



Amherst Community Diversity Commission

Tuesday, January 9th, 2024
5:30 PM, online meeting via Zoom

WELCOME & ROLL CALL: Chairperson Dr. Mohan Devgun welcomed all the attending members of Amherst Community Diversity Commission and wished all a happy new year.

ATTENDING: Dr. Mohan Devgun, Chairperson, Gul A. Rahman, Vice Chairperson, Zhen Liu, PhD, Secretary; Commission Members: Dr. Joseph Sankoh, Thomas Lucia, Heidi Nicklaus Lefebvre, Cynthia Bass, Dr. Mohammad Asghar Khan, Martha Taggart, Amherst Town Secretary to the Supervisor.

ABSENT: Melissa Abel, Anne Rohrer

GUESTS: Danessia Scott-Warren, Esq., Yanhong Baranski.

ELECT THE OFFICERS-RULES OF ORDER:

1. CHAIRPERSON – Dr Mohan Devgun.
Nomination: First motion made by Heidi Nicklaus Lefebvre, second motion by Zhen Liu.
Approved unanimously.
2. VICE CHAIRPERSON – Gul A. Rahman
Nomination: First motion made by Dr Mohan Devgun, second motion by Dr Joseph Sankoh. Approved unanimously.
3. SECRETARY – Zhen Liu
Nomination: First motion made by Dr Joseph Sankoh, second motion by Dr Mohan Devgun. Approved unanimously.

Congratulations to the newly elected officers!

MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION: Dr Mohan Devgun mentioned that many members' terms expired on Dec. 31st, 2023. Martha Taggart, Amherst Town Secretary to the Supervisor asked whoever wants to renew the membership to email her about the intention. Members can visit the website for information on their terms.

OLD BUSINESS:

November 14TH, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: The motion to approve the minutes was moved by __Heidi N. Lefebvre__ and seconded by __Dr. Joseph Sankoh__. Unanimously approved.

THE TOWN OF AMHERST LIAISON: The Commission was expecting the announcement of the new liaison on Jan. 2nd, 2023. Dr Mohan Devgun explained that the appointment was postponed until Jan. 22. The Commission had to wait until then.

Review of the Amherst Town Architect Presentation - Central Park Project: The Commission discussed and decided to wait until March to fix a time to meet internally, and then invite the architect, Anne Dafchik.

Review of the Library Display Project and Children Holiday Project: Heidi reported that the display was built by five members: Heidi, Dr. Devgun, Anne, Tom, and Zhen, with the help of the library on Nov. 21. The display included Diwali, Kwanzaa, Holi, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year, Christmas, Eid al-Fitr and Ramadan. A few pictures of the display were sent to David Willer and the town to put them on the website.

Heidi also reported that, for the children holiday event on December 28th at 2pm, Bath Staebell of the library created a table for each of the holidays with an appropriate craft or activity so the families and the kids could move around from area to area, with descriptions of the holidays. Ethnic holiday snacks were also enjoyed by the participants. About 50-60 people attended the event. Three members were there: Anne, Heidi, and Zhen. Yanhong and a few people from the Chinese community also volunteered.

Heidi also added that she would need to return some items to Gul, Dr. Devgun, and Tom. All other display items were boxed up and stored at the town hall in the storage room, labeled with the Diversity Commission.

Dr. Devgun thanked Heidi and others for the help and participation.

Planning meetings for 2024: Zhen Liu again proposed to organize an educational event on AAPI history potentially during the AAPI heritage month in May. He would need the help from Tom to reach out to the AAPI Clubs in school districts.

Heidi mentioned that as of 2024 New York State has passed a new law making the Asian Lunar New Year a public-school holiday across the State, which could add the significance to the event.

Danessia reported that besides her job as an attorney, she is also a facilitator for Community Foundation of Great Buffalo. She and other facilitators had worked with a not-for-profit to put on **racial-healing circles**. It only needs a safe space where people know it is okay to share their thoughts and their narratives and their views and ideas and they are not going to be judged for them. Ground rules are laid ahead of time. It may not be what I believe or what you believe, but it is what they believe, and it is their narrative of where they are coming from. The idea is to have a cross-section of race, religion, gender, and socioeconomic conditions.

The suggestion was discussed among the Commission and received broad support. It will be a future program to be done with the school districts, the Commission, the Town of Amherst, all open to the public.

Dr. Joseph Sankoh proposed to explore events during the Black History Month in February. He recalled the Underground Railroad event many years ago when Susan Grelick was the town supervisor, and the event engaged the whole town to educate the public about Black History. Heidi then suggested that at each meeting of the Commission, some member who celebrates a holiday could just shed some light on some culture so that others may learn. Dr. Sankoh agreed to give the presentation next month and emphasized that he would like to see more people engaged. The Commission then discussed other ideas to educate about Black History such as Ida Bell Wells-Barnett. The Commission agreed to plan such events for the Black History Month in 2025.

Yanhong mentioned the event on the coming Chinese New Year on February 10th. There will be a culture fair, a stage performance, and a dinner at the Center for the Arts of the UB. She would send the flyer to the Commission to advertise the event.

Community Diversity Calendar of 2024: Dr. Devgun moved to approve the document. Heidi seconded the motion. It is unanimously approved.

Annual Report: Dr. Devgun reported that he would write the report for 2023, and asked members to write about what they did with the Commission and email it to him.

COMMUNITY MATTERS:

SCHOOL BOARD LIAISON REPORT: Thomas Lucia reported that he wished to update a list of changes in school holidays, however none of the districts replied. He sent a reminder and was still waiting. He also reported that The Taste of North, an event focusing on foods around the world, was to be held on February 29 at 3:30PM in the gym of Williamsville North High. So far twenty food stations have registered. This was open to the public.

TOWN LIAISON REPORT: No report. The liaison was not appointed by the town.

NEW BUSINESS:

COMMUNICATION, IF ANY:

Heidi asked about the procedure for people interested in joining the Commission, since Yanhong Baranski and JoAnn Balazs expressed interest in joining. Marty answered that the person should email a resume and a letter of interest to the town. The liaison would review the list and the existing openings of the membership to decide.

Danessia asked Marty about her application sent to Debbie before she retired from the liaison position. Marty answered that she did not see it from Debbie and asked Danessia if she could resend the application to her. Danessia agreed.

Dr. Joseph Sankoh asked if the communications should be emailed to the two members who missed all meetings during 2023. The Commission discussed it and concluded that it would not be necessary.

Dr. Joseph Sankoh also asked if the members whose term expired should be notified. The Commission discussed it and concluded that the town website should be updated with the information and nothing else is needed.

Gul added that the Bylaws of the Commission specified the required number of meeting attendances, and also separated excused-absences and non-excused absences.

FUTURE MEETINGS: Next Diversity Commission meeting will be held on Tuesday February 13th, 2024, at 5:30pm via Zoom.

MOTION TO ADJOURN: First motion to adjourn the meeting by __Dr. Devgun__ and second by __Heidi__. Unanimously approved. The meeting concluded at 6:40 PM.

MISSION STATEMENT: The purpose of this coalition is to enhance and increase cooperation, understanding, and dialogue among residents of diverse cultural, religious, socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, and to promote inclusion throughout the town. Some of the responsibilities of the coalition will be to study the demographics of Amherst; promote town-wide events that foster cultural minority participation on governmental boards and committees and in the Town's workplace; and to facilitate meetings designed to promote a better understanding of who Amherst is as a community.

Respectfully submitted,

Zhen Liu, PhD

Secretary of Amherst Community Diversity Commission