

Minutes Tempe Veterans Commission July 10, 2024

Minutes of the TEMPE VETERANS COMMISSION held on Wednesday, July 10, 2024, at 6:00 PM. – 7:30 PM.,
via Microsoft Teams and Tempe Public

(MEMBERS) Present:

Juan Garcia
Romaldo Gonzales
Beno Thomas, Chair
William “Dennis” Gorman
Melanie James, Secretary
Jose Moreno
Jim Lange, Vice-chair
Aaron McBride
Gwendolyn “Gwen” DeNeal

(MEMBERS) Absent:

Phillip Kraft
Ryan Swearingen

City Staff Present:

Octavia Harris, Deputy CHHS Director
Susie Steckner, Public Info Officer

Public Appearances

There were no public appearances.

Guest Appearances

There were no guest appearances.

Agenda Item 1 – Call to Order (1 minute)

MOTION: Commissioner DeNeal motioned to START the meeting

SECOND: The motion was seconded by Commissioner Garcia, and the motion passed unanimously.

Agenda Item 2 – Attendance (1 minute)

Commissioners Kraft and Swearingen were absent

Agenda Item 3 – Public Appearances (5 minutes)

There were no public appearances.

Agenda Item 4 – Chair’s Remarks (5 minutes)

The Chair kept his remarks brief. Chair Thomas highlighted his excitement for updates on the latter agenda items. He also expressed concern about the excessive heat currently affecting the valley. He gave a friendly reminder to stay cool and be cautious when venturing outside, not just for oneself but for others as well.

Agenda Item 5 – Review of June meeting minutes (5 minutes)

MOTION: Commissioner James moved to APPROVE the June 12, 2024 minutes

SECOND: Motion Seconded by Commissioner McBride

AYES: the motion passed unanimously

Agenda Item 6 – Agent Orange Awareness Event UPDATE (30 minutes)

The Chair opened the conversation by praising the developments since the last official meeting. He acknowledged Deputy Director Harris’s extensive collaboration with the subcommittee and other officials. Deputy Director Harris highlighted two

principal proposals that are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, one way the City could recognize Agent Orange Awareness Day is by illuminating a significant facility with orange lights, with City Hall being the first suggested location. Secondly, the City could raise awareness for Agent Orange Awareness Day by officially commemorating it, albeit retroactively, on August 26.

Also in the meeting, Susie Steckner, the Community Health and Human Services' POI, mentioned that the City has multiple avenues for publicizing the efforts of the commission and Agent Orange Awareness Day. If agreed upon, Susie's office could run successive announcements before, on, and after the day of recognition.

Commissioners Gorman, Garcia, DeNeal, and Gonzales all expressed their approval of the current developments and proposals. The Chair also voiced approval of the current proposal but highlighted a quick caveat about the potential overreliance on self-interested officials.

Finally, wrapping up the conversation, the commissioners, with Harris and Steckner's input, discussed the lightning timeline. If it is possible to extend it to the whole month of August, it would be greatly appreciated. If it must be set to a shorter schedule, a week prior and after the Day would be the optimal choice.

MOTION: Commissioner DeNeal moved to APPROVE the proposal at hand to the City Council

SECOND: Motion Seconded by Commissioner Moreno

AYES: the motion passed unanimously

MOTION: Commissioner Gorman moved to REQUEST that City Hall be lit in Orange for one month to commemorate Agent Orange Awareness Day

SECOND: Motion Seconded by Vice Chair Lange

AYES: the motion passed unanimously

Agenda Item 7 – Toxic Substances Exposure Town Hall Event UPDATE (20 min)

-Commissioner Gorman initiated the conversation, noting that he has reached out to some leaders of the Vietnam Veterans of America for participation in the town hall; however, no response has been received yet. He anticipates personal contact in August during a VVA conference. Additionally, Commissioner Gorman mentioned that he has requested participation from leaders involved in the Fort McClellan Toxic Exposure Awareness Campaign. Finally, experts on PTSD and substance abuse, along with PACT Act specialists, have been requested. These efforts are ongoing.

-The Chair commended Commissioner Gorman's efforts and extended his support in recruiting speakers for the town hall.

-Commissioner DeNeal suggested the name of former ADVS Director Wanda Wright, which received praise from others.

-Moreover, Susie Steckner highlighted that several councilpersons have direct connections to the veterans community. The commission received the idea of a local elected official briefly addressing the town hall well.

-When asked if any commissioner should speak at the town hall, the commissioners swiftly and unanimously chose Commissioner Gorman as the ideal candidate. He humbly accepted the responsibility.

Finally, the commission discussed certain logistical aspects of the event, which will include educational materials, light snacks, and coffee.

Agenda Item 8 – Maricopa County Tabulation (5 minutes)

Commissioners were unable to attend this event.

Agenda Item 9 – Commissioner Updates (10 minutes)

Commissioner Gorman highlighted a current bill in the U.S. Congress, H.R.8140 - Supporting Every at-Risk Veteran In Critical Emergencies Act of 2024. This bill seeks to assist veterans through various means. Local representative Greg Stanton is a cosponsor.

On July 20, Commissioner Gonzales will be hosting a back-to-school event. His organization will be distributing materials to students.

Agenda Item 10 – Pledge of Allegiance Conversation (10 minutes)

Vice Chair Lange and Commissioner Gorman both voiced their support, highlighting the essential and symbolic need for reaffirmation. However, Chair Thomas, while reiterating his commitment and respect for his fellow commissioners, voiced his concern over the content of the allegiance. He believed that such material could be interpreted in various ways by a diverse group of veterans and civilians. Citing specific passages in the allegiance as exclusionary, Chair Thomas believed it was best not to proceed.

Commissioner Garcia respectfully challenged some elements of Chair Thomas's remarks. Citing his beliefs and the ideas central to the founding cultural principles of the USA, Garcia argued that the Pledge of Allegiance is important both to the commission and to the country. However, he acknowledged that the significance of the content surrounding this conversation was too substantial to be addressed in the limited time available to the commission. For this reason, he suggested that the discussion be tabled for the time being.

Other commissioners also acknowledged the weight of the content, opting that it would best this topic to table this discussion.

MOTION: Commissioner Garcia moved to TABLE this discussion

SECOND: Motion Seconded by Commissioner Gorman

AYES: the motion passed unanimously

Agenda Item 11 – Contact Roster Creation Conversation (10 minutes)

Agenda Item 12 – Future Agenda Items (5 minutes)

Pledge of Allegiance Conversation

Agenda Item 13 – Adjournment (1 minute)

MOTION: Commissioner Garcia to MOTION Adjourn the meeting

SECOND: Motion Seconded by Commission Gonzales

AYES: Motion passed unanimously.

The next meeting will be on August 14, 2024.

Minutes Prepared by: Jorge BenaventeS

Reviewed by: Octavia Harris

Beno Thomas, Chair
Tempe Veteran Commission