Meeting Minutes Oct 17 2024



Commissioners-Attended:	Commissioners-Not in Attendance	Other Parties in Attendance:
Srinivasan, Ravi, Chair	Pierre, Kevin	Renee Baskerville - Mayor
Allen, Kevin, Vice Chair		Eileen Birmingham - Councilor
Brown, Leslie, Treasurer		Tyrone Williams, Lt (Police)
Otero, Jennifer, Secretary		Erik d'Amato, Councilor
Carvajal, Matilda		Susan Shin Anderson, Councilor
Gale, Madeline		**Guests:**
Campbell, Nelson		Kevin Dawud Amin
Spence, Reubena		Jill Katz
Cohen, Joni		Josh Katz
		Nicole Farjani
		Dorit Zimmerman
		Jack Cleary
		Liz George, Montclair Local
		Paul Burr, Township Attorney
		Priscilla Perez
		Greg Payson
		Lazlam Leyda

Meeting notice was provided on Meeting Dates Township of Montclair, NJ (montclairnjusa.org) as well as filed with the Township Clerk. The Clerk is responsible for sharing with relevant publications.

Meeting Dates

The Civil Rights Commission (CRC) meets at 205 Claremont Avenue on the 3rd Thursday of every month. These meetings will have an allocated slot open to the public for public comment on issues pertaining to civil rights in Montclair. This section will typically begin at 7 p.m.

Civil Rights Commission activities also listed in Montclair Local (Internet only news site) with link to Township site for meeting dates: Montclair Civil Rights Commission: Come Be Part of Change - Montclair Local



Montclair Civil Rights Commission: Come Be Part of Change

For 2024, Montclair Civil Rights Commission has a new chair, several new members, and is actively recruiting more residents to join.

montclairlocal.news

1. **Meeting Overview and Attendance**: per table above
2. Call to Order by Ravi Srinivasan, Chair, and beginning with public comment.
3. Approval of minutes from prior meeting 9/19/24

Nicole Farjani, the first speaker, lodges a complaint over emails exchanged between Councilor Eric D'Amato and a constituent, where D'Amato's words are perceived as engaging in anti-Arab bias. Farjani calls for D'Amato's resignation and an investigation into his comments. The comments are referenced in Request 24-1971 - NextRequest - Modern FOIA & Public Records Request Software by the Township of Montclair.

D'Amato, present at the meeting, responds by clarifying his stance on the issue of flag displays, arguing that his intention was to advocate for inclusivity rather than expressing prejudice against any particular group. He further explains his perspective on incidents in Paterson that fueled the controversy, asserting that his reactions stemmed from a desire to prioritize the recognition of African heritage. More specifically, Councilor D'Amato indicated that the email was about an issue as to whether or not the township

of Montclair should display a historic flag of black empowerment (Pan African flag). He said some people don't want to have any flags flown that are not the American flag for a variety of reasons. He said he is a long time believer that the township government should stick to local government. He said then a person wrote to him because they were concerned that flying a flag could lead us in a wrong direction. Mr. D'Amato acknowledged writing in the email that “one may involuntarily be making an association that is not correct because of the colors of the Pan African flag”. He then shared that Montclair is in the news internationally about the Greek flag taken down, who Mr. D'Amato said did exactly what he warned about (making a connection just based on some colors). Mr D'Amato then shared why he said he was sad about this. It was not because of a dislike for any Arab countries or any Arab flags. It was because it overshadowed Africa and the Pan African flag. And, because it was monopolizing his attention and drawing him away from the actual issue. In Paterson, Mr. D'Amato said he saw in a store next to the Nablus Sweet Shop, on a soda can, a map illustrating a land region on Planet Earth. This region picture (approximately centered on 32N/34.5E latitude/longitude, fully including what is currently recognized by the US State Department as the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories) had only a flag of Palestine over the whole area. He considered this alarming.

First, let me say that we may have shared an involuntary association when seeing the flag, because of the fact that it shares colors with many of the national flags of the Arab world. And I later realized how sad it was that this was my association, even though I have long known the Black Liberation/UNIA flag and its colors, both from my life in America and also from travel and work in Work Africa, where red, black and green (and gold) are traditionally flown. In a meaningful way, Ms. Sweatt was correct to push by on me talking up the Juneteenth flag in favor of the more traditional red/black/green tricolor. It's a great flag.

Date: Thursday, August 29, 2024 9:26:20 AM

Lani:

Just checking to see if you ever got a response to this from the Township administration.

BTW, as I recall Councilor Shin Andersen was focused on the disposition of the grant. Has she been helpful? And how about the CRC?

FYI this is on my mind in part because because of a trip I took the other night to Paterson for dinner that turned out to be eye-opening/worrying in terms of potential anti-Semitic violence, and which made me think we could use the resources if only to create some resilience around the problem.

