



We Are Columbia

**COLUMBIA TASK FORCE TO PREVENT AND END HOMELESSNESS MEETING MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2022**

The Columbia Task Force to Prevent and End Homelessness conducted a meeting on Tuesday, June 29, 2022 at the Busby Street Community Center, 1735 Busby Street, Columbia, SC 29203. The Honorable Aditi Bussells, Chair called the meeting to order at 4:09 p.m. and the following members were present:

Attendee Name	Title	Status
Aditi Bussells	Chair	Present
Edward H. McDowell	District II	Present
Will Brennan	District III	Absent
William "Skip" Holbrook	Police Chief	Present
Matt Kennell	City Center Partnership	Present
Steve Cook	Five Points Association	Present
George Whitehead	Department of Probations, Pardon and Parole	Present
Allison Farrell	SC Department of Mental Health	Present
John Wilkerson	Elmwood/Downtown Coalition of Neighborhoods	Absent
Bret Kloos	USC Department of Psychology	Absent
Amy McCulloch	Probate Judge	Absent
Matthew Brock	Associate Probate Judge	Present
Kieley Sutton	Assistant Public Defender	Present
Antonio Flores Jr.	Wal-Mart	Absent
Doreen Skelton	Advocate	Present
Jamar Ogburn	Advocate	Present
Treacy Dobbins	Inspire Real Change	Present

INVOCATION

The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. offered the invocation.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. Approval of the May 18, 2022 Task Force Meeting Minutes - The Honorable Aditi Bussells

Upon a motion made by Mr. McDowell and seconded by Mr. Kennell, task force members voted unanimously to approve the May 18, 2022 Task Force Meeting Minutes.



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COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

2. Welcome - The Honorable Aditi Bussells and The Honorable Edward H. McDowell

Councilor Aditi Bussells said we held our first meeting almost five weeks ago. Since then, there has been a lot of activity and great discussion around the ways in which we continue this work. We have great perspectives and much needed expertise around the ways in which we can continue to address this complex issue. I want to acknowledge two new members: Mr. Jamar Ogburn and Ms. Doreen Skelton.

3. Task Force Goals and Outcomes - The Honorable Aditi Bussells

Councilor Aditi Bussells said I want to frame today's conversation and talk through some of the things I found to be the most salient in our discussion. We learned how much the city has invested in homelessness. We have one million dollars for city services specifically around our Inclement Weather Center. For the last several years that has been awarded to United Way with a pass through to several other providers. We provide dollars for security at Transitions, which is a shelter at the end of our Main Street corridor. A lot of our community development funding also goes towards homelessness. About \$2.5 million from our American Rescue Plan Act funding will be going towards non-congregate housing which is housing that allows people to not live in shared spaces. We continue to support providers to include Homeless No More and MIRCI. We expanded the Pathways Unit which is focused on embedding mental health clinicians within the Columbia Police Department. We cannot solve the entire problem of homelessness. We can do our part in leading efforts that we can control or influence. This task force will focus on the chronic and visible homeless. Typically, these are folks interacting with our commercial districts including downtown, Harbison and Garners Ferry. We are not focused on other populations like youth in transition, families and other populations that may be interacting with services. We want to focus on those that are visible and often resistant to services. We talked about the need to balance the increase in crime with the need to provide effective options and services for this population. Crime is often a consequence of these other complex factors that lead to homelessness. We talked about the importance of inclusive language. HUD uses the term unsheltered homeless. That is the term that we can continue to use. Instead of saying the homeless, let's say people experiencing homelessness as a more inclusive way of talking about the population that we are interested in serving. This task force was created with the intention of existing for six to eight months. The goal is to develop short-term immediate solutions to address the urgency of this issue. A lot of systemic change needs to happen. I need your help to find those short term immediate solutions.



