



VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION

Regular Meeting Minutes

March 14, 2024

Agenda ID # 240251

City of Dallas 1500 South Marilla Street 6 ES Dallas Texas

CISCO WEBEX LINK:

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Ronnie Mestas Presiding- Vice Chair Commissioner

PRESENT: [10]

Ronnie Mestas, District 6, Commissioner and Chair
Charles Ayers, District 1, Commissioner
Juan M. Preciado, District 2, Commissioner *
Fred Walker, District 4, Commissioner
Gayland Sherman, District 5, Commissioner
Diane E. Birdwell, District 7, Commissioner
Steven T. Ramos, District 9, Commissioner *
Scott Chase, District 11, Commissioner *
Ray A Smith, District 13, Commissioner *
Peter Gray Smith, District 14, Commissioner *

ABSENT: [1]

Katina Robertson, District 3, Commissioner
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**Note: Members of the Board/Commission participated in this meeting by video conference.*

***Note: Indicates arrival time after meeting called to order/reconvened*

AGENDA

I. Call to Order, Pledge of Allegiance, and Roll Call

Chair Mestas determined that there was quorum, then began with call to order at 12 noon. They began with the Pledge of Allegiance. Then, the Roll Call was taken.

II. Public Comments on Items III – VI

Chair Mestas moved onto this next agenda item. There were none. Then, he moved onto the next agenda item.

III. Vote to Approve the March 14th, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Chair Mestas asked the commissioners to motion to approve the Meeting Minutes. Commissioners Ayers made the motion and commissioner Walker seconded it. They vote was unanimous to accept them as is, and no one objected. Then, he moved on to the next agenda item.

IV. Discussion on Veteran Needs Assessment

Chair Mestas then began by introducing the Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs Officer, Christina da Silva to present on the Veteran Needs Assessment.

Christina began by introducing herself. Next, she informed the commissioners that City Council has approved \$75,000 towards a veteran needs assessment. She then expressed the benefits of having the assessment. It can be helpful in many, different ways. For example, it can formalize much of the information within the commission meetings. Furthermore, it may provide insight into how the City of Dallas can better support Dallas veteran residents.

In today's meeting we want to explain the process. First, we will review the scope of work for the vendor. The next step is the procurement process. We have a procurement specialist online to assist with questions.

The main focus for today is the scope. Your feedback will be incorporated into the scope of work for the vendor. On the screen is the draft scope. It provides an introduction and background information on the Veteran Affairs Commission. What's important is your feedback on the requirements

and specifications. We emailed this to you back in early March so that you had time to review, and today we would collect your feedback and final comments. We hope to begin finalizing this so that we can move forward and work with procurement to get it published.

Christina then went through the “Bid Submittal Requirements” on page 1. Eligible applicants must meet the following minimum qualifications:

“• *Demonstrate a strong record of providing high quality research and needs assessments.*” We want an organization or consultant that has experience collecting data from residents and is able to organize the data.

“• *Ability to collaborate with relevant stakeholders (veteran residents, City staff, local nonprofits, veteran serving organizations etc.)*” Also, we’re hoping they will have experience collaborating with relevant stakeholders. For example, with veterans, veteran serving organizations, city staff, and local nonprofits.

“• *Have experience applying an equity lens to projects, including disaggregated data in reports and taking into consideration intersectional identities, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender/sexual orientation, religion, disability, etc.*” Also, this vendor should know how to breakdown the data into relevant groups, like: race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender/sexual orientation, religion, disability, so that we have a good understanding of the diversity within the Dallas veteran community. As such, we hope to acquire an understanding for their unique needs.

Furthermore, here are some “Specifications for the Scope of Work”:

“A. *Project Planning and Kickoff:*

- *Develop a detailed project plan, including timelines and milestones.*
- *Conduct a project kickoff meeting with key stakeholders to discuss goals and expectations.*”

This would be once the contract is finalized. This would ensure we have metrics to follow and know the vendor is on track. Furthermore, this would allow us to engage stakeholders with that information.

