City of Melrose
Commission on Disability
Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date: Monday, February 13, 2023

Location: Zoom

Commissioners Present:
Board Members: David Hoff (Commission Chair) Judy Bushee, Garin Boyd (Commission Vice Chair), Alaine Breen, Erin Heyneman, Margaret Sheets (Commission Secretary)

1. Call to Order

Meeting was called to order by Commission Chair David Hoff at 6:08 PM.

2. Approval of January 9th, 2023 minutes

A motion to approve the minutes from the January 9th, 2023 meeting was made by Commissioner Sheets and seconded by Commissioner Heyneman. Commission discussion: None.

Vote to accept January 9th meeting minutes:
David Hoff-Yes
Judy Bushee-Yes
Garin Boyd-Yes
Alaine Breen-Yes
Erin Heyneman-Yes
Margaret Sheets-Yes

3. Public Participation and Discussion Regarding Self Evaluation and Transition Plan

Commissioner Hoff outlined the ADA Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan and why it was created. The Self-Evaluation and Transition plan is a highly detailed review of every city facility including all the city building, school facilities, and outdoor facilities.
Such an assessment must be done by periodically by municipalities, under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Commissioner Hoff outlined Parts, A, B, and C of the plan and explained how the Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan was conducted by the Institute for Human Centered Design and paid for by a grant from the Massachusetts Office on Disability.

The Commission on Disability welcomes any comments members of the public may have on the Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan.The plan has been posted on the city website with comments due on February 24th. The city has issued press releases about the Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan, and the Commission has been working to

spread the word about the plan throughout Melrose. In addition, the Commission has shared information on social media. The state legislators representing the city have been notified regarding the plan, as well as the city's Veterans Services office, Council on Aging, and the Milano Center. Commission Chair David Hoff will also attend the Tuesday 2/14 School Committee meeting to remind the committee about the release of the report. The Commission is looking into getting some time to present on "Let's Talk Melrose" on the plan.

An audience member asked about where the money would come from in terms of making the needed accessibility changes. It is up to the city determine what the best avenue is for paying for necessary changes. Options may include incorporation the costs into the city's operating budget, or issuing a bond for larger costs. Many of the recommended changes are lower costs, such as signage in Braille, and posting signs and/or instructions as to where accessible entrances to buildings can be found.

Overall, it was felt that the Commission on Disability's role is to bring attention to needed accessibility changes and monitor the City's progress in implementing the changes cited in the plan. The Commission on Disability's role will be to hold the City of Melrose accountable for making the changes described in the Self-Evaluation and Transition plan. The changes described in the report that are needed to make Melrose buildings fully accessible, could cost $1 million in total. Some changes are easier and can take a short time to complete whereas other more extensive/expensive changes can take longer. Needed changes to Melrose schools may take a while to complete. The need for an ADA Coordinator and for accessibility improvements to be made to City Hall were discussed.

The Institute for Human Centered Design will join the Commission on Disability in presenting the report to the City Council. The Commission on Disability will present to the School Committee at a future date regarding issues specific to the schools.

The discussion of the Self-Evaluation and Transition plan will continue at an in-person public comment session on Wednesday 2/15 from 6PM-8PM at City Hall's Cassidy Conference room. The Commission on Disability has already shared the report with and Commissioner Hoff plans to discuss it at the next School Committee meeting.

4. March Meeting Date

The next meeting will be moved from the standard second Monday, to Tuesday, March 21, 2023.

5. CODA/MOD/State Issue Update

At the February CODA meeting, (meeting of members of Commissions on Disability groups throughout Massachusetts), Commissioner Hoff asked about resources to assist with the Commission's community toolkit project. In response, attendees at the CODA meeting gave him an update about resources. Commissioner Hoff reminded everyone that CODA meetings are on the first Wednesday of the month at 12 noon over Zoom.

6. School Committee Follow-Up

Commissioner Hoff attended the January 10th School Committee meeting, as follow-up to the presentation on special education at the December meeting, to address issues

regarding the level and cost of out-of-district placements. Comments are attached. Commissioners discussed the difficulties and high costs of out of district placements at length. SEPAC has similar concerns.

7. SEPAC Update

Noreen Donovan said the Understanding Our Differences presentation Commissioner Heyneman arranged for the schools on disability awareness was well received. Noreen also said that the Superintendent Search Committee has been chosen, but no SEPAC members were included on that Committee, However, will be opportunities for public comment. SEPAC also plans to share their concerns about the Superintendent Search Committee with the School Committee.

8. MLK Day of Service Follow Up

The presentation given by Commission on Disability members as part of the MLK Day of Service on January 16th, was well received with lots of audience engagement. Thank you to Commissioner Boyd for his work setting it up.

9. Vo-Tech School Construction Issues Update

There appears to be some increasing momentum in opposition to the building plan for the new Vo-Tech School in Wakefield (NEMT). There will be a meeting on March 6th, hosted by the Wakefield Commission on Disability, for all area Commissions on Disability, regarding the concerns over accessibility at the proposed new NEMT building. An email has been sent to all commissioners regarding this meeting.