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We talked about how important it is to hold service providers accountable. One strategy that came out of that was to revisit the request for proposals (RFP) process for city homelessness service providers and to determine what your accountability metrics will be. Another strategy is to ask and advocate for regional and state investment around the work we are doing. Many of our community providers are serving the Midlands but the burden of support often falls on the city. We talked about having beat cops and a consistent police presence downtown to enforce regulations. We also talked about holding community groups accountable for waste that comes from meal sharing and the need to coordinate these efforts. Finally, we learned about our Homeless Court. We talked about competency and options for pathways out of homelessness. Perhaps the court can be a partner in making that happen. Are there any other strategies that you would like to bring up at this time?

Mr. Steve Cook said here is mental illness, drug addiction and a criminal element among the homeless in Columbia. It is important to be honest and realistic about that. As a member of the business community, this is important to me. I have a different issue with someone who needs help versus someone who is actively doing criminal activity in neighborhoods. That seems to get pushed underneath when we talk about law enforcement.

Mr. Jamar Ogburn recalled interactions with the police when he stayed at Transitions. When you look and act a certain way, you get labeled. The police have to change their attitude.

Chief Skip Holbrook said it is interesting that the first conversation is about law enforcement. We spent a lot of time at the last meeting talking about how to get law enforcement out of the solution. I can assure you that we would prefer not to spend 60% of our time in the Metro Region dealing with unsheltered homeless. Especially now with the staffing challenges we have, we are very reactive. For us, public contact is almost entirely based on complaints or a reported crime. We have various corridors that are more active than others. There are a lot of quality of life and criminal violations that occur in the area where Transitions is located. More goes on that is unenforced and that is a sticking point for a lot of the businesses. Law enforcement is always going to have to interact when there are violations of law. No matter the situation, we have to treat people with respect and dignity and justify our actions. There are lots of checks and balances. We wear body cameras. A lot of trespassing charges are based on a business owner giving law enforcement the authority to act on their behalf after someone has been properly noticed.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said that is what we hear from constituents as well. How do we solve this in a way that is meaningful?



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Chief Skip Holbrook said we had dozens of complaints in the Forest Drive corridor. We had to do a special operations to address this particular quality of life issue. In two days, we made nine custodial arrests. Every one of those were personal recognizance (PR) bonds and they were right back out. A lot of resources were drained for two days and those same people are back in the same place doing the same thing. Then the unsheltered homeless may have had a bad experience. They are mad at us and the business owner is mad at us because we did not affect a change. I would like to hear solutions.

Councilor Edward McDowell said we need to recognize that law enforcement officers are there to enforce the law. What is the responsibility of the providers? We hired clinicians to effectuate and navigate through crisis in the community. We want officers to be reasonable, compassionate and sensible, but we also want them to enforce the law.

Mr. Steve Cook said the only tool given to business owners is through the police department. It is incredibly unfair for officers to be the frontline for triaging this. We would love to have another agency to call or have the counselors come first.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said we have heard that consistently. Folks naturally call 911. We find that people struggle to find services after hours. It sounds like we need to identify an afterhours and first point of contact that can respond in a timely manner without putting the burden on CPD especially for instances where there isn't criminal activity.

Chief Skip Holbrook said we have one clinician. We had 337 calls for service, interacted with 214 different clients and made 238 different referrals. Those 214 clients were homeless and they did not go to jail. The discussion needs to be about the disposition of those 214 clients. We have to effectively deal with these persons who are experiencing homelessness that come into contact with the Pathways Unit. They are in crisis whether it is through addiction to alcohol or drugs, they are on the street, and they suffer from mental illness.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said the challenge is also that our services are all over the city or beyond the city. It is hard to interact if you don't have transportation or someone helping you navigate these things. There is no single point of entry that people have found consistent success with. We have folks that need services and we don't have a seamless process for that. We have folks that are engaging in criminal activity as a consequence of homelessness and it has affected neighborhoods and businesses.



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Mr. Jamar Ogburn said when working at the Inclement Weather Center, I would call a number for clients with mental issues, but I was told that they had no one to send out. I had to call the police and they tell me to call mental health. Something needs to be in place 24 hours a day.

Ms. Allison Farrell said there is a resource called Mobile Crisis that is available in every county 24/7 for 365 days a year. Call (833)364-2274 and two clinicians will be dispatched along with law enforcement if it is a mental health crisis. When will law enforcement identify it as a homeless issue? Is it during dispatch?

