

Subject

Presentation of the Human Rights Commission Annual Report

Department

Department of the City Manager - Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Mayor and Council receive the Annual Report of the Rockville Human Rights Commission, *and sets aside 15 minutes during the meeting for discussion with Commission Leadership.*

Discussion

The Rockville Human Rights Commission presents its annual report to the Mayor and Council¹. It covers the Commission's work since its last report in September 2025 and sets out its priorities for 2027. Two items in this report necessitate a decision from the Mayor and Council: the future of Rockville Pride, and the gap between what Article III of Chapter 11 of the City Code requires of the Commission and what the Commission is currently being permitted to do.

The HRC is intended to be an 11-member group of volunteers charged with minimizing the effects of conflict, protecting equal treatment, and promoting an appreciation of diversity within the City. To meet these goals, the HRC provides services and educational and cultural programs that promote global thinking, encourage civic awareness, and reflect the diversity found in the City. The HRC also advises the Mayor and Council on human rights issues that affect residents and community members.

Membership and meetings

The Mayor and Council appointed 5 new commissioners this year, so we now have 10 Commissioners, with one vacant seat. The Commission held 10 of its 12 monthly meetings, plus subcommittee, agenda-setting, and event-planning meetings. Vacancies again cost the Commission working time; in one instance a letter could not be transmitted because the Commission lacked the votes to adopt it, and in February 2026 a noticed special meeting was required to complete a vote that could not be finished at the regular meeting. In addition, a very important presentation scheduled to be given to the Commission by an invited speaker, had to be rescheduled.

¹ The Commission apologizes for the untimely submission of this report; with the turnover of half the Commission this year, we felt obligated to prioritize gathering consensus over timeliness.

Accessibility in the Mayor and Council Chambers

On September 24, 2025, the Commission adopted a recommendation from its Disability Justice Subcommittee, presented by Commissioner Jake Goodman and drafted by Co-Chair Rebecca Murphy, that the City install Auracast broadcast audio in the Mayor and Council Chambers and other City public spaces. Auracast is an open Bluetooth standard. A resident with a compatible hearing aid receives the room's audio directly, with no app to download, no loaner device to collect, and no accommodation request to file in advance. The recommendation was transmitted to the Mayor and Council on November 19, 2025.

In June 2026, the Commission received an update from the City on accessibility upgrades to the Chambers. The City has since installed Auracast in the Chambers: The June 29 update we received from the city described ListenWIFI streaming, two TimeKettle interpreter hubs, and a height-adjustable podium; no later email in the record confirms an Auracast installation. The Commission thanks the Mayor and Council for acting on this recommendation. We now ask for one addition: a placard outside the Chambers, using standard iconography for assistive listening devices, stating that assistive listening is available and how to request it, so that a resident with hearing loss can walk into a meeting and instantly take part, without scheduling ahead.

Rockville Pride 2026

Since 2017, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) has funded, organized, promoted, and operated Rockville Pride, the City's annual celebration of its LGBTQ+ community. The 2026 festival, held on Sunday, June 7, in Rockville Town Square, featured live music, ASL interpretation, face painting, decorations, and booths representing local businesses and nonprofit organizations.

As we understand it, Rockville Pride is the largest non-holiday weekend event co-sponsored by the City in terms of attendance. Given its size, visibility, and importance to the community, we believe the City's level of financial and logistical support should reflect the significance of this event.

Additionally, during a recent meeting with Deputy City Manager Barack Mattie and the HRC's liaison, Delores Scott, City representatives suggested that, beginning with Pride 2028, the City would consider providing \$15,000 in funding to help eliminate the need for the HRC to secure outside sponsorships and to insure all performers and auxiliary personnel are fairly compensated.

In light of these discussions, the Commission formally requests an annual allocation of \$15,000 to support Rockville Pride and its related activities, with appropriate adjustments for inflation in subsequent years. This funding would provide a more reliable

and sustainable financial foundation for the festival, reduce the burden of securing outside sponsorships, and help ensure that Rockville Pride continues to grow as a successful, inclusive, and valued City event. Sponsors would reserve spaces by donating directly to LGBTQ+ supportive charities and providing a receipt, instead of directly contributing to the city general fund.

The turnout was the strongest the event has ever had. Countless vendors, businesses, and nonprofits set up tables to conduct public outreach, while community volunteers worked shifts throughout the day. The turnout was the strongest the event has ever had. Over 40 vendors, businesses, and nonprofits added to the event and volunteers of all ages worked diligently throughout the day to make it a success. We were also very pleased and honored that many city, state, and federal elected officials attended and spoke at the event, including Councilmember Glass, and Representative Jamie Raskin.

