

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Homeland Security Commission

Muriel Bowser
Mayor



Dr. Christopher Rodriguez
Director

HOMELAND SECURITY COMMISSION
QUARTERLY MEETING

Friday, March 5, 2021
4:00 pm to 5:00 pm
Virtual Webex Meeting

Commission Member Attendees: Brad Belzak (Chair), Phil McNamara, Joanna Turner, and Ed Pearson, Brian Baker

HSEMA Attendee(s): Nicole Peckumn, Emile Smith, Rebekah Mena, Jason Rubinstein

Note: No members of the public were present

Brad: Welcome to 2021. This is the first meeting of the year. We are excited to have everyone back – operating virtually in our day jobs and in this role. I look forward to getting back together in person, when appropriate. This is going to be an open meeting. Today is March 5, 2021 – the first meeting for the year. We’ve had an incredibly difficult 2020, and in our world, we’re limited to things we can do. We’re not full time DC employees but we do play a valuable role, thanks to DC Council and support from HSEMA, which has been outstanding, and it enables us to fulfill these roles. We have more prospective Commissioners in the process of being interviewed by MOTA – I’ve talked offline with Nicole and Jason. I’d ask if there’s any update on that?

Nicole: I’ll defer to Emile and Jason

Emile: We conducted interviews and had meetings with MOTA. We are awaiting next steps in the process.

Brad: We understand, and we are excited to welcome them onboard. A full Commission will allow us to be more effective.

Brad: The events of COVID and January 6, has made this year especially challenging. HSEMA and the administration has done a great job in responding. There’s no playbook for this. We’ve all done exercises in our careers, but it’s been a difficult and unprecedented year. We’re not finished with this yet. The mayor extending a public health emergency and so I think this was a smart move. On behalf of commissioners, I’ve seen the public messaging and the actions taken. Commissioner Baker used to serve with HSEMA, so I know he’s in contact with folks behind the scenes. We’re here for you and I’ll leave it there. I know it’s not ending, and January 6 was a devastating threat and domestic terrorism is something we may want to look at, moving forward.

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This commission stands behind the city – we’ll continue to be here to help out in any capacity we can.

Chairman Brad Belzak provides agenda for meeting:

We will first talk about the mass care report, discuss ideas for the next report, and then I would like to discuss a brainstorming session and invite main stakeholders (Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, HSEMA Director, City Council staffer Kate Mitchell).

Regarding the mass care report, this was challenging. I was optimistic that we’d accomplish it, but it took a bit longer than I thought. For us to be able to interview 10, 11 people, the report came out very strong. It wasn’t controversial, it just shared what’s going on across the country. Hats off to this commission for doing all the work and big thank you to HSEMA’s staff - Jason, Emile, Nicole, and Dion for all their work in supporting the backend of this report. Any other thoughts on the report?

Phil McNamara: I think we should give ourselves a pat on the back. We got together last February and talked about being aggressive to get the report done by Labor Day. We found ourselves in COVID and in an environment where we couldn’t have a meeting for a few months; getting back together virtually in May. Doing a deep dive and soliciting response from other emergency managers across the country and wrapping up the report by October. I’m excited that it got out and to the folks that pushed it over the finish line, thank you so much. The takeaway for me personally was that this is value in completing a report that is tight and succinct. Our cyber report was chockfull of great recommendations to act upon, but it was also a dense report. Whereas, with this report on mass care, it was much tighter and more succinct. The takeaway is if we can be more expeditious by doing a tighter process, I would like to see us implement that. Brad, you said, this report was noncontroversial. In part, I think it’s because we didn’t dive into what DC Government itself was doing. I don’t want us to avoid that in the future. We’re going to have to submit – whatever the next topic is – we should have those meetings with those DC agencies and ask those tough questions, where it could become more controversial. Congrats to us for getting it done – Jason and the entire HSEMA team. We owe you a huge debt of gratitude.

Brad: Well said, Phil. Through your experience in and out of government, you know how difficult it is to cross the finish line. I mentioned ‘controversial’ because it’s a departure from what we normally do. We did not want to pull people away from their day jobs responding to COVID. I think the report was a good length and covered best practices – here’s what the country is doing: innovation, partnership, and training. I hope on behalf of commission, that the city will look at these recommendations and find them helpful. Some of these they may already be doing. In any event, I think the next report – to Phil’s point – I would love for us to consider revisiting DC and want to have us consider those hard questions. I’m glad we gave DC a break. Brian, Joanna, Ed, any thoughts on the old report?

