

Rally held to support Topeka HRC

BY [TIM HRENCHIR](#)
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Topeka Human Relations Commission chairman Bill Beachy, at the lectern, spoke Saturday to participants in a rally held in support of the city's HRC and human relations department. The event took place on the lawn across the street from the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, 1515 S.E. Monroe.

Against the backdrop of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, speakers encouraged participants in a rally Saturday to mobilize their relatives and friends in support of the city's endangered human relations department.

"We may be preaching to the choir, but it's up to you to go out and get additional choir members," said Glenda Overstreet, vice president of the Kansas NAACP.

Overstreet was among 12 people who spoke at a nearly two-hour rally held in support of the city's human relations commission and department.

Bill Beachy, chairman of the Topeka HRC, said 189 people attended the event held on the lawn just east of the Brown v. Board site, 1515 S.E. Monroe.

Sixteen groups sponsored the rally, which was held in response to city manager Norton Bonaparte's announcement May 17 that as a cost-cutting measure, he would ask the city council to abolish the human relations department and terminate the jobs of its three employees.

Bonaparte proposes the city still maintain its nine-person, volunteer HRC, which would continue to offer such services as public forums, education and outreach opportunities. A date hasn't been set for the council to consider Bonaparte's proposal.

Ensuring fair and equal rights for all Topekans in the areas of housing, employment and public accommodation is the mission of the HRC and human relations department, the latter of which employs a director, an office assistant and a civil rights investigator. Bonaparte suggests the city close the department and direct residents with

discrimination concerns to the Kansas Human Rights Commission.

But Beachy told Saturday's audience that for Topekans, asking the state HRC to resolve their problems regarding discrimination would be like calling the Kansas Highway Patrol to deal with a prowler in their backyard.

"You want a cop on your beat who knows your block," he said.

Other speakers said the state HRC has a considerable backlog of cases and saw its staffing reduced this year by two investigators.

Lorene Williams, vice chairwoman of Topeka's HRC, urged the audience to fight any effort to diminish city human relations functions. Topeka's HRC has been in existence since 1961, she said.

"In the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter," Williams said. "These are the things that matter."

Troy Scroggins, a member of the executive committee for the Topeka NAACP and a former member of the Topeka HRC, stressed that Topeka has been an inspiration to other communities as a key player in the fight for human rights.

Scroggins also said Topeka's HRC and human relations department still have much to do.

"Topeka is not a utopia as far as human relations is concerned," he said. "But it's a lot better place than it would have been if not for the efforts of the human relations commission."

The only speaker at the rally who didn't speak out against Bonaparte's proposal was Karen Hiller, the one city council member on hand. Hiller told those present that she "came to listen" and hadn't expected to be called to the podium.

Hiller, who is retired executive director of Housing & Credit Counseling Inc., said she provided fair housing counseling her entire career and considers it essential for the city to continue to offer a "human relations element."

Hiller stressed that council members have yet to see the specific proposal Bonaparte will ask them to approve, adding that she still has a lot of questions.

Organizers of the rally handed out fliers containing the phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the nine council members. John Nave, a former councilman, urged those on hand to "bombard" the council with messages in support of the human relations department.

Nave described the proposed closing of that department as being "flat-out wrong."

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