“B. *Literature Review:*

- *Review existing literature, research, and reports related to veterans' needs and services.*”

Likewise, we hope the vendor will review existing research. We know the State of Texas has conducted a veteran needs assessment at the state level, but not at the city level.

"C. Stakeholder Engagement:

- Identify and engage key stakeholders, including veterans, veteran service organizations, government agencies, and other relevant entities.*
- Conduct interviews, focus groups, or surveys to gather input from veterans and stakeholders."*

This part is very interesting because the vendor will include in their surveying interviews with focus groups of veterans, their families and caregivers.

"D. Data Collection:

- Conduct a thorough analysis of the current landscape and envisioned objectives to guarantee veterans enjoy unobstructed access to essential support services.*
- Gather both quantitative and qualitative data encompassing veterans' demographics, challenges, health, employment, housing, education, and other pertinent factors.*
- Facilitate focused discussions with key stakeholders, including veteran-serving organizations in Dallas, veteran residents, families of veterans, and caregivers.*
- Engage with municipal departments to compile information on the existing services provided to veterans.*
- Employ a mixed-methods approach to ensure a holistic and comprehensive collection of data."*

And in terms of data collection, we want to hear the numbers along with the stories they reflect. Ideally, quantitative and qualitative data on health, employment, housing, education, etc. Additionally, they will facilitate discussions with veteran serving organizations, families of veterans, and caregivers. We want the vendor to engage with the City's 42 municipal departments and see what they are currently doing to service veterans, how to serve veterans, and how to serve them better, and internal tracking for quality improvement. The vendor should employ different methods for data collection like online surveys, face-to-face interviews, etc.

"E. Analysis and Reporting:

- Analyze collected data to identify trends and patterns*

- *Name actionable ways that City of Dallas can better partner with external agencies including veteran serving organizations and government agencies*
- *Data triangulation for key findings and recommendations, for example, identify how City of Dallas departments can leverage current operations to equitably serve veterans (e.g. recruiting and hiring)"*

Moreso, we want the vendor to analyze the data they collected and identify trends and key findings.

"F. Recommendations and Action Plan:

- *Provide actionable recommendations for addressing identified needs and challenges.*
- *Prepare a detailed report summarizing the assessment results, including a scoring method for prioritization of action items and/or recommended policies*
- *Identify standards that could ensure that service delivery is best in class for veterans and aligned with City's values of service.*
- *Develop an action plan outlining steps for implementation."*

Lastly, the report should provide actionable items, in a prioritized method.

"G. Presentation:

- *Deliver a presentation of the assessment findings to key stakeholders, such as Veteran Affairs Commission and City Council, including visual aids"*

Finally, the report will become public information as part of transparency and accountability. The Veteran Affairs Commission and the City of Dallas will receive the report

Upon concluding the presentation commissioner Ayers stated several points.

1. The City doesn't have a great track record of picking consultants. A lot of money has been spent with little to show for it.
2. The Veteran Affairs Commission is not mentioned as being involved in the selection of the consultant or anywhere else in the process. He asked that they be involved in the process.
3. After the report is complete, who is going to implement it? And how can implementation be ensured?
4. The commissioners need to be involved to ensure deliverables are to expectation.

Christina da Silva thanked Commissioner Ayers then addressed his points. She mentioned that a strong criterion to rate the consultant is an essential factor in selecting the right candidate. Additionally, she will inquire with Procurement regarding the Veteran Affairs Commission's involvement in this process and follow through. She further clarified that payment is not made until the project or product is delivered. Furthermore, to prevent an undesirable product, clear objectives and deliverables are stated within the scope, along with milestones.

Commissioner Chase asked about the timeframe to hire this consultant.

Christina replied that we haven't confirmed a timeline yet, but our hopes are to identify a contractor by May 2024.

