

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS COUNCIL
VALPARAISO, INDIANA
May 5, 2025**

The Human Relations Council of the City of Valparaiso, Indiana, met on Monday, May 5, 2025 at 6:30 p.m. in City Hall. Allison Quackenbush called the meeting to order. Present were Matty Whaling, Elisabeth Cohon, Mark Fesenmyer, Debi Sibray, and Jack Tipold. Roy Summerville, David Muniz and Mike Hendren were absent. A quorum was established.

MOTION: Alison Quackenbush moved to have item 8 – President Comments move up on the Agenda to item 6. Elisabeth Cohon seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

Appointment of Officers

MOTION: Mark Fesenmyer moved to nominate Alison Quackenbush as President of the AHRC. Elisabeth Cohon seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

MOTION: Alison Quackenbush moved to nominate Elisabeth Cohon as Vice President of the AHRC. Matty Whaling seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

Appointment of HRC Member to IR Committee

Allison Quackenbush – In 2016 the Council adopted an Ordinance that prohibits discriminatory conduct within the city. It established an Investigation and Reconciliation Committee. The committee has five members. One is to be appointed by the AHRC. There has not been a complaint filed since the Committee was established.

MOTION: Alison Quackenbush moved to nominate Jack Tipold as the AHRC's appointment to the IR Committee. Elisabeth Cohon seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

Acceptance of October 1, 2024 Minutes

MOTION: Debi Sibray moved to approve minutes from the October 1, 2024 meeting. Jack Tipold seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

At the last meeting there was not a quorum. Therefore, there were no minutes. Alison will put notes she took at the meeting on the web page.

Review of Valparaiso Community Conference

Elisabeth Cohon attended the Review of Valparaiso Community Conference. This was held at VU and Mayor Costas was the speaker. Elisabeth gave a review of the conference. After lunch they broke out into groups for discussions. The groups were local businesses, Porter County Foundation and MAAC. They ended the day with a "speed dating" scenario intended for everyone to get to know local agencies. The Mayor talked about civility and government. The gist of it was how do we become better people. He discussed how there is angst with the national government and it is filtering down to local government. But really the two do not have anything to do with each other. He talked about discussing an issue and not putting a person down because they believe the way they do. By talking you can find out where they agree and where they disagree. And both are okay. Sometimes we might have an opinion on an issue. When we do further research on the issue, we might find that we were incorrect in our opinion. It is ok to admit we were wrong rather than hold on to our original opinion. If people are being hateful towards us, we can just go on our way. The person is just trying to get on our nerves. We should work on having the gift of grace. We can do things that are better for ourselves. Our ego

can get in the way and we might not be listening to others. Attendance was a mix of everyday people and local businesses. One of the things she learned from the table she was sitting at is that either Rotary or Kiwanis of Valparaiso is the largest of that organization in the world.

President Comments

Alison Quackenbush – It has been an interesting beginning of the year. People have been saying that the School Board President may or may not be a resident of Valparaiso. How it played out and how he carried himself in a City Council meeting was not in a way that would be allowed in any workplace. It was not how you would behave in the classroom. She is not defending him but there was a lot of social media out there too. What came out of it was the whole conversation about civility. Alison has read three books about civility. She does not know how you mandate civility.

Mark Fesenmyer - He believes most people when they are in situations where they do not act well they are frustrated because they don't have information or they feel they are behind the eight ball. You become defensive and show aggression.

Alison Quackenbush – At the meeting where there was discussion for the PRIDE month Resolution, there were uncivil comments made. You also have to dance with the issue of when a person has been uncivil but understand the context of what got them there. That led the Council and Mayor to talk about civility. There used to be a little more push back in the running of the meeting. Now there are people in the audience monitoring how things are going. It is difficult to determine when to make the call.

Matty Whaling – Do you mean by gaveling the person or calling time or what do you mean?

Debi Sibray – There are people there with their own agenda.

Alison Quackenbush - Mayor Costas believes in freedom of speech. So there is a lot of leeway that is given. Most people would limit the amount of time but he does not. He is looking at people he has known forever. She told the Mayor he has to be the Mayor for the whole City.

Elisabeth Cohon – At a previous meeting they talked about guidelines for people that are going to talk – like podium guidelines.

Alison Quackenbush – She presented that. Again, this group is just advisory. She suggested having a civility slogan on the front of the dais. The City Council wants a Code. Codes have a grey area.

Matty Whaling – A lot of times people want to live by the letter of the Code and not the principal. Who holds accountability? The individual or the Mayor? At the bottom of the Agenda it basically says we hold the individual accountable. If someone doesn't read that and they are asked to leave, you can accelerate the whole thing.

Debi Sibray – The rules could be read before every Public Comment portion of the meeting.

Alison Quackenbush – There were three things she brought back: Read the notice at the bottom of the Agenda out loud at each meeting; having a slogan on the front of the dais; having a card on the podium. There are two councilmembers that want to know what the AHRC programming is for February. Alison informed them they are not a group set up for programming. She will help any group that approaches with an idea. Councilmembers Hunt and Kapitan have presented an Ordinance that changes the AHRC from a Mayor appointed advisory committee to a Council appointed advisory committee. They say every single Councilmember would have an appointment and the Mayor as well. She is not in favor of that. This Committee is only as good as the integrity

of the group. She is as far away as can be politically with Mayor Costas. Yet they can have good conversations.