Commissioner Hoff noted that there was a well-done letter in the Melrose Weekly News about the Vo-Tech School building issue. Commissioner Hoff met with Jeff Dougan at the Massachusetts office on Disability and was told the school's proposed construction plan wasn't in violation with ADA. Members of Melrose Commission on Disability have been vocal in multiple meetings of the Vo-Tech School building Committee about their opposition to the building plan. In addition to the accessibility issues, a complaint has been raised with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. regarding environment concerns.

10. Social Media Status

Commissioners Breen, Heyneman and Boyd will meet to discuss and finalize the social media plan for an intern.

11. High School Student Accessibility Projects

Commissioner Hoff noted that a number of high school students were doing projects on disability accessibility and got in touch with Commissioner Hoff. He provided them information in response to their questions, and met with one of the students and their teacher. The student showed a great deal of enthusiasm regarding the topic. The possibility of involving these students in an Understanding our Differences courses in the future was discussed.

12. Community Awareness/Education Project Update

Commissioners Hoff and Sheets met twice to review examples of awareness guides, and develop a plan for development of a community education toolkit. They will review

the 12 examples they have identified, and use those as the basis for a guide customized to Melrose's needs. It may end up being a series of guides.

13. Storytelling Event

Commissioner Boyd is working to developing a Storytelling Event specific to disability issues. June 10th was proposed as a day for the storytelling event. Preliminary discussions have taken place and this will be discussed at future meetings. The intent is that this won't be spontaneous storytelling, but instead planned for cohesive storytelling.

14. Other Business

- Commission officer elections will be held at the March meeting. Commissioner Sheets was reappointed to the Commissioner was appointed for another 3 years, and Commissioner Hoff and Commissioner Boyd re-appointments are in process.
- Commissioner Heyneman met informally with the Chair of the Chamber of Commerce about presenting to the Chamber of Commerce about what businesses can do to be inclusive. The Chair of the Chamber of Commerce felt this would be really interesting for business owners. It was discussed that the Commission could do a presentation for the Chamber of Commerce and discuss with them how businesses in Melrose could increase employment of people with disabilities.
- There was a discussion of having ASL interpreters at meetings and how there's a nationwide shortage of interpreters. If anyone needs an interpreter to attend the Commission's meetings, they need to let the Commission know in advance.
- Commissioner Hoff noted that the city is part of a grant funded project focused on structural ableism. He is meeting on Tuesday February 14th with Kara Showers, the city's Prevention and Wellness Coordinator to discuss it further.
- Commissioner Heyneman will speak to Tufts University about her experiences with MS.

Adjournment

A motion to adjourn the meetingh was made by Commissioner Boyd and seconded by Commissioner Bushee. Commission discussion: None.

Vote:
David Hoff-Yes
Judy Bushee-Yes
Garin Boyd-Yes
Alaine Breen-Yes
Erin Heyneman-Yes
Margaret Sheets-Yes

Meeting adjourned at 7:32PM

Meeting minutes were submitted by Maggie Sheets, Commission Secretary.

Comments by City of Melrose, Commission on Disability Chair David Hoff to Melrose School Committee - 1-10-23

Hi. My name is David Hoff, 46 Warwick Road. I am chair of the City of Melrose Commission on Disability. I wanted to comment on the presentation at last month's meeting on Special Education, by Cari Berman. I first off wanted to say thank you for the comprehensive presentation and the opportunity to hear about the efforts in the City of Melrose to ensure students with disabilities are getting a quality education. As a result of the presentation, I wanted to call attention to one issue. It was noted that 54 students with an IEP are currently placed out of district – that's 8.1% of total students with an IEP, which is above the state average of 6.2%. This number has stayed fairly consistent over the last 15 years. It was also noted that in FY 2023, it is estimated that in Melrose the out of district tuition costs will have doubled since FY 2018, from $2.3 million to $4.6 million, with students with out of district tuition in excess of $100,000 increasing from 4 to 20 since 2018. Given the significant number of students who are placed out of district and the increasing tuition costs, I was frankly surprised that the presentation did not discuss any type of efforts to reduce the number of out of district placements, and none of the questions and discussion after the presentation focused on this issue. I fully recognize the complexities of out of district placements, and the reasons for them. However, it is time to stop looking at out of district placements as just "part of the deal" or "a solution" to educating students with disabilities. As a school district, I would like to see Melrose commit itself to significantly reduce the number of out of district placements of students with IEPs, with an aspirational goal of eliminating them completely. Every time a student is placed out of district, it should be cause for reflection regarding why the City of Melrose schools does not have the capacity to provide for the educational needs of every student within the city's schools, and how this can be avoided in the future. As noted, the costs of out of district placements have ballooned, and while reducing the number of out of district placements will hopefully have a positive impact fiscally, more importantly it will be very much a positive development for the students to receive an education with their friends and peers in the city in which they reside.

One other note: as you may be aware, over the last several months, the Commission on Disability has led the development of an accessibility self-evaluation and transition plan for the city. A significant focus of this effort has been on the city schools. I just wanted to provide a quick update to let you know that the draft report has been completed. Our commission has reviewed the draft, which should be available for public comment in the next couple of weeks. After the self-evaluation and transition plan is finalized and presented to the City Council, the Commission on Disability looks forward to discussing with the School Committee the findings and recommendations in this report specific to the city's schools.