Commissioner Chase said a year for this timeline seems appropriate, and the pre-planning is just as important as the study. He suggested as a next step the commission review the RFP to provide their feedback.

Commissioner Ayers stated May is too soon because you must develop the scope, send out for bids, etc.

Christina clarified that the process is in two (2) phases. The first is the procurement process. The City uses a program called "Bonfire" and it notifies vendors that there is an RFP available. Procurement manages all of this, and we work with them as needed. We've shared the Bonfire link and information with veteran partners and relevant stakeholders that we have met with and so they can be vendors for this contract. Also, we can monitor to see how many bids we have received. Furthermore, if the quantity of bids is insufficient, we can extend the deadline through procurement until a vendor has been selected.

Then, the second phase begins, which is the contracting process. For this, we work with the City Attorney's Office. So, when we say a year timeframe, that is when the contract starts till completed. This may very well take longer than a year. Although there are procurement rules that limit the details of what we can communicate, once we've gotten that, we'd want to regularly update you.

Commissioner Ayers suggested researching other cities that have done this assessment to learn from them.

Christina agreed and reminded them of the two (2) assessments (State of Texas and El Paso) recently shared with the veterans. Also, we're looking to implement the models from previous City plans, like the Racial Equity Plan.

City Attorney Adenia Clark chimed in on the timeframe. From the time of advertisement till the time of recommendation for award for a typically RFP takes six (6) months. It will be well over a year before we can start benefitting from services. So, yes the timeframe for over a year is right.

Commissioner Birdwell suggested a subcommittee for this. Moreso, whatever vendor be awarded this contract, they should have a workshop and not just a meeting with the VAC. Meeting for just an hour, once a month, is not sufficient to achieve meaningful work. The commission needs to be integral as the City's stakeholders for veterans. We can guide them throughout the process. For example, we can direct them to what groups to meet with. Also, we can talk with them about housing issues and nuances between West and North Dallas. There's so much input we can provide.

Then she addressed the difference between assessment and implementation. She expressed a weariness towards a company that assesses then suggests implementation. This is where things go wrong because they'll always find something wrong so that we can pay them to fix it. Therefore, she suggested having the assessment along with their recommendations, but not involved in implementation. The VAC can receive the recommendations along with the City and jointly be involved in implementation.

Additionally, the role of budget is essential with regards to implementation. The commission needs time to review the plan and communicate with their City Councilmembers. Then, we need to ensure this is backed by money in the budget, because ultimately, we need for the City to support it with funds. So, the role of this commission is to be guardian angels in with the process and overseeing implementation of recommendations.

Christina responded by affirming the request to have a preliminary workshop. This way the vendor can include that feedback from the workshop into their detailed plan. And as far as implementation, the first focus is internal, like identifying which city department would address what gap. The second focus is external, outside of the City's scope. In this case we'd like to identify the city partner to address that gap. Ultimately, this is a tool for the VAC to communicate this with your councilmembers and residents.

Chair Mestas restated the need to be more active and involved. He liked the idea of a subcommittee for this. Also, he expressed the need to engage younger veterans.

Christina suggested that Chair Mestas and the commission may want to place in next month's agenda the idea of creating a subcommittee for this and voting on it.

Christina then brought up the conflict in schedule for the April 11 meeting. Due to the Welcoming Interactive Conference occurring from Wednesday, April 10 through Friday, April 12. Attempts were made to reschedule, but Room Reservations replied that there is no other date and time available to reschedule. After deliberation, the decision was for Shpendim to further look into rescheduling the meeting and updating the commission via email.

V. Discussion on the creation of a Human Rights Commission

Chair Mestas continued with the fifth agenda item on the Veteran Affairs Commission is the creation of Human Rights Commission.

Christina attended with Human Rights Officer, Chris Graves to present on the possibility of a Human Rights Commission for the City of Dallas.

