

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY  
OBSERVER REPORT

Tacoma Human Rights Commission

July 16, 2020

Observer: Lydia Zepeda

Special meeting

Called to order at 5:32 pm

Commission Members Present: Andreta Armstrong (staff), Commissioners: Sarah Rumbaugh, Al Ratcliffe, JR Nobles, Taneisha Lyons, and Julie Tran

Community Members Present: Gerrit Lyons, Adria Buchanen (Fair Housing), Lydia Zepeda (LWV observer)

The study session dealt with the proposed closing of the Tacoma Civil Rights Investigation office that deals with housing and employment complaints.

Andreta Armstrong indicated that the City Manager and OHR told her that after 2020 the City has no money for the Office of Civil Rights Investigation (CRI). She said the final decision has not been made, but was told it will be made within a couple weeks. Andreta prepared a report for the City Manager about what would happen if Tacoma does not have civil rights investigators: people will not get an investigation because the state backlog is six months and the state is not obligated to enforce Tacoma's housing code; Tacoma is responsible for that.

In the discussion, it came to light that currently all staff are on an 11-week layoff and all housing complaints were closed at the end of the fiscal housing year, June 30. The City is asking that all employment complaints be closed by September 30, the end of the fiscal year for employment complaints.

Tacoma is one of three cities in Washington that has its own Civil Rights Investigation Office. It investigates housing and employment complaints, as does Spokane, while Seattle only investigates employment complaints. There is a Washington State Civil Rights Investigation office, but it only enforces state statues, it does not enforce city law. Tacoma has its own city code, which the state cannot enforce. Furthermore, Tacoma collects fees from landlords, under the justification of enforcing its city code.

The HRC opposed closing the Tacoma Civil Right Investigation office because:

1. The closing of the office is antithetical to Tacoma's goal as a welcoming city.
2. The presence of the office acts as a deterrent to housing and employment discrimination.
3. The office provides information on the rights of tenants and employees
4. Tacoma has an anti-discrimination code and the State office of Civil Rights commission is not obligated indeed, the State cannot enforce city code.
5. The state had a six-month backlog meaning that tenants and employees who have to use the State agency will have no chance of a timely response.
6. Closing the office may jeopardize HUD funding to Tacoma because that funding is contingent upon affirmatively protecting fair housing. Tacoma cannot enforce its code if it does not have an investigative office. This lack of an office may not come to light until an audit.
7. Tacoma collects fees from landlords regarding its own housing code and so by disbanding the investigative office it will be collecting fees for an enforcement service it does not provide.

8. Now is not the time to close an office that protects people against housing and employment discrimination. We are in the midst of a pandemic, where many people have lost their jobs and are sick. The moratorium on evictions will be lifted and many people cannot pay their rent. Furthermore many have become disabled as a result of COVID-19 and need the disability protections the office provides.

Andreta indicated she would welcome a statement from the HRC about the closing of the CRI.

The discussion comments included:

- While the numbers of cases are not large, they are in proportion to the size of Tacoma. Furthermore, while there are far more intakes, the intakes involve explaining what discrimination and what is lawful and unlawful behavior. “We are arming people with information.” “Having the office in place is like having seatbelts, it is an issue of prevention.”
- “It’s like we are walking away from all the work we have done.”
- What has happened to the housing discrimination cases? They were referred to Washington State Human Rights Commission and HUD because Tacoma is no longer taking new cases.
- The City brought back parking enforcement and it does not pay half of what it costs to run parking enforcement.
- CRI is an important tool to fight systemic racism in housing and employment.

The Special meeting adjourned at 6:25pm

Break

The business meeting started at 6:40pm

Commissioners Present: JR Nobles, Alan Ratcliffe, Julie Tran, Taniesha Lyons, Sarah Rumbaugh, Ronita Boult

Others Present: Lydia Zepeda (LWV Observer)

Minutes from June business and special meetings were approved.

Motion made: Create a subcommittee to write a letter to communicate with the city manager, city council and mayor and city staff that the HRC does not support the layoff of the civil rights staff. Moved and seconded.

Amended to have the racial equity subcommittee draft the letter.

Passed unanimously.

Discussion:

- Status of the Civil Rights investigation position. They are coming back after an 11-week layoff. Since the HUD fiscal year ended June 30, and all the housing cases were closed, the housing investigator has been reassigned to assist the employment investigator.
- Letter will be drafted by the Equity subcommittee and brought to the HRC committee for approval. A special meeting can be called if needed.
- Community members were encouraged to help with drafting the letter.

Adjourned at 7:15pm