

August 29, 2023: Human Relations Ad Hoc Committee

Human Relations Ad Hoc Committee – August 29, 2023 AT 5:30 P.M.

Members Present:

Mike Blessum, Scott Burlingame, Denise Dykeman, Lisa Olson, Miranda Schuler, Christine Staley, Travis Zabloutney, Lianne Zeltinger

Members Absent:

Janet Mathistad

Also Present:

Harold Stewart, Stefanie Stalheim, Lisa Jundt

The meeting was called to order by Co-Chairperson, Scott Burlingame at 5:30 pm.

Mike Blessum made the motion to recommend the Minot City Council repeal in its entirety Division 4 of Chapter 2, Article V, of the City of Minot Code of Ordinances (Human Relations Committee); and further to recommend the discontinuation of the Human Relations Ad Hoc Committee as the Committee has completed its work. Motion was seconded by Lianne Zeltinger.

Blessum stated he believed the discussion should start with the Committee determining if the current ordinance should be in law at all. He went on to say he believes the role of government is to provide parks/recreation services, police and fire services, public housing services, emergency medical services, municipal court, transportation and public works. He believes government should take up issues with human relations when they intersect with one of these primary services. He does not believe issues with regard to human relations should be taken up by an unelected board of volunteers and that Minot already has a vibrant set of non-profits that have done well in addressing issues of diversity.

Miranda Schuler said she does agree with Mr. Blessum's view on the limited role of government. However, she stated the Committee has already laid out its path on how to move forward to the public for their involvement and believes discontinuing the process will point to a lack of transparency by the Committee. She would like to move forward with the current path to make recommendations to the Council.

Denise Dykeman first pointed out the discussion of the role of government was not on the agenda. She stated she disagrees with Mr. Blessum's characterization on the role of government. She continued by saying the Preamble to the Constitution clearly states what government's role is including promoting general welfare. She believes the Human Relations Ad Hoc Committee can also promote general welfare and foster a sense of belonging and respect for its citizens. She stated government should be concerned about the liberty of all including their civil rights.

Lisa Olson agreed that the ordinance should be repealed. She went on to state she would like the Ad Hoc Committee to look at the recommendations previously put forward by Alderman Jantzer. She said she feels committed to doing the work and not just walk away this early in the process.

Christine Staley believed the committee needs to take a look at the issues the community currently faces or risk bigger problems in the future. She stated that she volunteered to be on the Committee and wants to do the work that has been given. Staley stated that younger citizens may feel insecure to come forward and this type of forum could also provide the confidence they need to come forward with their issues.

Travis Zabloutney said the role of government is subjective and can be interpreted in many ways. He stated the role is to provide for an orderly and lawful society that respects individuals, but operating within law. He does not believe government should be a group of people who make subjective decisions outside of law. He stated not everyone will be in agreement as to what acceptance is on social issues.

Blessum addressed the Committee by saying he is not making the motion so as not to do the work. He stated he does not see this Committee as a need, because he personally does not see or understand the issues that have been voiced by others. He believes the Committee needs to have the discussion so he can further understand the concerns that have been raised before proceeding in the path the Committee has outlined.

Lianne Zeltinger agrees with much of what has been said by all. However, she also has not heard what exactly has been unsafe and unwelcoming in the City of Minot. She believes there needs to be actions outlined that would define what unsafe and unwelcoming means. She stated government can address acts of discrimination, but actions involving feelings cannot be taken care of by the City.

Dykeman stated she believes the City provide a forum for individuals to bring issues forward that involve accessibility to public spaces and events. She stated this forum could also do education for citizens to understand what resources are out there to help address their issues. She believes there are barriers to take complaints to state and federal levels.

Co-Chair Burlingame reminded the Ad Hoc Committee that this group will determine the future of the Committee and how it will look. The current members will probably not be the ones to hear the concerns of citizens.