Chief Skip Holbrook said it could be the complainant through dispatch or after we interact with them on scene. It could be based on field interviews, arrest reports or incident reports where an address is not listed. Mobile Crisis works well and it complements our Pathways Unit.

Ms. Kieley Sutton said I represent almost everyone who comes through the City of Columbia Municipal Court with a competency issue. Competency is when your mental health is so significant that you don't understand what's going on in court and you don't care to participate in your defense. That also means that you can't engage in services. It is not necessarily a resistance to services; it can be an inability to engage and follow through in an appropriate way. Since January 1, 2022 through June 22, 2022, there were 113 arrests for 10 different people who have pending competency evaluations. [*Correction received on June 30, 2022: The number of arrests is 34 for 10 unique individuals who collectively spent 405 days in jail as of June 22, 2022.*] These individuals cannot be tried. They cannot engage in services. There is no solution. They can't comport their behavior in a way that allows them to stay in a shelter or participate in services. They can't be probated because they usually don't have family. The hospitals can't or won't engage with them longer than the 24 hour or one-week hold. They don't have insurance to keep them in a program. With all of those issues, the appropriate thing would be a competency evaluation and the restoration process after they are charged criminally. That doesn't exist but we are working on this with the city. There was a 2019 State Supreme Court order saying that the mechanism needs to be developed and here we are mid-2022 with no plans. That is arrests and days spent in jail by people who cannot be tried, self-advocate, or participate in services. They are discharged without a plan. At last check, there were 23 people with pending competency evaluations. We have a robust service provider community but none of the services are one size fits all. We need an afterhours or on call individual who is well versed on all of the services available to make appropriate referrals. It is a matter of collaboration, cohesiveness, clear referrals, follow-up, and warm handoffs. Proposals for afterhours peer support specialists and weekend peer support have been presented to MACH. There is an issue with transportation. A lot of the clients that I work with who are interested in engaging in services have been banned or put on trespass notice from the Comet. There is no clear policy, notification process, or



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appeals process. We are putting a gap in the continuity of care which is an additional hurdle to the next level of success.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said we have competency up there. We need to talk about clear policies and suggestions for how we are allowing people to become unbanned from transportation. I would add that a lot of people are banned from accessing services. What is the process if you want to engage in services again? What are our accountability metrics to ensure that we are not creating these unintended consequences? A campaign would help people have access, especially business owners and community members to numbers and a set of resources that actually work. I don't want to hear the desperation of "I don't know what to do except call CPD." I want to have options for those who feel like they have criminal activity on their property or in their vicinity.

Ms. Kieley Sutton encouraged everyone to recognize that there is going to be two sides to every coin. If I went into my job and didn't recognize that on one client I could be the best advocate in the world but on the next one I am a public pretender - if I didn't know that those two perceptions existed, I would be doing clients a disservice. We need to deal with that consistency of interaction and understanding. If the rumor is that your weekend staff is different from your day staff, we as agencies, service providers, and advocates need to be aware of those rumors, recognize if there is truth to it, and be willing to fix it.

Councilor Edward McDowell noted that the Department of Mental Health is the only service provider in the meeting.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said many of the providers have been invited to our August meeting where they will be presenting on the services they provide. During the next meeting, I would like to hear the questions you have for providers.

Councilor Edward McDowell said this is not just a mental health issue; there are layers to homelessness. I don't think there has been collaboration with providers to discuss resolutions. In August, I will ask what is being done collaboratively towards resolutions that can effectuate themselves. Again, CPD is not in the triage business. We have to do a better job. We have identified the issues, but we haven't had the hard conversations about what we can do collaboratively. We spend one million dollars per year and I am asked if we are getting a bang for our buck. We will have this conversation in August.



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Ms. Kieley Sutton said there are monthly case conferencing meetings that talk about intensive case conference based on a list provided by CPD or MACH. There is a youth specific meeting, a families meeting, and there used to be a VA meeting. Clean of Heart has the next level services where we do intensive case management as a group table event. The library has partnership days. I don't think there has been a collaborative effort to discuss what the city can do differently. There have been collaborative efforts to coordinate services and better serve our fellow humans.