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Brian: Brad, thanks for your leadership and HSEMA for all the support. Nicole – this is an example of a commission that really does work. There’s a lot of boards and commissions out there. We set out to do a report in a year that was very untraditional – and we did it during a time where for a bit we couldn’t meet. I hope this will help further the District’s preparedness for the next event. I feel fortunate to have been a part of it.

Ed: Thanks for your leadership, Brad. We pulled together and did what the commission stands for. We could have given up and said the pandemic is making us push pause, and it would have been a fair statement. We led by example – we displayed resiliency and got the report out on time. Thanks to all commissioners for their work.

Joanna: I cannot believe we got it done. Good for us! Congrats to the whole team and to our staff who worked hard in getting speakers to come and coordinate with all of us, which must feel like herding cats. Thank you Brad for your work in driving the effort and making sure we stay on target and on time. I know it isn’t easy. I’m grateful this report is good and timely. In COVID, we got so many interviews together and produced a report that is useful.

Brad: I’ll echo what Phil said. Disasters are compounding and they build. To get through them from a resiliency standpoint, you compartmentalize and work through them. We are sworn in by city council – we have laws, a report to produce yearly, and a responsibility to keep functioning. Thanks to HSEMA and MOTA for granting us the ability to come back. We were one of the commissions and boards that reopened and worked virtually – thanks to Jason and the team for making that happen. I know it was an important matter to navigate and I pushed hard on behalf of the commission. You guys allowed us to continue.

Jason: Thanks, Brad. You were very patient with us as we worked with MOTA.

Brad: Before we move on, I want to congratulate Phil on his new role at Department of Transportation. He has a great career in the government, and we are proud of the work you are doing. It’s tough to get a senior role in any administration, and the work you did at DHS, the work you do here, and the work you’re going to do for President Biden and Vice President Harris is most impressive. Congrats!

Next report topics and Brainstorming Session

Brad: I want to hear all of your thoughts and have a brainstorming session on next topics. We want a listening session with our stakeholders in the next month and push hard on the next report. Then, I want us to try to make as many meetings as possible, which we do, so I’m not worried. I will continue to drive us, get us these meetings, get everyone to attend, and I hope Phil, in your new role, you can be a part of it!

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Phil: Yes, DOT ethics lawyers have given me the green light to participate. I signed my recusal form yesterday but indicated we've yet to talk about DOT business in this forum. If we do, I'll recuse myself.

Brad: We have 15 minutes remaining. I want to just real quick think about how we want to proceed with our next report. I'm going to talk last but want to say we have a few ways to approach this - based on previous listening sessions, we've heard resiliency as a key issue, over and over and over. Mass care is how we focused the last report, but resiliency is a large topic. Being able to return to normal or semi-normal status after an event is important. Here are some potential focus topics: hitting the waterfront - it's changed from baron to high growth. Visits from people; manmade natural disasters rising - general flooding; manmade attacks. We could hit that from several angles. We also have domestic terrorism issues that we'll face, objectively. We've always faced these issues in the capital, but we are at a heightened sense now. As well as international foreign state actors. We'll continue to see a rise in cyber threats. Then, we have the effects of those events to underserved populations to lower levels of the tax bracket or underserved populations that we care deeply for, and our last report focused on this a lot. How do we deal with multiple disasters, generally, but also look at populations with a high number of disabled individuals? These are high level issues - the key is which one can we do effectively through interviews?

Phil: Brad, I agree entirely that in the next month we should do a listening session with stakeholders. Let's bring in Mr. Geldart, Director Rodriguez, Councilmember Allen or his team and hear from them about what essentially is keeping them up at night. They're all dealing with front burner issues. Are there any thorny issues that they've put on backburner that we can help take off their plate and help think through? Maybe that's the way to approach it. All issues you mentioned, Brad, are matters we could dig into. We got to mass care because Kevin Donahue flagged it. For our reports, what's our goal? It's to give policy makers and the mayor's office a report that is actionable that they want to do something about. I'll be honest, I'd love to see us do that listening session and take cues from them. I'm one voice of five, though.

Brad: My vote is that as well, Phil. The return to work for COVID - what does the workforce look like? We could play a role in that, do interviews, gap analysis, look at how the city is responding, etc.

