



DOMINICK PANGALLO  
MAYOR

## CITY OF SALEM RACE EQUITY COMMISSION

98 WASHINGTON STREET  
SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS 01970  
978.745-9595 x. 41505

REGINA ZARAGOZA FREY, CHAIR  
ALPHONSE WRIGHT, VICE CHAIR

### FINAL – Approved February 1, 2024 MINUTES OF THE RACE EQUITY COMMISSION January 4, 2024

A meeting of the Salem Race Equity Commission (REC) was held on January 4, 2024, at 5:30 pm via ZOOM, an online video conference call system in accordance with Chapter 107 of the Act of 2022.

#### 1. Roll Call

Present on the call were: Regina Zaragoza Frey (Chair), Alphonse Wright (Vice Chair), Shantel Alix, Rosa Alvarado, Nicole McLaughlin, Paola Miranda, Tara Dhanraj Roden, Salem Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Stephen Zrike, and City Council Liaison Jeff Cohen.

Absent were: Alexandra Ramos, Kenzie Chin, City of Salem Human Resources Director Lisa Cammarata, and Chief of Police Lucas Miller.

Other meeting attendees include: Veronica Miranda, Saskia VannJames, and Doreen Wade.

#### 2. Approve previous meeting minutes.

- a. December 7, 2023

Chair Zaragoza entertained a motion to approve the previous meetings' minutes for December 7, 2023. Motion was made by Nicole McLaughlin, seconded by Tara Dhanraj Roden, and the motion was carried unanimously

#### 3. Welcoming Jeff Cohen as the REC's new City Council Liaison.

Chair Zaragoza announced that Jeff Cohen will be the REC's new City Council Liaison replacing Lev McClain who was the previous City Council Liaison. This position is not a voting member.

Councillor Cohen expressed gratitude to the City Council President for appointing him to the REC. He shared that he is looking forward to representing the views of the REC to the



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rest of the Council and vice versa. He invited REC members to reach out to him anytime to talk about anything he can advocate for with the Council.

4. **Discussion regarding feedback on presentations from the December meeting of the REC.**
  - a. **Equity Audit – ReadySet Solutions.**
  - b. **Human Resources Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse and Representative Workforce – HCH Enterprises.**

Chair Zaragoza introduced this item as an opportunity to have a discussion regarding the presentations from the December meeting including the Equity Audit, which is still in the process of being conducted, and the Recruitment and Retention of a Diverse and Representative Workforce Report, which has been finalized and shared with the City.

Vice Chair Wright asked which, if any, of the recommendations in the Recruitment and Retention of a Diverse and Representative Workforce Report will be taken under advisement by this administration. Chair Zaragoza shared that the Mayor has said they plan to implement as much as possible. She explained that first they will be having an internal debrief of the process and then identifying the implementation plan. Chair Zaragoza will give an update at a future meeting with the details. Vice Chair Wright wants to ensure it is on record that the REC is paying attention and holding them accountable.

Vice Chair Wright asked when the Equity Audit will be finalized. Chair Zaragoza provided context about the Equity Audit by sharing that it is focused externally on the community and the goal is to increase community participation in government processes that affect the community. She shared a slide reviewing the deliverables of the audit as shown below.

1. **Planning:** Critiquing completed projects and existing planning processes through a DEI lens in order to increase equitable community involvement and feedback for future projects.
2. **Purchasing and Procurement:** Critiquing the procurement process through a DEI lens in order to increase equitable community involvement.
3. **Community Assessment:** Completing a Community Assessment about equitable representation from the community in government processes.
4. **Diversity on Boards and Commissions:** Identifying ways to equitable representation and increase diversity on City Boards, Commissions, and Committees.
5. **Language Justice:** Identifying best ways to address language justice and translation needs in the City using new and existing feedback and data.



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Chair Zaragoza reviewed the timeline of this work. The plan is to do the community based work in person in late April and early May. The delivery date for the final plan will be in the summer. Chair Zaragoza said the intention is to keep the REC involved in the process with ReadySet Solutions doing at least one more presentation at a meeting so they can gather and incorporate the REC's feedback before they do the community assessment.

Shantel Alix asked if they discussed how they would measure outcomes of the Equity Audit. Chair Zaragoza clarified that coming up with accountability measures is part of the Request for Proposal (RFP). The accountability measures will be different for each type of goal.

Chair Zaragoza called for any other comments or specific things REC members want the consultants to focus on and consider while conducting the Equity Audit.

Tara Dhanraj Roden shared interest in hearing more about the information they gather from community members and hopes to hear about that in their next presentation.

Dr. Stephen Zrike asked if there is a way for them to look at barriers to diversity in participation on city boards, running for office, and other participation as well as if there is anything the REC can do to support more engagement from a diverse group. For example, is the need for child care a barrier that prevents participation in city council, school committee, or other city boards. Language access is another important thing that is being looked at.