City Manager Harold Stewart stated the role of government is a difficult question to answer. He went on to say that simply looking at government to provide infrastructure and services is becoming challenging. He said the need to start addressing social infrastructure is important because it has an impact on citizens. He also said we can learn from what has happened in other communities and be proactive by having a mechanism in place to address concerns. Stewart stated workforce issues in communities are being addressed by having this type of forum in place so communities are welcoming. Stewart gave examples of social issues as being racial discrimination issues across the country, LGBTQ+ issues, women's issues and others who do not feel accepted or seen in the community. He said people can be a part of our community regardless of if people agree with or accept their differences.

Blessum cautioned that government has precipitated issues because it has tried to take care of concerns. He believes community organizations are in place to solve social issues not the government. He does agree that accessibility and housing issues are important but there are mechanisms in place to handle those concerns.

Motion by Blessum, seconded by Schuler, failed by the following vote: ayes: Blessum, Zabloutney, Zeltinger; nays: Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley.

Miranda Schuler made the motion to have Article I titled Human Relations Committee. Motion seconded by Christine Staley.

Mike Blessum stated there should be conversation about if the committee should be addressing human rights issues or human relations. He also believes the group should be addressed as a commission rather than a committee. Miranda Schuler said human relations is the correct wording and would like to see it remain as a committee rather than a commission.

Co-Chair Olson suggested that the committee look at Alderman Jantzer's ordinance revisions which called the committee a human relations committee.

Stewart agreed that the City should not become involved in human rights issues that utilize investigations and injunctions. Stewart continued by saying the City should help direct individuals to state or federal resources that could look at human rights issues. Co-Chair Burlingame stated he would like this group to look at human relations and not move in the direction of the City of Fargo which has started looking at human rights issues.

Blessum and Travis Zabloutney expressed the need to be consistent in the use of committee or commission titles in the ordinance. City Attorney Stalheim stated committee and commission are interchangeable but would also like ordinance consistency. She stated it makes sense to distinguish human relations or human rights because there are other connotations with both terms.

Motion by Schuler, seconded by Staley, passed by the following vote: ayes: Blessum, Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley, Zabloutney, Zeltinger; nays: none.

Miranda Schuler made the motion to have Article III (Objectives) state; The goals and objectives of the Human Relations Committee are: a) To provide leadership in the areas of civil and human rights; b) To promote respect for all people; c) To identify issues of concern regarding civil and human rights in Minot and to make recommendations to the City Council; and d) To encourage adherence to federal and state laws regarding civil and human rights. Motion seconded by Lisa Olson.

Miranda Schuler stated she believes the language presented by Alderman Jantzer is easy to understand, and identifies adherence to state and federal laws with regard to civil rights since the Committee would not be specifically addressing human rights. Lisa Olson stated she appreciated the wording “all people” rather than providing a specific list of different individuals so as not to exclude anyone. Christine Staley would like the City to consider capitalizing the word “all” the proposed objective “b” to make it a more prevalent to citizens.

Mike Blessum stated he doesn’t want proposed objective “c” to weaponize government by expecting everyone to accept how others think. He said he agreed with Lianne Zeltinger’s statement the City should look at actions not beliefs. He went on to say that if someone is actively discriminating when they shouldn’t, then they deserve to be charged or fined for the infraction.

Discussion continued by discussing the definitions of civil rights and human rights. Mike Blessum stated he believed the civil rights definition comes from law and human rights has a more spiritual perspective. Travis Zabloutney read the definition which stated “human rights are one acquires by being alive and civil rights are obtained by being a legal member of a certain political state”. Denise Dykeman read the ND list of protected categories that cannot be discriminated against. City Attorney Stalheim asked if the intent of the committee is to reference other laws by using terms civil rights and human rights. Schuler stated that including the terms civil rights and human rights in objective “d” reaffirms the City’s intent to adhere to existing federal and state laws. Lianne Zeltinger stated she does not want the ordinance to be too restrictive so as to limit future Committees in their actions.

Motion by Schuler, seconded by Olson, passed by the following vote: ayes: Blessum, Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley, Zabloutney, Zeltinger; nays: none.

