazi named these initiatives "Put down or pay" and "Click it or ticket", respectively. Officer Reid reiterated that the month of April is focused on the safety and awareness of driving. This is due to an apparent increase in distractions during driving. He stated that there have been a lot of deaths and severe injuries due to the lack of seatbelts, so these programs will work to prevent these. In addition, "Driving Sober or Pull Over" is another active initiative, especially during holidays such as July 4th. There were a lot of crashes and complaints in town due to parking, so it is necessary to address those issues. A question was brought up about how the police department knows when someone is on their phone. Officer Reid said that there are plenty of ways to tell, such as seeing someone with a phone in their hand (or even a laptop), and he said there are certain locations where he can see inside the car. He also rides in a disguised vehicle, which many residents would not know a police officer is in. There are also driving signs, such as swerving or not correctly following traffic laws which could indicate either intoxication or distracted driving. Officer Reid said that certain areas where parking and moving violations are apparent are being managed

by the police department. Officer Reid said that all of these addressed issues are possible due to complaints that come from the township residents. In response to Tibbs Reid said that he cannot speak on what recreation does, but rather only what the police department does. Officer Reid reiterated that all police programs are free of charge and are open to all. He also stated that recreation is staffed by the recreation department and is therefore operated by them. Programs such as the Franklin Fit program are done by the Franklin Detectives so the police department facilitates these programs and tries their best to ensure that cost is not a factor in allowing the youth to participate. Mr Rosenthal said that the issues that Mr. Tibbs posed are not under the scope of the HRC and need to be brought up to the recreation department. Michelle Petersen states that the chess program Mr Tibbs brought up is a different one from the one that the Police department is hosting. This program is organized by a vendor. If the children want to go to a different program, they may attend the youth center program for free. Mr. Rosenthal stated that possibly there were some problems with police timing of response but Dr. Kharazi stated that there is truly no issue. Officer Reid brought up a program called "Operation Blue Angel," which is offered to individuals over 55 which ensures that the EMTs can break down doors to provide aid to the elderly. The program works when an individual signs up for the program, and a call is made. Through information entered in the program, officers may be able to respond to the call more efficiently and ensure that seniors can receive the help they require. The program involved installing a lockbox on the exterior of your home, in which police officers know the combination through information entered online. This program is apparent in many other places throughout NJ, due to the need for it, and has existed in Franklin for upwards of 20 years.

Guest Speaker: Bina Mehta, Chair of South Brunswick HRC, is a resident of South Brunswick Township. She thanks everyone for having her. She has been in the US for 30 years and part of the South Brunswick community for 21 years. She has been active in the community for as long as she can remember. She makes money through a financing job where she feels she has been given tremendous opportunities. Because of this, she feels like she has to give back to her community. Part of this contribution entails being part of the South Brunswick HRC, where she has been the chair for years. One of the jobs that the commission entailed was funding the Public Library. They also try to do a lot of events at the Senior Center, such as bringing awareness about senior abuse and psychological abuse. They try to work with the NJ state attorney general in the justice department, and bring those programs to the senior center as well. They actively promote programs regarding faith, but have been a little slow with it post-COVID. One of the things they have been working on this year is bringing all the commissions in the area close together. They want to meet other commissions in the area and work together, and how they can complement each other. This recent month, they are going to be doing a special event regarding poetry for their senior centers. They have a scholarship program for high school students, and are looking for a donor to give funding for this program. They also actively participate in the South Brunswick Township National Night Out and have a booth there. They make every effort to bring awareness to how to request help and special types of assistance for issues other than police related issues. There was a question brought up about how this information is brought to the rest of the community. She responded that they participate in free events (as the commission has no budget)

and sometimes depend on donations. When they do participate, such as during the National Night Out, they can bring great impact to the town. They also participate in their July 4th event, in which they have a booth to give out information. They are constantly associated with the senior center and constantly offering programs for them, so it is very easy for them to give out information through these avenues. John Tibbs asked if the elementary school system is involved with these programs. Mehta says that these issues have nothing to do with the youth in these elementary schools as the council does not particularly focus on the youth as of now. Tibbs stated that he asked this question because he realized that he was the only African American at one of these schools. He wonders how ideas are exchanged in such a setting. Mehta says this may be an issue to bring up to the rest of the council. Mr Clark asked if there was a representative from the SB BOE. Mehta stated that there is a person who is on the Women's Commission but not on the HRC of South Brunswick. Regardless, Mr. Clark feels that this idea is good, as the FTW HRC is a member of Diversity Day and wants to continue working with schools. He was interested to see online that there was a BOE member on the HRC of South Brunswick. Mehta asked how the HRC, elementary schools, or BOE connect. Mr. Clark says that she should intertwine these entities in order to better support the community. He says this is what the backbone of the Human Relations Commission is meant to be. This would involve these different parties participating in mutual events and helping each other in moments of need. A recommendation was posed that it would be beneficial for both townships to have a BOE member on the HRC. Mehta asked if the BOE and HRC attachments would be beneficial, as there is no clear connection between them in her township. Mr. Rosenthal stated that Franklin is a