Councilor Edward McDowell said we are having these intensive conversations with others. Is it working? If it is not working, we need to fix it or find some resolution. If we are not making a difference in terms of that conversation, then we are talking about sounding brass and gonging cymbals. It has to be a collaborative conversation that is going to engender itself around solutions. We can't do it by ourselves. It doesn't matter which agency it is; it is not working. It becomes a hard pull for CPD when there are issues and situations and the only thing we do is dial 911. There has to be a genuine conversation between you all. We can effectuate change but what are the end results. There are no results right now.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said what is currently happening is not working. We have to revisit the ways in which our community, business owners, and providers are all interacting. We have a lot of great pieces and they are not all moving together in one cohesive puzzle that allows folks to engage with services correctly and allows CPD to stay in their lane and respond to the situations that make the most sense and are in their purview. It is scary to say that. What we are doing is not working, because it continues to escalate. We keep hearing about the increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness.

4. Review of Reading Materials - The Honorable Aditi Bussells

Councilor Aditi Bussells said I want to talk about the materials I sent to you all. One being the 2013 Homeless Committee Report. The committee had four subcommittees. I want to summarize some of the strategies they had that may be interesting for our discussion: Winter Shelter, Main Street Corridor, Meals and Feeding, and Sanitation. The four key recommendations for the *Winter Shelter Subcommittee* were to have a four-year plan to start having effective enough services where they no longer need an overflow. They wanted to make transportation accessible, timely, and reasonable. They shifted the times for when meals and services are provided in the winter. They had recommendations on how to manage overflows. Instead of having those experiencing homelessness move into MLK Park, they suggested using the existing structure to address that. In terms of the *Main Street Corridor Subcommittee*, the city added more "No Loitering" signs and garbage cans; conducted trash patrols of areas for meal sharing; and handed out posters on how to address homelessness. They urged the city to pursue vacant properties.



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They talked about the blue store that continues to sell single-serve alcohol, which led to an increase in alcohol consumption and substance use around that business. In 2013, they urged us to look at ways to halt single-serve alcohol. Emphasis was placed on the Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless (MACH) doing a point in time count to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness and launching a public awareness campaign of the different services available in Columbia. The *Meals and Feedings Subcommittee* suggested that we have fixed locations for meals. They suggested having specific times because so many programs were overlapping. They also suggested discouraging outdoor meal providers and enforcing and revising city regulations to ensure that they are sharing meals in fixed locations to help address issues with trash. Lastly, the *Sanitation Subcommittee* explored options for public sanitation. They did not include specific recommendations but said they were talking with Savannah and Asheville to look at models for public bathrooms and sanitation options. This was in 2013 and we continue to talk about many of these issues. I would love to hear your reactions to these recommendations and if you think there are some that we should continue to pursue.

Mr. Matt Kennell said the blue store is a major issue. I testified before the Department of Revenue and for a year or two they were not allowed to sell alcohol. Somehow they were allowed to open and it has been a major problem ever since. The single-serve alcohol from there, El Cheapo and other places is a major problem. That is an issue that perhaps council could deal with by ordinance. The city has put in porta johns and there have been maintenance issues over the years. Anybody that works in the Main Street District would say that it is better than it used to be. There are better solutions. Austin, Texas installed The Portland Loo[®]. It is a beautiful thing but it is expensive.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said I would like to put that down as a solution. We are brainstorming and we will see what is feasible.

Ms. Allison Farrell asked why some of the recommendations did not go forward. What were the barriers to getting some of these recommendations addressed in 2013?

Councilor Aditi Bussells said I will try to find out.

Mr. George Whitehead said during COVID there were handwashing stations all around town but they went away. I would like to see some of them come back. That was a great resource.



