

## Meeting of New Jersey Human Relations Council

September 21, 2022

The online meeting of the New Jersey Human Relations Council was held on September 21, 2022 using Zoomgov software.

**Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance:** The meeting was called to order by Ashton Burrell at 10:02.

**HRC Officers in Attendance:** Ashton Burrell, Chair, Yumiko Mishima, Vice Chair; Karen Positan, Treasurer.

**Those in attendance were as follows (alphabetical order):** NJMVP Admin; **EI-Rhonda Williams Alston**, Director, Equal Employment Division /Ethics Unit, NJ Dept. of Corrections; **Mudassir Ansari**, IAMC National Addl. General Sect.; **Ayaz, Aslam**, American Muslims for Democracy; **Azra Baig**, American Muslims for Democracy; **Lisa Burke**, New Jersey Administrative Office of the Courts, Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement Program Coordinator; **Terry Cannon**, Bergen County Human Relations Commission; **Mohammad Ali Chaudy**, AMD and President of the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge, Member of the NJ Attorney General's Muslim Outreach Committee; **E. Closek**, NJDCJ; **Kai Durant**; **Kimberly Homes**, Chief of Staff at DCA; **Tonya Hopson**, Chief Judiciary EEO Officer; **Minhaj M. Khan**; **Jenni Lamon**, Assistant Director of Government Relations, NJ Principals and Supervisors Association; **Steve Landfield**, Former member of the Council and former member and chair of the Advisory Board; **David Leonardis**, Division of Criminal Justice; **Tisha Leonardo-Santiago**, Interim Director of Outreach and Community Relations; **Selaedon Maksut**, Exec Dir, CAIR-NJ; **Ajit Sahi**, Advocacy Director with Indian American Muslim Council. **Jaweed Syed**, Advocacy Director with Indian American Muslim Council; **Zainab Syed**; **Zainab Tabassum**, Communications Officer, Office of Faith Based Initiatives; **Peter C. Thambidurai**, Department of Corrections; **John Wenz**, Advisory Board; **Vinnie**, Department of State; **Don Beetham**, Minutes.

The chair read from the New Jersey open public meetings act. The upcoming meetings at 10:00 am on zoom are scheduled as follows:

Wednesday, November 16th 2022

The annual conference will be Wednesday, December 7th 2022.

### Minutes from June 2022 Meeting were Read and Approved

**Chairs report:** Ashton Burrell gave a "shout out" to Tisha Leonardo-Santiago for her phenomenal work on keeping projects and events moving ahead.

**Old Business – 2022 HRC Conference - Report of the Subcommittee: Tisha Leonardo-Santiago.** The conference will be held on December 7, 2022 10 am to 12:15. The program is "Decriminalization to Legalization: What does it mean for Cannabis and Marijuana in New Jersey?" The first part will be focused on resources and information about expungement; part two will deal with systemic impact. The objectives are: Overview of the Marijuana Decriminalization; Cannabis Legalization impact on criminal records, employment, and housing. Understanding on how to pursue expungements related to marijuana possession charges;

understanding how Marijuana Decriminalization impacts employers and housing; overview of the Fair Chance in Housing Act; high-level overview of systemic impact: There is a list of proposed speakers. Forward anything that want covered in the toolkit or additional topics to be covered. If there is agreement with the list of proposed speakers, the subcommittee will start to reach out to them.

**New Business – HRC Leadership Elections November 16, 2022.** Soliciting nominations by October 19. Ashton asked everyone think about serving.

### **Speaker: Understanding the Significance: Edison's India Independence Day Parade Incident**

Azra Baig, Minhaj M. Khan, Agist Sahi, Selaeden Maksut, and Jaweed Syed, representing American Muslims for Democracy, Indian-American Council, American Muslims for Democracy, The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), as well as community leaders spoke the incident at the Edison India Day Parade on August 14, 2022 and why it is concerning. Azra had met with Ashton and John Wenz right after the incident.

The parade is an annual event on August 14<sup>th</sup> celebrating India's independence. Included in the 2022 parade was a bulldozer with symbols of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and an image banner of Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, known for his use of the bulldozer. The bulldozer has become a symbol for the BJP. The float was called "Daddy's Bulldozer".

Azra Baig introduced the topic and moderated the discussion. This is not a Muslim issue but one for all minorities in India including Christians and untouchables. It is about Hindu ideology. Hindutva is a threat to New Jersey and the US.

Minhaj M. Khan gave some background of the incident. During the parade, a slogan could be heard: 'Jai Shri Ram'. This has become a war cry meaning something is going to happen. In India, a number of mosques, churches and at least one house of an activist have been bulldozed with little or no warning. The inclusion of the bulldozer float was meant to intimidate.

Peter Thambidurai spoke up in support noting that the bulldozing goes back to 1991 when a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque was raised in Ayodhi. The bulldozer float is a dog whistle.

Agist Sahi, The Indian Business Organization issued an apology in a written statement to the mayor of Edison. They acknowledged "the parade should never be about politics" and "should never include blatant divisive symbols". We hereby make the commitment we will not allow these symbols in the future. The parade "reflected poorly on our organization and offended the Indian American minority groups, especially Muslims, from the local area and across the state and country." This apology is self-incriminating. Amnesty International spoke out about bulldozer justice; it is an unlawful exercise in collective punishment. Hindutva has been globally denounced. It is a vendetta based in Islamophobia. Question for NJ. Was this an honest mistake? Sambit Patra, a spokesman for the BNP, was flown in from India precisely to be the grand marshal. He has spent two decades of history spewing venom against Muslims and Christians in the media. Leaders of another organization were in photos: the Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP). The OFBJP is a twenty-year old US organization that has just registered as a foreign agent, meaning they get funding from a foreign source. In short, this incident was a deliberate attempt to sow division. This ideology is the next big headache for NJ and a threat to

Democracy. It will spread to the rest of the country. It is documented that the ideology inspired by Nazis and Italian Fascists. Last weekend there was violence in the United Kingdom.

Selaeden Maksut. The Bulldozer is the tip of the iceberg. There is discrimination against Muslims in local politics. There is employment discrimination in the IT Industry in NJ and California. There is bullying in the schools. Hindutva speakers are being introduced and welcomed at churches and schools. Recently, in a Richfield church a well-known anti-Muslim spreader was identified and then dropped. New Jersey will be a flash pint for this issue. Keep your eyes open and stay educated about the issue.

Mohammad Ali Chaudry – The Muslim community is willing to provide resources at the State and local level. It is willing to come speak to groups. The Council has a role to speak up against bullying. Education and training are offered. Chaudy speaks to cadets of State Police Academy. The State legislators signed a pledge. There is more than the Incident in Edison Woodbridge. Stuff is going on across the State.

Jaweed Syed. Has been an Edison resident for 22 years. BJP began ruling India in 2014. Change began to happen in NJ. There is rising hate and bigotry in our towns. The parade used to invite well-known personalities like Bollywood stars. This marshal was full of hate. At Council meetings, people who tried to condemn the event were attacked. The BJP supporters asked why Pakistani people were coming and talking. These are American citizens. When we see something bad happen in our towns, we have the right to speak up. The BJP is trying to create divisions.

Ashton thanked the group for sharing their experiences. There was agreement that there is room to work together. Ashton Invited the speakers and others to attend Council meetings.

Lisa asked a structural question. Is the parade entirely funded privately? The Edison mayor had been asked to address this. Businesses fund the IBA. \$150,000 to \$200,000 was raised for the parade.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:04 a.m.