Chris Graves mentioned his grandfather, father & brother are all Navy veterans. After thanking the commissioners for their service, he gave the background/history of the Human Rights Division. This division is within the office of Equity and Inclusion. The focus is on protecting the rights of the most vulnerable communities. That includes a focus on improving systems to support survivors of human trafficking as well as people with disabilities. They work with internal and external stakeholders with the goal to create a

Dallas where everyone can thrive. His office provides a range of services, like:

1. Develop a collaborative response to violence that includes human trafficking. Essentially, this involves of the depravation of someone's freedom for the profit of others. This includes sex and labor trafficking.
2. In advance of the FIFA World Cup 2026 they are working with a wide range of stakeholders to advance human rights.
3. Ensure all the programs, services and activities offered at the City of Dallas are accessible to people with disabilities. Furthermore, they can call 311 with any issues to report it.
4. Additionally, they organize the commission on disabilities which serves the key role of advising the City on how to best meet the needs of Dallas residents with disabilities.

He mentions he recently joined the City of Dallas. Previously, he was with the City of Houston, Mayor's Office. He was involved in the Human Rights subcommittee that focused on Houston's bid for the World Cup. Houston and Dallas have extensive stakeholder engagement across human rights areas. FIFA wants to ensure that the cities who are hosting are respecting and protecting the rights on people, as well as provide access to remedy. When originally exploring this idea for city council, they proposed aligning this human rights commission with some of the guiding pillars with the FIFA Human Rights framework which will be released soon.

Dallas has several areas identified for support:

- 1) Fair Housing- includes rentals, ownership, homelessness & motels/hotels
- 2) Workers Rights
- 3) LGBTQI+ Rights
- 4) Immigration & Asylum
- 5) Disability Awareness & Access
- 6) Human Trafficking
- 7) Child Abuse & Domestic & Intimate Partner Abuse
- 8) Genocide Awareness & Hate Crime Prevention
- 9) Gender Equality
- 10) Environmental Justice

An example of cross-collaboration with stakeholders on intersectional issues is housing. Housing is of major concern for veterans, LGBTQI+,

human trafficking, and domestic violence survivors. This is an opportunity to leverage FIFA's World Cup to advance human rights issues. To leverage collectively addressing concerns while ensuring representation from diverse communities.

Christina stated that part of this meeting is to solicit feedback from the commission on the following questions:

1. What from the current structure is working well?
2. What's not working well?

Commissioner Birdwell mentioned the Iraqi SIV who was homeless during Covid and really struggled to get him housed. The gap between being homeless and housed is a huge gap. Refugees are housed in bad places, like near Conrad HS.

Christina clarified that the question is referring to the VAC.

A guest, Angela Davis (I think), asked to speak and someone granted her permission. She stated that she owns for a consulting firm and real estate group. Her consulting firm sets up homes for treatment and groups. She understands the nuances of housing. Not many places allow veterans in nicer communities. She wanted to know what this commission does about it.

Christina thanked her, then said her question may be taken at the end, after finishing the agenda items.

City Attorney Veronica Barboza spoke saying that the Chair has the right to amend the agenda if he chooses and allow public comments.

Commissioner Birdwell sought pardon as she mentioned the need for the commission to have clarity on the different outlook based on being a citizen or naturalized. Citizen's issues are not nearly as much as other subpopulations in the city.

Chair Mestas sought clarification on the question asked in the presentation.

Christina stated, we are asking you, based on your experience with the Veteran Affairs Commission, to provide feedback that will be insightful towards a potential Human Rights Commission.

Chair Mestas further asked if the feedback is global, meaning the City has residents from everywhere, and the City presents itself as a global city. His concern is the veterans in Dallas and Texas. He mentioned the recent case of the veteran who urinated on himself, and that it took the Police nine months to admit something happened. His concern is focused on veterans because he doesn't see things are well.

Then, he mentions some things that are not working well. He mentioned a lack of awareness. Despite making the resource card it wasn't far reaching in getting out to everybody.