Joanna: I agree with Phil. We took advantage of an opportunity last year to hear from HSEMA on what would be most useful in their view for us to use our time. I think this is a good model for us to follow. Personally, I'm interested in the domestic terrorism issue. Without talking about frustrations from last month, the capital was breached in two hours. Without the District's police force, things would have been a whole lot worse. DC rescued the capitol building. Where's our thank you? Where's our funding from the federal government for that work. More so, what are they doing to make sure it doesn't happen again? If that topic is not helpful, I'm happy to work on other things.

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Phil: Joanna raises good points and I hear her hesitancy, and Brad, yours about making sure we try not to be partisan. I think there is a way to talk about domestic violence extremism in a way that is not partisan. We could look at it from a notion of how has DC implemented Suspicious Activity reporting – is the “if you see something, say something” campaign robust enough? Do we need a new campaign? We can talk about whether law enforcement, MPD, through the intel division, is getting enough intel about domestic violence extremism. We can do it in a way that steers away from politics. Joanna, I agree – MPD saved the day that day. No doubt. It took three hours for the National Guard to get up there. There are ways to talk about this.

Brad: If that’s the direction after listening session, then let’s do it.

Brian: Listening is the way to go. I’m more than two years removed from DC government now, which might be two lifetimes in what has happened since I’ve left. I’d be happy to hear from the HSMA Director, DMPSJ and DC Council. This should be the driver for where we can best focus our energy. I will say 2 things related to domestic terrorism and the January 6 incident - I think that if we do go down this road, just like we did in previous reports, we should make sure that it’s focused and that we can affect change. We should be careful not to impeded other investigations going on because I know that congress is looking into things that will likely be an Office of Inspector General (OIG) report. Clearly, there were some things that should have happened that didn’t. So, I don’t think we should shy away, but if it is the appropriate direction, we should focus on where we can be impactful and also not impede or be counterproductive to larger initiatives going on.

Ed: I’m in agreement with taking our direction from outcomes of the listening session with the leaders. Personally, I would venture towards something where we would produce a product that would be useful to the city right now. For me, something where we can come up with and assist them in any type of way for District residents to have confidence in getting the COVID shot would be impactful. It’s a challenge right now, and without stepping on toes from the city and what they’re doing, maybe the commission could do something that could augment and enhance what they’re doing. This needs to be a focus if we’re looking at something that needs to be done, right now. I don’t know how we would go about it, but that’s something I would like to see the commission consider and do – get the word to residents who are hesitant about getting the vaccine.

Brad: Thank you, Ed. Your insights from your prior role will also help with the efficacy of the report. The city is dealing with COVID, first amendment marches, violence stemming from that, and a new domestic terrorism threat.

Brad: Next week, I’ll work with HSEMA to schedule this meeting. It may take a few weeks. I’ll hound everyone as usual to get us scheduled. Whatever it is, the report needs to be relevant. We have to factor in that it may take a year to get the report done. The new report is actionable and

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short, so we'll proceed along that path. We'll schedule a listening brainstorming session I hope in the next month and would like to invite council, staff, and virtual participants. Any final thoughts before concluding? From a DC government standpoint, Brian and Ed will be key in navigating – in the era we're in now – for what would be the optimal report. Our cyber report was value added and I'm excited for this next report. We can provide an impact when the city doesn't have time to wade in on it but would benefit from it.

Brian: To the HSEMA team, please pass on thanks to Director Rodriguez for giving us the A-team. Love seeing such great participation from the agency.

Nicole: We appreciate your efforts! We will continue working with the chair on ways to be proactive in the work that the commission has done. Just takes a bit of time to get everyone on the same page.

Brad: Thank you to the interns that HSEMA allowed us to bring into the fray. They provided a lot of research. Going forward, we'd love to have that same support, if possible. It was a great learning experience and they really helped us. Please keep us in mind as the next team comes in. We'd love to integrate them on these meetings, this report, etc.

Nicole: I'm proud of the work that Rebekah did with the program. And proud of how Jason navigated a commission while dealing with COVID restrictions and not meeting in person.

Brad: Rebekah, thanks for joining. We follow your LinkedIn posts and you're doing a great job with the media and the internship program and we look forward to working with you, moving forward. I'll move to close this meeting since we are at the end. Have a great weekend.

No members of the public are present. Meeting adjourned.