

**REGULAR MEETING OF THE CITY OF GOSHEN COMMUNITY RELATIONS  
COMMISSION**

**Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2020–7 p.m.**

**Goshen City Council Chambers, 111 E. Jefferson St.**



PRESENT: Michele Fanfair-Steury, Yolo Lopez DeMarco, AJ Delgadillo, Glenn Null, Don Brown, Simon Hertzler Gascho and Misleny Moreno

ON ZOOM: Cathie Cripe, Sreekala Rajagopalan, Judith Davis, Evan Miller and Julia King.

*Meeting called to order 7:05 p.m.*

**Approval of minutes:** Motion by Glenn, seconded by AJ. Approved unanimously.

**Presentation: Recognition of Simon for his time serving as a member of the CRC (2019-2020 youth adviser).**

**Simon:** “Thank you all very much. I came to the CRC not super confident and pretty unsure about how I would fit in, but you all did an amazing job helping me find a voice and listening to me. I think I grew up and I think the commission is better with a Youth Adviser. So I’m excited to see this continue with Misleny.”

**Presentation: Welcoming Misleny Moreno (2020-2021 youth adviser).**

**Misleny:** “I just want to thank you for welcoming me onto this commission. I know I have really big shoes to fill and I can’t wait to help in any way by sharing my voice. I know from the first meeting where I learned about the CRC—it was my junior year—I knew this would be a really wonderful experience. So I’m really excited to be welcomed on.”

**Presentation: Mayor Jeremy Stutsman on the 2021 CRC budget.**

Discussion of hiring part-time employee to help with the CRC on administrative work. Over the last year and half there has been discussion about having an employee to help with administrative work for the CRC. Mayor has been in discussion with the City Council about the CRC’s need, especially so in light of the national conversations surrounding topics of unity. While the Council is not ready to create a full-time position this year due to fears of the economic downturn, they would support creating a part-time position at this time. The hiring process would be conducted by the Human Resources Department, but some members of the CRC could participate in the interview process. The position would operate under the Mayor’s office. The council must first create the position and the hiring process would begin soon after. The new employee would begin working in early January 2021.

**Presentation: Rachel Van Alstine on blighted property in Goshen.**

Letter attached (Appendix A)

**Presentation: Ben Hartman on a proposal to form a police policy review board.**

Mr. Hartman asks the commission to appoint a group of three to five persons to a board that sits down and reviews the Goshen Police policies. Ideally with a diverse group of people from the community. The decision to bring this to the commission is out of concern, as a business owner, that Goshen has a

sundown town reputation. If visitors come, what information can they receive on the local police department's policies? Glenn offered to be in subcommittee for this endeavor.

Don said he is happy to hear of Mr. Hartman wanting to establish this relationship with the police departments. He asked that a goal be established as the work continues on the creation of the committee.

Evan asked what the structure of the group would look like, or whether CRC is expected to lead this project. Mr. Hartman said he would like to see residents, police and other City representatives and members of the CRC.

Michele said the Commission will discuss what action to take, if any, and reach out to Mr. Hartman.

**Presentation: Aiden Friesen.**

Mr. Friesen was not able to attend the meeting August. The presentation has been postponed to September meeting.

**Committee reports:**

- Fusion/diversity fest: Plans for an in-person event have been postponed. The item may be reviewed at a different time for virtual event option. **Motion** made to table committee indefinitely due to the pandemic affecting event planning. Motion by Evan, seconded by Judith.  
**Motion: FAILED**  
AYES: Sreekala, Evan, Judith  
NAYS: Glenn, Don, Yolo, AJ, Cathie, Michele
- Bystander training: The facilitator/trainer was under the impression the contract had a retainer fee. After review of the contract by the treasurer, it was found there was no retainer fee and no further payment is required. Due to the pandemic affecting further planning in the near future, a Motion is made to table the bystander-training program indefinitely. Motion by Michele, seconded by Evan. Michele recalled her motion.
- Middle school: Committee has not had a chance to meet. There is hope that the committee will meet soon via email or Zoom.
- Treasurer's report.