Strategic Direction

This Committee was formed because in 2027 there were racial tensions downtown. Within two weeks the City, schools and VU had a plan rolled out. She has asked herself how she runs a meeting with a group that doesn't have an outcome or a work product. She lives in a world where there is a work product.

The AHRC has four purposes: Establish a Council responsible for providing advice and assistance to the Mayor in the areas, including the following:

1. Advising the Mayor on the status of Human Relations in the City and identify special needs or opportunities to enhance such relations.
2. Be a resource to the Mayor when ethnically motivated events occur.
3. Suggest events that would promote a better understanding of diversity
4. Be a liaison between the Mayor and minority groups.

Alison Quackenbush – To her this Council is a group to help the Mayor with the management of the City. She feels if the Council appoints the members, it will become a political committee.

Debi Sibray, Mark Fesenmyer and Matty Whaling expressed their opinion that they agree it will become political which it is not currently. If the Council wants, they can form their own committee.

Alison Quackenbush – She and the Mayor have worked hard to make sure this Committee is well balanced. She feels the Council is confusing community with City. She has talked with Chicago and Naperville Councilmembers. When they do cultural events, the City will waive all fees and a few other items, but they are not running the event. The minute this committee says you get to be in charge of who gets to celebrate and how much, it is a slippery slope. This group is supposed to work by seeing there is a problem and making sure it is legitimate and gets fixed.

The Latino population is growing in Valparaiso and needs support. Gaining trust is a big issue with populations.

How does this group know if they are not serving a populations needs? An example is two years ago for disability awareness they did a full assessment of the City. They discovered issues that needed to be addressed.

Debi Sebray – When the Committee was first established Maggie Clifton stated the Committee was not intended to plan and promote.

Mark Fesenmyer – If the Council asks what is being done for a population's celebration, should the group respond by asking if there is something that should be brought to the Mayor's attention.

Alison Quackenbush – This Committee has been asked by two groups to help with programs. The Committee has done so. She asked if PRIDE month looked different this year than it has in the past.

Mark Fesenmyer – There were events which there have never been before. So he would say yes.

Alison Quackenbush – She asked if he thought that would continue.

Mark Fesenmyer - Yes.

Alison Quackenbush – She asked a trusted friend if this Committee is something that should be done away with because there are not the racial issues that we did before. Her friend said absolutely not. Because you are going

to have the extreme always. You have to keep pushing forward the messages. Alison asked how the Committee keeps pushing forward the messages without becoming a reactionary group. They need to ask groups to come in and talk with the AHRC.

The members of the AHRC need to be out in the community to hear what the people are talking about. They need to look at neighboring communities to see what they are doing. How do you know you are reaching everyone in that group?

Mark Fesenmyer - You have to start somewhere.

Jack Tipold – The AHRC needs to network. Volunteers should go to the Latino dinner at Hilltop. They need to build trust first. The rest will come.

Discussion ensued regarding seniors and handicapped population. Councilmember Domer has suggested she is working on putting together a Committee for this issue. It was questioned if our officers are trained in mental health issues. Communications will be through whatsapp.

What is Working:

- HRC's communication
- Going different places for meetings – at least twice year

What is not Working:

- Speak at Council meetings.
- Initiate coffee with people who speak at Council meetings
- Stay away from flame throwers
- Alison needs to share with the group
- Alison needs an administrative assistant to be organized
- Lack of schedule – Meet if even just to discuss – 4th Tuesday of each month at 6:30 pm

What is Missing:

- Feedback from Mayor - Put items on Agenda
- Guidance
- What Mayor needs to know
- This Committee going out and tapping into populations

What is Possible:

- HRC Emeritus Council
- Bring groups to Mayor as there is a need
- How are we connecting with Seniors
- Should Seniors and disability be their own group
- Training for bus drivers for mentally ill
- e-mail top the group what is heard around the community

MOTION: Alison Quackenbush moved to nominate Debi Sibray as secretary. Elisabeth Cohon seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

She will do a schedule of meetings for the rest of the year.

Cultural Grant Proposals

LGBTQ Outreach of Porter County

Their request is \$925. Contact person is Ezra Burke. Funds will be used for All Together: Building Allyship with a Community Book Discussion and Study.

MOTION: Alison Quackenbush moved to approve the request of LGBTQ Outreach of Porter County in the amount of \$925 for All Together: Building Allyship with a Community Book Discussion and Study. Elisabeth Cohon seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

Valparaiso Creative Council

Their request is \$2,000. Contact person is Jessica Corral. Funds will be used for a Mural Walk 2025.

MOTION: Debi Sibray moved to approve the request of Valparaiso Creative Council in the amount of \$2,000 for a Mural Walk 2025. Jack Tipold seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

Hilltop Neighborhood House

Their request is \$2,000. Contact person is Jennifer Wright. Funds will be used for Latino Family Community Dinners at Hilltop Mission Kitchen.

MOTION: Debi Sibray moved to approve the request of Hilltop Neighborhood in the amount of \$2,000 for Latino Family Community Dinners at Hilltop Mission Kitchen. Matty Whaling seconded the motion and so approved with a unanimous yes vote.

These are recommendations to the Mayor. In light of budget cuts, does the Community need to be doing this type of thing. If it is being cut and it will save someone's job, then that is one thing. We have to fall in line with other organizations. There are things that can be done without money. If they do not spend it all this year, then next year cut back. St. Theresa is always looking for volunteers for their dinners.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None

The Next Council Meeting: TBD

The meeting was adjourned at 8:17 p.m.