Chair Zaragoza shared that ReadySet Solutions started by reviewing diversity on all city boards and commissions. They have now started looking at challenges and barriers to participation as well as identifying recruitment strategies. There is a lot of interesting data coming out of this process such as how there are very few renters on these boards and commissions which is problematic since renters make up a large percentage of the population in Salem. Chair Zaragoza shared the example of the Planning Board which is an extremely powerful board that lacks a lot of diversity. There was also some discussion about the Salem Housing Authority being a paid position and how it is decided who is on this board. There was some misunderstanding on how many people served on the Salem Housing Authority board. (There is a total of five people who serve on the Salem Housing Authority, one is appointed by the governor, and the remaining four are appointed by the Mayor of Salem. Out of the four, two can be selected at the discretion of the Mayor, and the other two are voted on by the tenant organizations and the North Shore Labor Council unions).



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Chair Zaragoza called for any other comments. There were none. She added that if any REC members do want to discuss anything more regarding these items in future meetings, then to let her know.

**5. Discussion regarding October's presentation from Saskia VannJames about the creation of an American Freedmen Commission in the City of Salem. Any vote regarding this matter is expected during February's meeting of the REC.**

Chair Zaragoza began by explaining that she made the decision to push any vote to the next meeting to make sure there is enough time for REC members to review materials. She then opened the floor to discussion.

Tara Dhanraj Roden clarified when the additional materials were sent to the REC members. Chair Zaragoza confirmed they were sent in a long email right before the holidays.

Vice Chair Wright asked how many people have had a chance to review the materials to see if they are prepared to have a discussion now or if they should push it off. He explained that he is prepared to have a discussion because he has had a chance to review some of the materials, but not all of it.

Chair Zaragoza confirmed she has reviewed the materials. Nicole McLaughlin confirmed that she reviewed the materials once, but needs to look at it again with the understanding of what is being asked. She requested clarity about what is being asked of the REC such as making a specific recommendation to city council and if they can only make the recommendation they are being asked to make or if they can come up with other options.

Chair Zaragoza clarified that the REC is being asked to make a recommendation to the Mayor about the creation of an American Freedmen Task Force for the City of Salem. However, they are not bound to that specific recommendation so there are other options about actions the REC can take. For example, the REC could write a letter in support of the relevant state-wide bill. The REC is also not required to make a recommendation at all. It is completely up to what the REC would like to do. Chair Zaragoza added that the City of Cambridge did recently approve the creation of an American Freedmen Task Force for Cambridge.

Tara Dhanraj Roden shared that she needs to review the materials more. The information shared today has been helpful framing as she reviews the materials further.



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Saskia VannJames sent a message to REC members during the meeting requesting them to be specific with their questions so she can take notes to answer the questions.

Vice Chair Wright shared that he has a lot of thoughts about this and has not come to these thoughts lightly. He is glad the city of Cambridge did it and there is an effort statewide. However, regarding the creation of an American Freedmen Task Force for Salem, he doesn't think we have the resources to do this. For a task force like this to have any meaning, there needs to be people involved who are currently not and Salem doesn't currently have the budget and the processes to effectively recruit diverse members to participate, as shared in discussions regarding the previous agenda item. He also questioned if it is necessary to create another body to do the purpose of this work or if an existing body could do this work such as the Race Equity Commission or the Human Rights Coalition.

Vice Chair Wright agreed there is work that needs to start being done regarding reparations, but is hesitant about the creation of another caste level in Black society. He explained that society will not distinguish between these different designations because the way the system of power is currently structured. So the creation of a new designation of American Freedman will be problematic overall.

Shantel Alix shared that she would love to see the participation and perspective of American Freedmen in the Salem community. She understand the feeling of belonging that it can bring so she would love to see their interest in being involved in these task forces.

Chair Zaragoza shared that she is also concerned about the resources and budget. In conversations with the Equity Audit, Salem is considering implementing something being done by the Salem Public School systems such as hiring a full time translator and giving stipends to bilingual employees. These initiatives would create a budgetary impact of over \$100,000. Making decisions like this would mean an increase in taxes. These are already concerns and this decision regarding an American Freedmen Task Force would have a budgetary impact as well.

Nicole McLaughlin asked Shantel to clarify if she meant that she would like to see if there are people in the City of Salem who are interested in this task force before we make the decision about it. Shantel confirmed that was her comment.

Rosa Alvarado agrees there is a lot of work being done around the areas of race and equity so she is not sure about the need for the creation of a task force.



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Vice Chair Wright encouraged everyone to do a deeper dive into the materias, including himself, but that he shared his initial thoughts which can be considered.

Saskia VannJames sent a message to REC members during the meeting summarizing the notes she has regarding their questions and concerns.

“So far I have the following;

Budget concerns, how can the city afford to support this commission due to budget constraints?

Can we do this with existing commissions?

Will this create a new caste system?

How can more voices from the American Freedmen community be included in this decision process?”

Chair Zaragoza brought up the option of inviting Saskia to speak, but wasn't sure about the process. Vice Chair Wright made a motion to suspend the rules of the agenda to allow Saskia VannJames to speak, Shantel Alix seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

Chair Zaragoza promoted Saskia from an attendee to a panelist. Saskia addressed some of the questions that have been brought up. Regarding the budget, Saskia advocated for Cambridge to leverage their resources and subsidize other communities doing this work such as Salem. This includes financial resources as well as procedural resources such as a municipal transitional justice model that Cambridge is partnering with Harvard Law School to help develop.