The City's closeout memo of July 17, 2026 shows the following:

Revenue		Expenses	
Online portal payments	\$9,470	Allied (tables, tents, chairs)	\$3,488
Sponsorship checks	\$1,950	Scout Productions (sound)	\$2,900
JEDI grant	\$5,000	Party Magic (face painters)	\$1,240
2025 carryover funds	\$6,170	Hissign (ASL)	\$975
Total	\$22,590	Musicians	\$800
		Decorations	\$396
		Total	\$9,799
		Net	\$12,791

The City's direct contribution to the event was the \$5,000 JEDI grant. The remaining \$17,590 in revenue came from sponsors and vendors (\$11,420) and from the balance carried over from 2025 (\$6,170). Pride is now funded mostly by the community and run entirely by volunteers.

That model has two problems the Commission needs the Mayor and Council to resolve.

The money. The \$12,791 left after this year's event was raised from Rockville businesses and nonprofits on the HRC's representation that it would support Rockville Pride. The City carried \$6,170 forward from 2025, but the Commission has no written assurance that it will do the same with this year's balance. If Pride funds revert to the general fund at the close of a fiscal year, the Commission will have been disingenuous to sponsors, and it will have to be forthcoming about this the next time it asks them for money. The Commission requests one of two things: written confirmation that Pride funds will be held in a dedicated City account and carried forward year to year, or authorization to work with the City Attorney on a 501(c)(3) friends-of structure modeled on the Rockville Recreation and Parks Foundation, Inc., which since 2008 has held privately raised funds for City recreation programs and whose Board of Trustees is partly appointed by the Mayor and Council.

The people. Sponsor solicitation, performer selection and booking, the stage schedule, flyer and poster distribution, vendor coordination, and day-of operations for the 2026 festival were carried by two commissioners. Rockville Pride has become one of the City's signature events, and the City treats it as one, but it is staffed as if it were a Commission project. The current model depends on a few volunteers working at a pace that is not sustainable; our Pride event currently operates at the expense of Commissioner mental health. If Commissioner Zwi or Commissioner Russoli was hit by a bus the day before the event, Pride would not have happened, which is unacceptable.

Rockville Pride has become one of the City's signature events, and we appreciate that the City acknowledges this however, the current model depends on a few volunteers working at a pace that is not sustainable as Rockville Pride expands year after year. The HRC believes Pride should endure and thrive in upcoming years regardless of the abilities and availability of its commissioners. The HRC is thankful for the tireless dedication and countless hours of work **Commissioners Zwi and Russoli** put into Pride because without them, particularly on the event day, nothing would have happened.

The Commission was saddened to note that this was the first year that commissioners have received Hate Speech aimed directly at them via emails to their personal addresses in relation to Pride. While the Commission requested city email addresses to help provide a layer of protection (and to simplify MPIA compliance), the Commission was ultimately rebuffed. Refusing to provide city emails shows a troubling lack of commitment to volunteer safety given the minimal logistical and financial cost— especially given that several of our commissioners are part of demographic groups that have endured frightening increases in levels of targeted violence over the past few years. The Commission notes that volunteer emails are common practice in several other local communities (ex. Fairfax, VA), and are even required by law in some larger cities nationwide (ex. Houston, TX).

On July 1, 2026, the Commission's Executive Committee submitted to the Mayor and Council a proposal that Rockville Pride be designated an official City of Rockville Special Event. On July 10, the City Manager's Office confirmed that the Mayor and Council had received the proposal and that staff were reviewing it with the Department of Recreation and Parks. **As of the date of this report the Commission has not received a binding decision.** The Commission asks the Mayor and Council to act on the proposal before planning for Pride 2027 begins in January 2027.

Student Safety at Wootton High School

The 2025-26 Student Ambassadors brought the Commission their concerns regarding a lack of administrative engagement with students after a gun violence incident at Thomas S. Wootton High School. The Commission drafted a letter to the Mayor and Council, adopted it at a special meeting on February 23, 2026, and transmitted it through the City Manager's Office that day. The Mayor and Council responded favorably, as recorded in the Commission's March 18, 2026 minutes. Commission leadership met with the City on its public safety concerns on June 30, 2026, and on July 9 the City Manager provided a written response that included feedback from the Rockville City Police Department.

Student Ambassador Program

The Student Ambassador Program, in place since 2019, gives high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors who live in or attend school in Rockville a nine-month term working alongside the Commission. The 2025-26 cohort of 5 ambassadors shaped the Commission's year: the Wootton letter began with, and was shaped by, their concerns. Applications for the 2026-27 cohort were open on the City's website through September 25, 2026.