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Chief Skip Holbrook said every one of those areas have been touched in one way or another since that committee brought forward the recommendations. The winter shelter has been massaged and worked over and over again. It is not perfect but it has been an important resource for managing the situations with homeless individuals in inclement weather. The Main Street corridor has changed. There has been a dramatic shift in the complaints of people relieving themselves. The porta johns aren't the greatest thing to look at. It would be awesome if this group could come up with a solution to meal sharing. It leads to a lot of issues with trash. We have meal shares that occur throughout the day, every day and in various places. Some are scheduled but more are not. It is nearly impossible to coordinate. All of these areas have been touched in one way or another and with various successes. Hopefully we can build on those successes as those are all important areas.

Mr. Matthew Brock said the problem with coordinating meals can be solved with some type of technology and by getting all providers and those who share meals regularly in a room. That way, not only do the homeless know but the police can know and we can have that coordination.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said we have churches and other non-profits that are not traditionally in the provider community but want to do something kind. These come up and there is no way to capture all of them until after they happen. Then we get a call about trash and bags of clothes being left behind. The United Way did a great job with trying to organize the meal shares but there is much more happening that is tangential and happens on its own.

Mr. Matthew Brock suggested having an ordinance requiring 24-hour notice before going to feed.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said I like the idea of a 24-hour notice.

Mr. Jamar Ogburn said don't feed them. There is a major difference from when I moved here in 1988 to what we have today. In 1988, the Salvation Army, Oliver Gospel Mission and the church on Washington Street were the only place that offered meals. On Sunday, you had the church on Senate Street. Back then, the Salvation Army and the Oliver Gospel Mission didn't let you take food out. Now you have massive churches and law firms. If you don't feed them, you don't have it. Coordinate it in a certain area but move it away from the city and the main corridor. Let the main people do what they have been doing and stop the extras.



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Councilor Aditi Bussells noted that the city attorney mentioned several cities have tried this approach. In many cases, these groups sued and they won on the rights of the first amendment to be able to feed. There are creative ways to help people understand the unintended consequences. Legally, we won't be able to say you can't feed at all.

Ms. Jacqueline Pavlicek, Esq., City Attorney's Office said pursuant to the first amendment, the City of Columbia doesn't regulate churches. There have been numerous law suits largely based on the first amendment. The City of Columbia cannot have an official policy that would fine them for that.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said another strategy is continuing to find ways in which we can help people understand those unintended consequences.

Mr. Jamar Ogburn asked if we can setup a central location for meal sharing.

Councilor Aditi Bussells suggested looking at policies around waste and to-go containers.

Doreen Skelton said one solution is for us to help people have a place of their own where they can feed themselves. Several states have done it. Cities have worked with social workers and community programs to have tiny homes where each person has their own sleeping quarters. They are able to put their belongings in it and they setup bathrooms and resources. A lot of money has been put out for bathrooms. You can use recyclables to help them and they can help build the places.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said one strategy we did not talk about but has been key to this task force is understanding the landscape of our provider network. There are a lot of robust services and there may be opportunities to strengthen it. What is happening right now is not working for all of the people experiencing homelessness. We tasked Treacy and his organization with cataloging these agencies and providing us with a presentation. This will flow into our conversation in July where we will prepare for our providers to be with us in August where we can have questions and make sure we are on the same page for how we would like to collaborate with our providers on developing solutions. Please read the three articles in your packet.



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5. Social Service Network Catalogue Presentation - Mr. Treacy Dobbins, Inspire Real Change

Mr. Treacy Dobbins, Inspire Real Change said we entered into a partnership with the city to do a social services advancement project. We realized that there were so many resources and organizations in Richland County. We needed to understand who is out there, who's doing what, and how they are operating. Our goal was to build a functional catalog. It is 41-pages that contain information on each program to include eligibility and contact information for 102 programs and services. We included the Inclement Weather Center under shelter services. The transitional housing programs are broken down by the demographic they serve. We have nine veteran services that are directly related to somebody who is unsheltered or at-risk. There are 33 organizations that serve food and they are linked to a map. This is the first part of our project. The 102 programs are strictly within Richland County, not Lexington County. Our continued work is to evaluate and assess the current social services delivery system within Richland County. We will be looking at how services are delivered from a big picture perspective and from a service level perspective through case studies. We will evaluate the challenges, the gaps in services, and the need. The latter part is to provide the task force with recommendations on the potential restructure or consolidation of services that would improve delivery to these individuals and bring efficiencies to the system.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said the catalog is available in the task force members' packets. We plan on releasing this to the public and sharing it with those who helped in gathering this information including our providers. There are 102 services in Richland County, yet we are still seeing these challenges. This continues to reinforce that we have the puzzle pieces but it is not put together in a way that is working. We have a compassionate city but we are facing a lot of changes and we need to revisit how we are providing some of this support.