Miranda Schuler made the motion to have Article X (Officer Job Description) to be as follows: (1) Membership; Appointment; Term; Vacancy: a) The human relations committee shall consist of at least seven members, and shall not exceed eleven members. Committee membership should reflect the diversity of the entire Minot community; b) The Mayor, subject to the confirmation by the city council, shall appoint a chair and the members. The Mayor shall also appoint a member of the City Council, subject to the confirmation by the City Council, to serve in an advisory capacity to the committee. The City Manager shall also serve on the committee in an advisory capacity; c) Of the initial appointees, a majority shall serve for one year and the remainder shall serve for two years. Thereafter, all terms should run for two years; and d) If a vacancy occurs, an appointment to fill the unexpired term shall be made in the manner in which original appointments are made. (2) Meetings; Chair; Subcommittees: a) Meetings of the human relations committee may be held as often as deemed necessary by the chair or vice-chair; b) The City Clerk shall keep a record of the human relations committee’s minutes; c) The human relations committee shall elect its vice-chair for a term of one year. The chair shall approve the agenda prior to the meeting and preside over the meetings of the human relations committee. In the absence of the chair, the vice-chair shall assume the duties of the chair during the chair’s absence; and d) Subcommittees may be established as necessary. The chair shall appoint subcommittee members, subject to confirmation by the human relations committee. Motion seconded by Lisa Olson.

Mike Blessum called a point of order stating the Committee was straying from agenda which did not address membership which is currently addressed in Article IV of the original ordinance. Lisa Olson agrees that the wording from the Jantzer amendment does not line up with the current ordinance, but the intent is consistent with the agenda.

Travis Zabloutney stated he believed Article X in the current ordinance was more orderly than the amended language is.

Motion by Schuler, seconded by Olson, failed by the following vote: ayes: none. nays: Blessum, Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley, Zabloutney, Zeltinger.

Travis Zabloutney made the motion to have Article X tabled until next meeting. Motion seconded by Miranda Schuler.

City Attorney Stalheim stated tabling will most likely push the item to the next meeting. City Manager Stewart reminded the committee that it was alright to let a motion fail for lack of a second, rather opening for discussion which makes for confusion.

Motion by Zabloutney, seconded by Schuler, failed by the following vote: ayes: none. nays: Blessum, Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley, Zabloutney, Zeltinger.

Miranda Schuler made the motion to have Article X (Officer Job Description) to be as follows: (1) The Chairperson shall: (a) Preside over and conduct all meetings; (b) Prepare the agenda prior to meetings; (c) Appoint subcommittees as necessary to carry on the work of the HRC; (d) Refer tasks to the appropriate subcommittees for action; (e) If a vacancy occurs, an appointment to fill the unexpired term shall be made in the manner in which original appointments are made; (2) The Vice-Chairperson shall: (a) Assume the duties of the chairperson during his/her absence; (b) Perform other duties as directed by the chairperson; (3) The secretary shall: (a) The City Clerk shall keep a record of the human relations committee's minutes and the City Clerk would act as the secretary; (4) Someone from the City Attorney's office will serve on the committee as the Parliamentarian. Motion seconded by Lisa Olson.

Mike Blessum confirmed that Schuler's motion be fully in the current ordinance with the exception of some language changes. Lisa Olson made the recommendation to follow Alderman Jantzer's document as it would be easier to work from one document. Blessum agreed with Olson but wanted to make sure the public had advanced notice for what would be addressed in coming agendas. Schuler expressed her reservations in just adopting Alderman Jantzer's revisions without also considering Alderwoman Evans' recommended revisions. Denise Dykeman stated she would rather work from the existing ordinance document.

Motion by Schuler, seconded by Olson, failed by the following vote: ayes: Burlingame, Dykeman, Schuler, Staley. nays: Blessum, Olson, Zabloutney, Zeltinger.

Miranda Schuler made a motion move Article X (Officer Job Description) Motion seconded by Mike Blessum.

Motion by Schuler, seconded by Blessum, passed by the following vote: ayes: Blessum, Burlingame, Dykeman, Olson, Schuler, Staley, Zabloutney, Zeltinger; nays: None.

Co-Chair Olson asked that any items for next meeting's agenda be communicated to either Co-Chair by September 6th.

Miranda Schuler made the motion to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Mike Blessum and carried unanimously.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 7:00 pm.