Commissioner Birdwell interjected, affirming lack of awareness. She mentioned what works well is that the commission gets together, and almost always unanimously agree on every issue. What doesn't work well is getting the rest of the city to listen to them. If the matter is not something for the whole city, then it's not grabbed onto. Human Rights is worthy, but people care more about parks and animals than people. Human Rights is highly politicized, both positively and negatively.

Commissioner Ayers expressed as an example for this the commission meeting getting cancelled for April. He stated that the commission is not a priority.

Commissioner Birdwell expressed as an example of what is working that City Council chose wisely whom to represent on the commission. She enjoys serving with the other commissioners. They are a diverse group, focused. For a Human Rights commission City Council needs to be in receptive mode and not their personal issues. They need to dial back the politics. She gave examples of the vast array of meanings for Human Rights, from Jaffa getting clean, running water to a trans student to participate in a play. It's a broad topic, and they're limited as veterans on their topic. Human Rights encompasses the whole world, so being specific on goals and focuses, especially when Human Rights are managed at the international, national,

state, and other local entities. What can the city do, except enforce the laws already on the books.

Chris Graves said although the World Cup is global, but the focus is Human Rights in Dallas. Furthermore, they're soliciting feedback on where there is potentially intersectionality between the two commissions through the World Cup efforts. He then mentioned that groups aren't mentioned, but rights are, like housing. He emphasized their need to engage with the Veteran Affairs Commission to see what's working and what isn't.

He further explained that they are conversing with other Human Rights Commissions across the states. Till now they have talked with 11 cities and are scheduled to speak with 5 more. They hope to learn best practices, challenges, and actionable items. He then reiterated their reason for dialoguing with this commission, to ensure veterans are heard and included in these efforts.

Commissioner Peter Smith summarized Chris' statement and restated the two questions. He then provided his feedback saying as an advisory committee a struggle is collaboration across the different parts of the city. The VAC is primarily focused on health care, jobs, housing, homelessness, and education. The focus has been housing and homelessness because those are major issues for the City, but without a budget and decision-making authority. They serve an important purpose in being a voice for veterans and their issues. He then advised them to be clear on their focus within Human Rights, and the parts of City government they'll need to interact with to enact positive change.

Chris thanked Commissioner Peter and stated that his advice was echoed by other cities. He stated that they are collecting his feedback and that of the commissioners, and other human Rights Commissions across the states to present their findings to City Council's consideration.

Commissioner Peter expressed their work as important because veterans are often overlooked. A reason for that is the many service organizations, about 500, almost too much. Their focus is raising awareness of the work they're doing, and with the different parts of the city. He defined some of their most impactful work as being related to the Bond Package. By working

with those directly involved and the decision makers they leveraged money from the bond to go to housing, including for veterans.

Commissioner Birdwell stated they would be willing to meet with the Human Rights Commission so long as it's within the law.

Commissioner Walker stated awareness is working well. And what's not working is implication, government putting laws in place that will make it work.

Christina thanked them and moved onto the next set of questions.

3. When you think of a Human Rights Commission, what do you think about?
4. What kind of structure do you think would be impactful?
5. How would you see veteran issues intersecting with a Human Rights Commission?

Chair Mestas asked the commissioners to focus on answering the questions because time is running out.

CA Veronica interjected saying, staff can present their questions to the commission, but not supposed to ask these questions of the commission. Then, once the presentation is concluded, if the commission wants to provide feedback, they can do that. But it shouldn't be the staff asking questions of the commission, in the way it's going on here.

Christina thanked CAO, then continued to present the remaining questions.

6. How do you foresee the potential combination of the Veteran Affairs Commission with the proposed Human Rights Commission influencing representation and effectiveness?
7. What are your concerns about the establishment of a Human Rights Commission?
8. What kind of resources so you envision this commission needing?

Commissioner Ayers asked CA Veronica if it is ok for them to receive these questions then provide individual feedback, later?