**New business:**

- In anticipation of August meeting, Michele reached out to all commission members and asked for what they personally would like to see discussed in future meetings. Michele noted that the commission should prioritize the list and see what concerns can be addressed together.
  - o Glenn: Tolerance for those who have differences of opinion.
  - o Judith: Black Lives Matter: what is the City doing; how are we considering the issues; what kind of support is City offering to commissioners.
  - o Cathie: Open statement from CRC regarding race relations.
  - o Don: Invitation to have Jordan Giger present to CRC about the local Black Lives Matter movement.
  - o Evan: What is the long term strategy given the pandemic and opportunities presented by the Black Lives Matter.

- AJ: Concern for humanity and individual well-being.
- Sreekala: Continue work on the Sundown Town marker.
- Yolo: Similar to Evan, what is the long-term strategy for the CRC. What are some opportunities to continue letting the community know we are here.
- Michele proposed bringing back to the table the conversation surrounding the sundown town resolution and marker to the September meeting. Michele said she believes it would make sense for CRC to make an open statement about it.
- Proposal to write a letter to the Mayor—from the CRC—to remind the City that the commission is here to listen and work for a safe community.

**Motion** to form a committee to write a request for proposals to find a facilitator that can help develop a three-year strategic plan for the CRC. Chaired by Evan. Motion by Evan, Seconded by Judith.

**Motion: PASSED**

AYES: Michele, Yolo, Sreekala, Cathie, Evan, Judith

NAYS: Glenn, Don, AJ

In the committee will be Evan, Cathie, Judith and Michele.

**Closing comments:** Glenn appreciated the CRC getting back together after long pause due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Glenn Moved to adjourn. Seconded by AJ. *Meeting adjourned 9:18 p.m.*

## Appendix A

8/11/2020

Community Relations Commission Meeting

I am a social worker in Elkhart County and am currently providing case management and advocacy services for a local family, specifically for housing advocacy. I met with a family in their current home which they rent here within the City of Goshen on July 8<sup>th</sup> and found the home to be in deplorable, hazardous, un-safe living conditions which briefly include:

- The wood flooring throughout the entire home and porch is soft and deteriorating, you physically sink down while walking as if you could go through the floorboards at any time.
- When it rains water leaks from the 2<sup>nd</sup> story roof upstairs down the walls to the main level; the paint is peeling with visible black mold surrounding the areas.
- All of the window and door frames of the home are dry rotted and do not seal properly—the window in one of the children’s bedrooms leaks water excessively to the point that the carpet in the bedroom is soaked every time it rains and there appears to be mold all around the windows and there is concern that there could also be mold within the flooring and carpet as well due to the continuous water exposure every time it rains. The child’s bedroom window also had to be nailed to the wall from the inside because if you physically pushed the window with your finger it would fall out onto the roof.
- There are two front doors to the home and one of the front doors does not have a physical doorknob or lock and you can see straight through the door. The family currently has a couch pressed up against the door to prevent people from entering their home. The back door visually has a 5-6” gap at the bottom and even if the door is locked you can push it open. My client stays up at night while her family sleeps in fear that someone could easily enter the home.
- The electrical panel is exposed with no front covering and exposed wiring. If you turn on/off certain lights in the home the power will go out throughout the entire house. My client reported that the Electric Company came out to the home in January because the power kept going on and off and the worker told the family that the electrical box was not to code and stated that there were only 4 fuses in the entire box and said that he would also be required to report the home to Goshen City Code Enforcement as he indicated that no one should be living in the home until it was brought to code. These issues were reported to the landlord and he still refused to fix the immediate electrical concerns and required that the client’s husband with no electrical experience replace the electrical box. My clients husband attempted to fix the box but stated that he was shocked in the process and indicated that there is still exposed wiring.
- The electrical outlet directly above one of the children’s beds in another bedroom was making “sizzling noises” and the landlord sent a “repair man” to fix it but the client stated that he did not connect the ground wires and the outlet almost caught on fire while her child was sleeping.
- The front porch is separating from the house and completely dry rotted. The client indicated that the mail carrier recently fell through the front porch and the landlord required the client’s husband again to fix the porch which consisted of him pulling up the rotted wood and placing new wood on the existing rotted foundation. The basement of the foundation is currently held up on several floor jacks.