Regarding the creation of a new caste system, Saskia clarified that the American Freedman Task Force is based on human rights. The majority of members should be American Freedmen because the claim is loss of sovereignty and the vision is to have the government acknowledge that this is their homeland and the re-establishment of the Federal American Freedmen Bureau. However, this work would also impact everyone being hurt by the racial caste system because this transitional justice process would work to dismantle the racial caste system overall. All of this is defined by the United Nations. While the majority of members should be American Freedmen, there should be people of all communities and races involved to help them all begin to break down the racial caste system.

Regarding the use of existing commissions in doing the work of an American Freedmen Task Force, Saskia said it is possible but the existing commissions have to be based on human rights. In Cambridge, they decided to establish its own commission because it



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required that much focus and the current commissions do not have expertise regarding this. Also, when you put this work under another commission, there need to be members who are American Freedmen involved to effectively utilize a transitional justice model.

Regarding more voices from the American Freedmen community to be included in this decision process, Saskia agreed this needs to happen in Salem. She has been talking with One Race and Salem United about transitional justice. Consent is central in this process so the American Freedmen community in Salem has to be educated and own this process. If interested Salem residents are identified, they can be connected with Saskia to be educated about it, then they can develop and share their views and contribute as they'd like.

Chair Zaragoza asked a clarifying question about what the budget implications may be. Saskia shared that the following may be items that would be part of the budget: stipends for commissioners; RFPs to conduct harm reports for items such as health, land laws, and economics; genealogy programs to verify who is an American Freedmen; and community engagement. Boston put half a million dollars towards RFPs, but no funding towards community engagement so no one knows this work is being done. Amherst took a resident's harm report instead of doing a state analysis. For community engagement, they did a survey. Neither of these were deemed a successful model. In Cambridge, they are doing a public education campaign about what this means before putting out a call for interest in serving on the commission. They are also partnering with local leaders and institutions to develop a website, conduct harm reports, and develop resources.

Vice Chair Wright clarified that it is almost impossible to estimate the budget implications right now. Saskia confirmed. Vice Chair Wright clarified that some of these budgetary burdens should be handled by federal levels, not municipal. Saskia confirmed. She explained that certain items are decided and handled by the federal government including protected class, cash, and land.

Saskia encouraged the REC to ensure they take enough time to consider this recommendation and connect with the American Freedmen community in Salem before taking a vote. Saskia also shared that she may have a better idea about Cambridge's budget for the initiative by May and could share that information then.

Chair Zaragoza said there are multiple options for the REC to consider including supporting the work at the state level and/or supporting a recommendation to create a task force in Salem. She also echoed Saskia's comments that the REC can hold off on taking action until they have more information. Either way, the REC needs to determine how to move forward with this and how it should appear on the agenda for future meetings.



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Rosa Alvarado shared that this should be an ongoing conversation and the REC should wait until they have more information before taking specific actions.

Tara Dhanraj Roden shared she would like to continue to review the materials and at the next meeting narrow down the options they would like to consider.

Shantel Alix shared that the REC should connect with the American Freedmen community in Salem before making a decision, but questions who should lead this work.

Nicole McLaughlin recommends the option to wait and see what happens in Cambridge and any other information that becomes available. Even if the REC has a robust conversation at the February meeting, she doesn't believe they'll be ready for a vote because this is a very big, important, and complicated decision.

Paola Miranda agreed with Nicole McLaughlin.

Chair Zaragoza interpreted that the final decision at this moment is to continue this discussion at the February meeting without the intention to vote until the future when everyone feels ready.

SaskiaVan James shared the following in a message to the REC members during the meeting:

<https://www.cambridgeday.com/2023/12/15/paid-legal-notice-for-cambridge-for-dec-15-22/> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice/about-transitional-justice-and-human-rights>

This link also provides the legal definition of reparations. Reparations is not racial justice, it's the process of applying transitional justice. Racial justice is based on civil rights. Transitional justice is based on human rights. Reparations is not to be summarized as a check. I encourage the focus to simply be updates on engagement with grassroots organizers that are American Freedmen for next month."

**6. New business.**

Chair Zaragoza made a call for any other agenda items for the next REC meeting in February. There were no agenda items suggested.

**a. Update on the City of Salem's Discrimination Reporting Form.**



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Chair Zaragoza said that at the next meeting in February she will share an update on the City of Salem's Discrimination Reporting Form. She clarified that she can't be too specific with the details since it is a public forum. The information will be broad, but it will still give an idea of how the form is being used and what types of reports are coming in.

**7. Public Comment.**

Chair Zaragoza made a call for public comment. There was no public comment.

**8. Adjournment.**

Motion to adjourn was made by Vice Chair Wright, seconded by Shantel Alix, and the motion was carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 6:56 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Giffen  
Race Equity Commission Minute Taker