Best, Erik

Erik D'Amato
Councilor for the First Ward
Township of Montclair

Imam Kevin Dawud Amin is the next public comment speaker.
Chair Srinivasan confirmed that the meeting minutes from 9/19 were adopted and that, as an exceptional courtesy to Mr. Amin, were already printed and available to be shared immediately with Mr. Amin. While Mr. Srinivasan was mentioning this, Mr. Amin interrupted and said he will not transact on the minutes until a future time.

- He delivers an extensive account of his experiences and perspectives. He begins by outlining his religious beliefs and obligations as a Muslim and a Black American, emphasizing his commitment to fighting oppression and injustice. He proceeds to detail specific incidents that have led him to believe that his right to practice his religion is being threatened, starting with the allegation of anti-Semitism stemming from his statement at a council meeting regarding the influence of certain groups.

- Amin recounts his efforts to address the allegation, including a meeting with Rabbi Tepperman and Lani Sommer-Padilla, the individual who raised the concern. He argues that his statement was misconstrued and that the word "pull," which he used to describe the influence of certain groups, was wrongly equated with the word "control," thereby falsely painting him as anti-Semitic. He further points to the Change.org petition demanding his removal as a police chaplain, fueled by the allegations, as further evidence of the hostile environment he faces.

- Amin continues by describing the impact of the accusations on his life, including the pressure on the police department to sever ties with him and the filing of a bias crime complaint against him by a member of the LGBTQ community based on his Facebook posts. He expresses his frustration with the lack of due process and the tendency to label him as anti-Semitic without concrete evidence.

- Amin goes on to highlight other incidents that have contributed to his sense of unease, including a Jewish Voice for Peace event at the library that was met with protests and the actions of certain individuals.

- Amin concludes his statement by reiterating his commitment to interfaith dialogue and understanding, emphasizing his track record of bringing people together in times of crisis. He calls for mutual respect and dignity among all communities, asserting that the sensibilities of one group should not supersede the beliefs of another.

- He ends by requesting a ruling from the commission affirming his right to practice his religion as a Black American Muslim.

Josh Katz is the next public comment speaker:
- He refers to the nature of the complaint, which he argues centers on Amin's fitness to serve as a police chaplain due to his public behavior. Katz cites examples of Amin's social media posts that he considers insensitive and divisive, particularly those related to Jewish influence and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He shares a picture of a well known Jewish lawyer defaced with devil horns that was posted on Amin’s page and speaks to the anti-semitic nature of the post. He questions Amin's judgment and his ability to serve a diverse community, suggesting that Amin's actions demonstrate a lack of understanding and empathy towards the Jewish community.

- Katz concludes by emphasizing that his concern lies not with Amin's personal religious beliefs but with his public conduct as a representative of the municipality. He argues that individuals associated with the police department should be held to a higher standard and that Amin's actions have fallen short of that standard.

The remaining public comments largely consist of back-and-forth exchanges.
Lt. Williams emphasized that the commission is an advisory body to the Town Council. The commission sees that the councilors should be informed of anything being discussed on a regular basis, and as such, councilors are engaged differently than private citizens. Responding to Nicole Farjani's repeated interruptions, Kevin Allen emphasized that CRC complaints (even if there is high-level context provided beforehand, as was the case with the public comment speakers for the 9/19 CRC meeting) must be properly heard with full detail context by the whole CRC commission at a given meeting before next actions, including following up with other relevant parties, can be conducted if deemed appropriate.

Dorit Zimmerman asked Mr Amin directly what groups he was referring to in his 9/10 comments (“some groups have more pull in the media”) at the Town Council. Mr. Amin replied that AAPI, White Americans in general, and Jews all have more influence in the media than other groups. He then complained about being suppressed by Google and Facebook.

Subsequently, the CRC engaged in the executive session:

Discussed the formation of an anti-hate crimes task force and the importance of inclusivity in its membership. Matilda Carvajal will work with Lt Williams in the Anti-Hate Crimes Task Force.

Follow-up on the topic of the ARC Beauty Salon, where the representatives may join in the November meeting.

Discussed follow-up with MUSC Soccer / prior complaint, which Matilda Carvajal will do.

Discussion by Mr Paul Burr, Township Attorney, on CRC bylaws and procedures, including filing notice of meetings with 2 newspapers, which can be handled by the court clerk; that the CRC should be indemnified already, as indemnification covers all boards; imposing a time limit on speakers for public comment; keeping public comment to a single turn only-not revisiting; recommended listening to both sides of an issue with upcoming complaints. Nelson Campbell also shared some thoughts on CRC procedures and how to modify our approaches to handling complaints.