CA Veronica replied, the concern is to not have a walking quorum issue. So, it would need to be maybe that everyone separately provides feedback.

Because if it's everyone on one email it's a walking quorum. Perhaps what would be better is that for the next meeting you can get together and discuss some of the questions, and then collectively the meeting minutes can be utilized as answers to those questions. She stressed not running into the walking quorum issue.

Commissioner Chase sought clarification on what he understood from CAO, that if they individually emailed and not included other commissioners, that it would be alright.

CA Veronica stated that at first, she said that, but thinks it would be better to follow the format of adding the questions to the next meeting. Then, the commissioners can discuss them during that meeting, and the questions are documented in the minutes, and the answers can be taken from the record of that meeting.

Another point of clarification, although staff is presenting, it's no different than any other presenter. It's still the Chair who's presiding over the meeting, so presenters still follow the same protocol. It's the Chair who decides if the commissioners will provide commentary or answer questions. It's not different just because it's a department who is presenting.

Chair Mestas thanked her and stated he's new at this.

Christina asked, since the presentation was concluded, can they ask questions?

CA Veronica explained that a presenter is a guest and doesn't get to ask questions or seek feedback after they finish their presentation. It's up to the Chair to address his commission and ask if they have questions, comments, or feedback for the presenters. There is no back and forth dialogue, unless it is initiated by the Chair.

Christina said she understood and thanked her for the explanation.

Chair Mestas declared the conclusion discussing the Human Rights Commission and that they would give their answers, reports in the next meeting.

Commissioner Ayers interjected stating his understanding that they have two options.

1. They could take the questions and provide feedback individually the next time they meet.
2. Take the time now to answer those questions.

Chair Mestas stated the time is late and insufficient to address this topic. It would be better if we submitted our responses to this topic and discuss it in the main meeting. He then asked the commissioners if they understood him. There were two responses. One was yes, and the second was unclear. He then motioned to hold responses till the next meeting.

Commissioner Birdwell said that according to her understanding they are not deciding, rather it's the city that will decide. The presenters came to seek information and feedback from this commission. There is nothing to vote on. This is just informational. She then asked CAO this as a question ensuring she correctly understands what's before her but retracted after realizing the agenda had other items and time constraints.

Chair Mestas at 1:20p.m. decided to move onto agenda item VI: Increasing awareness of Veteran Serving Organizations.

VI. Discussion on Increasing Awareness of Veteran Serving Organizations

Chair Mestas read this agenda topic, then Christina spoke.

Christina mentioned that we have been working on building a list of veteran serving organizations. The hope is to place this on the website, like the Veteran Resource Card. Additionally, she mentioned FindHelp, a company that the Office of Equity and Inclusion is contracted with, and they provide a search engine for curated service providers for veterans. That site can be linked via a QR code for ease of access and sharing. Also, this site can be updated and maintained.

Chair Mestas asked if there were questions. Upon seeing none he said awareness is a gap that needs addressing. He referenced the Veteran Resource Card and the lack of knowledge regarding it. He mentioned ways

to increase awareness, like advertising on DART and in person communication.

VII. Announcements

Chair Mestas brought up the cancelling/rescheduling of April's meeting.

Furthermore, he stated that he will be involved in the Welcoming Interactive conference and thanked Christina for affording his district the opportunity to get involved.

VIII. Adjournment

Since quorum was lost Commissioner Ayers motioned to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Birdwell seconded it. Chair Mestas adjourned the meeting at 1:25pm.

Drafted by:

Shpendim Nadzaku, Welcoming Coordinator
WCIA / OEI

Date

Approved by:

Ronnie Lee Mestas, Chair
Veteran's Affairs Commission

Date

Attachments:

Transcript Link and or Video Link:

<https://dallascityhall.webex.com/webappng/sites/dallascityhall/recording/1ed6babfc452103cb8cf0a215a691d8a/playback>