- The kitchen floor is sinking in the middle. The client stated that they cannot use their oven and top burners at the same time, or it shorts out the electric. The family must physically turn on and off their gas valve every time they use the stove; otherwise, there is a constant gas leak in the home.
- The flooring in the bathroom is soft and rotted and you can visually see down into the basement from the bathroom as there are several gaps in the floor. When you step into the bathtub it literally sinks down 2-3" and appears that the bathtub could fall through the floor at any time. The client reported that the landlord sent another one of his "repair men" to attempt to fix the bathtub; however, this consisted of him placing black tar all around the faucets and bathtub surround which did absolutely nothing for the existing safety concerns.

These hazardous, un-safe home conditions were confirmed by the Goshen City Rental Inspector during his recent inspection on 7/28/2020. I have a copy of the inspection which consists of 3 pages of violations, in detail.

In speaking with the Goshen City Rental Inspector, it was found that this home failed to pass inspection in 2018 and it was documented as a "no-occupy" which means the landlord was not to move anyone in until there was a passing inspection. The City Rental Inspector also noted that the landlord was "somehow still able to register the property" although the landlord did not schedule an inspection to ensure that it was passing. He said that "this must have been missed by the City"; however, it is apparent that this was quite intentional by the landlord.

This landlord moved the family into these unsafe home conditions in July 2019 and has since been charging them \$900/mon in rent to live in this environment with their 4 children. All of these unsafe, hazardous conditions have been reported to the landlord for the last 12 months without any resolution as the landlord has refused to properly fix any of these hazardous conditions. I was told by the Goshen City Rental Inspector that the landlord had until 8/25/2020 to make all documented repairs; however, as of today, I confirmed with my client that the landlord has yet to attempt to make any of these repairs. The reality is, that it is physically not possible as the home is in such deplorable conditions that it could be deemed condemned if there was not a family currently residing in the home.

Since witnessing the condition of my client's home, I have personally contacted Elkhart County Code Enforcement, Elkhart County Environmental Health, Goshen City Rental Inspections, and the Goshen City Attorney. I believe it's important to note that ALL these entities were aware of who the landlord of this property was before I ever spoke his name. Both Elkhart County Code Enforcement and Goshen City Rental Inspections indicated that they each receive at least 'one complaint a month' regarding this landlords' properties as it is known that he targets low-income families, in poverty that generally do not have access to legal resources or alternative housing options. The Goshen City Attorney also indicated that 'at least half of his cases are against this landlord'. We must ask ourselves how this is able to exist?

It is quite apparent that this landlord has learned that he is untouchable in our community. The Goshen City Attorney specifically indicated that 'violations work against most landlords but not this landlord as he pays whatever fines are incurred and proceeds as usual'. He stated that "the courts are sick of him" and yet this man is still able to prey on the most vulnerable populations in our community every single day.

It was explained to me by the Goshen City Attorney that 'although this landlord is committing illegal acts, it does not necessarily make it criminal'. I had honestly never heard of such an explanation. How can something illegal that risks human lives, not be criminal? Throughout the course of this case, I cannot tell you how many 'professionals' have told me that further action would be 'beyond their scope'. I am frankly disgusted by the excuses and by our community's failure to act against this landlord. We have an obligation as professionals within this community to ensure that this man can no longer take advantage of vulnerable populations and place families and children at risk.

There is substantial evidence and documentation which proves that this landlord illegally rented this hazardous, un-safe home to this family with children. Elkhart County Code Enforcement, Elkhart County Environmental Health, Goshen City Rental Inspections, and the Goshen City Attorney are now all aware and yet there is no legal or physical consequence for this landlord. How is this possible? How does a landlord have such a deplorable record within our

community that you all know him by name, without me even speaking his name? How is this man allowed to still rent to families within our community? How is he able to place families with children continually and consistently in unsafe housing conditions and there are no substantial consequences that would deter him from doing this again? Our local city and county government is allowing this discrimination and continual human rights violations to exist. This man clearly and intentionally targets individuals of low economic status, in poverty, and in my opinion that is how he is still able to exist in our community. We must right this wrong! I believe the city and the county have enough evidence and cause to require inspections of all this landlord's properties. What other families and children are currently in danger because of his negligence? We are telling families and children within our communities their worth by allowing this to continue. There is significant evidence to hold this man accountable and unless we are all willing to continue to look away while he places families and children at risk every day, I would request that the city and county join forces to stop this man from preying on the most vulnerable populations in our community. If we do not hold him accountable as a society, then who will?

**For the record, this landlord's name is Ron David Heiser but you already knew that.**