very diversified town, with two junior commissioners who are high school students. The Franklin HRC is also very close with the BOE and the schools, even having the high school principal as a guest at the last meeting. So, he stated that the Franklin HRC benefited a lot by having a connection with the schools. Mehta states that she loved the idea of having two junior commissioners who are high school students, and enhancing her HRC's relationship with the schools. Dr. Kharazi posed a suggestion for each member to attend one of the surrounding commissions' events and ask them for suggestions on how we can improve our commission based on them. This is a great starting point and will help enhance all commissions in the area. Mehta stated that due to her library role, she is very familiar with the town. Despite this, she states that her biggest challenge is finding how to connect the commissions in town and address common issues with the youth. As a result, she had an idea to connect with various commissions in the same town and commissions in neighboring towns. Councilman Kharazi stated that our township is one of the most diverse ones in NJ. He stated that the Franklin Township HRC is one of the most active in the community. Mr Rosenthal reminded that at the town council meeting, there is a liaison reporting from each commission in the township. In addition, he goes to the high school guidance department every year to receive recommendations for two high school students to serve as junior commissioners. This is very beneficial to the commission. Mr Clark also brought up how South Brunswick is unique in having a women's commission. He commended them for this and wants this to be copied in Franklin Township. It is also commendable how beneficial South Brunswick's work with the senior citizen community is. There is a big community of individuals over 55 in Franklin Township, and embracing this is something we hope to engage in the

future. Mehta brought up how the Senior center and senior helpers have their own managers and regulators. These senior programs and the senior center are heavily supported by the township. These programs are also quite old and have been in institutions for a while and stem from connections with the state of New Jersey. Mehta states that South Brunswick likes to piggyback on ideas and work to better themselves. The HRC is involved in supporting these programs, rather than planning them. Mehta states that she speaks with her library director and asks if it would be possible to bring local commissions together in order to benefit all commissions in the area. She can confidently say that there is nothing in prominence for a common planning board among all commissions in South Brunswick. Regarding our town, Franklin, multiple boards come together and brainstorm. This is something that can be implemented by the Franklin HRC. It is stated that this is not in fashion as of now but can be used in the future. Mr. Rosenthal stated that there are people in the HRC who are also on other boards, such as the zoning and health commission boards. The HRC reports to the council and has no set budget. One of the things that is important is the HRC's role in being informed on what is going on in the township, as they need to have context and understanding about many different processes in town. Mr. Rosenthal thanked Mehta for her time.

Other Business: Edna states that she did not know if South Brunswick does the hometown heroes project, where flags are put up for community veterans, and Mehta assures her that they do. This is a project that Franklin Township is trying to undertake. Edna brought up how she talked to local veterans and the chamber of

commerce to discuss their support in this large project. Recently, there was a meeting with the Assemblyman's office which stated that they will provide financial support towards the project. Mr Rosenthal and Edna said that they have met with the township project manager who now would like a timeline for the project that can be reviewed before this plan is put into play. The chief of staff, Wayne, at Assemblyman Danielson's office, suggested waiting until the spring to find the flags because it provides time, direction, and money to undertake this project. Also, the flags would fly for a longer period of time because they would have to be taken down before the bad weather starts. Mehta said that this is a project similar to what is happening in South Brunswick. She is not too sure who else is doing such naming ceremonies for veterans or notable citizens of South Brunswick, or raising flags but she said that she may want to help with raising these flags in Franklin Township. Mr. Clark stated that North Brunswick has a program in which they name their streets after veterans who lived on those streets. These streets have a special sign recognizing these veterans, and this program is funded by the township itself. Edna brought up the Veterans Day and Memorial Day ceremonies in the township, and the sculptures throughout the community that recognize military and veterans. Mr. Rosenthal brought up the subcommittee (Edna, Nora, Pete) that is working on the new HRC brochure. Edna says that this will be an online infographic that may be able to be translated into a hard copy. These copies could be hung up in big community areas such as the library or the senior center. She stated that the last time these brochures were produced, the township undertook the task but this may be subject to change this time around. What has been determined as "must-haves" on the brochure includes a history of the commission, the mission statement, the goals, an explanation of the organizational structure, how positions are appointed, and the

unique employment of two junior commissions. Some questions brought up were if an ex-member of the HRC could be appointed to a new position by the BOE, or if we wanted to purchase a banner for community events, who would pay for that. It is also brought up how if we were to get a brochure or banner, how would it be paid for? Would it be sponsored by a business, corporation, or paid for by the township/HRC? The big question is whether we are permitted to undertake this task. Mr. Rosenthal brought up one of our Councilmen, and how he goes around the township requesting donations. Mr. Clark brought up how many commissions have a facebook, and that the HRC would benefit from a social media presence. One of the avenues that can be used by the HRC is its website. Edna stated that younger people are not active on Facebook, and are rather on other platforms such as Instagram or TikTok. Elangkathir Elamaran reported on how, regrettably, Franklin High School has lost a lot of funding for after-school events and clubs. Mr Rosenthal will look into this further.

Meeting adjourned at 8:03 PM

The next meeting will be on April 23rd, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

Junior Commissioners Rohan Kalidas & Elangkathir Elamaran