Mr. George Whitehead said there is a lot of transitional housing out there. Is anyone evaluating if a place should come off the list or if we shouldn't be referring people to these places? Are you looking at quality assurance?

Mr. Treacy Dobbins said there is no real quality control within the system. People start sober living homes under an organizational name and they are chartered to perform services but there is no real quality control piece to validate who is doing what.

Mr. George Whitehead said my concern is that we will refer people to places that are not going to make them successful and no one has gone to these places to vet them.



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Councilor Aditi Bussells said for the one million we are investing directly towards professional services, I am in full support of accountability metrics and outcomes that need to be monitored over time and treating these contracts as grants where we are able to see what will be accomplished in the short-term and the long-term. That has not happened. That is a question I'd like to table for the providers. What accountability mechanisms do you have with each other? Where is the quality control? How do you work with each other to identify some of that? I am aware that a lot of federal opportunities are coming down the pipeline through HUD to address homelessness. We want to make sure that we are receiving those funds and they are making a difference in our communities. There are certain touch points where evaluation has to happen as part of those grants. It will be helpful to hear what those look like.

6. Task Force Discussion

Public Input from Ms. Diane Wiley, Belvedere Community resident said we shouldn't have homeless in America. People want a roof over their heads. Give them a chance. I am homeless from the flood and if it wasn't for my mother I wouldn't have a place to stay. Give them shelter, pride and a job. If they have a mental problem, have a place where they can go. There are a lot of people sleeping in Finlay Park. The tiny homes are a great idea. You need shelter for 24 hours. It is hot and it will get cold. They need a place to lay their head and go to the bathroom.

Ms. Doreen Skelton presented solutions to help anyone that is experiencing homelessness. My intent is to provide houses for the homeless to be able to go to every night. Some people are hard to get off the streets. The benefit is having resources onsite like social workers and employment. The first phase would be to get the people off the street. The tiny homes do not have bathrooms. All of the facilities are on community property. They have weekly meetings to discuss issues. There is a fence around the perimeter. They can't go out or come in without going pass a guard. We can use recyclables. Builders donate their time and materials. This is my solution for getting people off the streets. I give people food and I talk to them. The solution is to give them the resources and a place to sleep.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said there are great examples of tiny homes across the country and we will put that down as a potential solution. The committee will receive a link to the video.



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Ms. Missy Caughman said Chief Holbrook addressed what Ms. Farrell was saying about the 2013 study. A couple outcomes from that study were worked on such as the meal sharing through United Way's coordination. There's a food share committee. We will talk more about that during the August meeting with the providers. We did the solicitation and now we have an inclement weather center. Other things were mentioned and will be discussed in future meetings. We will also talk about who will be invited to the August meeting.

Councilor Aditi Bussells said we will talk about the structure of that meeting. I want it to be an opportunity for all of you to get as many questions answered with the providers as possible. Before that meeting, send your questions over. I want to have some of those hard conversations. We will dedicate our July meeting to thinking about some of those metrics; following up on conversations we've had; and responding to the examples we have seen in other cities. This was an incredible conversation and I appreciate everyone being open-minded about a difficult topic.

7. Closing Remarks - The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr.

Councilor Edward McDowell said what a good day to have this conversation and resolutional things that we can institute and initiate as our city continues to grow and expand. Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to be a part of this dialogue. I want to thank Councilwoman Bussells for her leadership. Councilman Will Brennan could not be here today, but I am sure he senses that this conversation was needed within the confines of this community. We look forward to seeing you in July and August. It is going to be an interesting time.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 5:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Erika D. Moore Hammond, CMC
City Clerk