Disability Justice Subcommittee

The Disability Justice Subcommittee, chaired by Commissioner Goodman, resumed monthly meetings in May 2026 and now meets the first Thursday of each month. Its first product, the Auracast recommendation, is described above. Its agenda for 2027 has evolved into planning a series of discreet taskforces, the first of which, the Service Animal Task Force, is led by Commissioner Murphy. So far the task force has focused on access to training organizations, but intends to, in collaboration with CM Van Grack and 4 on the Floor Dog Training, develop educational materials about service animals.

Rockville MLK Day Celebration

The HRC led planning for the 54th Rockville MLK Day Celebration on Monday, January 19, 2026. The Commission notes that turnout was diminished from previous years. We suggest bringing back more varied programming, as well as more opportunities for community

engagement (i.e. performers from local schools, etc..) The volunteer fair we held 2 years ago was also a great example of other ways to honor Dr. King's legacy; the Commission recommends bringing back something similar. It is extremely important that if the HRC is co-sponsoring the event, that we are the primary drivers of programming decisions, while the city handles implementation. The Commission notes that there was one commissioner that resigned due to the diminished ability of the HRC to influence programming decisions in 2026.

Statutory Duties Under Chapter 11 the Commission is Blocked from Carrying Out

Article III of Chapter 11 of the City Code (Administration and Enforcement) does more than create the Commission. It assigns the Commission an enforcement role and specifies the support the City is to provide. Measured against that Article, the Commission is not doing a substantial amount of what the Code says it shall do. This is not, however, because of any lack of willingness on the part of the Commissioners. In fact, the HRC stands ready and willing to do the work that we joined the Commission in order to carry out.

- **Discrimination complaints (Sec. 11-41(3) and Secs. 11-55 through 11-62).** The Code directs the Commission to receive complaints of housing and public accommodations discrimination on a form the Commission provides, to offer mediation through the Community Mediation Program, to have each complaint investigated (the City Manager "shall arrange for the prompt investigation of each complaint," Sec. 11-57), to assign a commissioner to conciliate, and, where conciliation fails, to hear the case before a three-commissioner tribunal with power to issue subpoenas, cease-and-desist orders, damages, and civil penalties of up to \$500. The Commission has no complaint form in circulation, no intake procedure, and no standing arrangement with the City for investigation. We also have no mechanisms with which to securely manage a docket, store evidence, and store testimony.
- **Employment complaints (Sec. 11-41(2)).** The Code assigns these to mediation under the Community Mediation Program.
- **Complaints against law enforcement officers (Sec. 11-42).** The Code authorizes the Commission to hold informal hearings on resident complaints alleging harassment, excessive force, demeaning language, or discrimination by a law enforcement officer operating in the City, and to report its findings to the City Manager. The Commission has no procedure for receiving such complaints. The Commission acknowledges that this *particular* subsection has been pre-empted by state law and should be considered dead letter law.
- **Meetings (Sec. 11-39(a)).** The Code requires not fewer than ten meetings per year. The Commission held eight in 2024 because vacancies led to failures to reach quorum, and 10 in the period covered by this report.
- **Membership and leadership (Secs. 11-37 and 11-38).** The Code provides for eleven members, with vacancies "filled in a like manner for the remainder of the unexpired term," and a Chairperson appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Council.

- **Staff and funding (Secs. 11-2 and 11-40).** The Code defines an Executive Director, appointed by the City Manager, "to supervise the staff of and advise and assist" the Commission, and provides that the Commission "shall be funded in the annual budget and appropriation ordinance," with the City Manager taking the Commission's recommendations into account when proposing that budget. The Commission is supported by a single staff liaison who carries the assignment alongside other City duties. Its only City funding in the period covered by this report was the \$5,000 JEDI grant for Pride. In order to carry out the HRC functions as contemplated with the utmost rigor, we request to work with the city to research and fund an appropriate training regime for commissioners wishing to sit on Tribunals (likely through Montgomery College to fulfill Maryland State Social Work requirements)

The Commission implores the Mayor and Council to choose one of two paths: resource the Commission to carry out Article III as written, or amend Article III with the Commission at the table, while ensuring that any responsibilities removed from the Commission's authority, are reassigned elsewhere so that they do not fall by the wayside. What the Commission cannot accept is the current position, in which the Code assigns the body duties it has no means to perform, nor can we accept the chapter being revised without our input and expertise. The Commission notes that the current score Rockville receives from the Municipal Equality Index is predicated on a functional Human Rights Commission— moving further down the path of restricting the HRC's contemplated adjudicatory authority will be interpreted as removing that function, and will have immediate negative consequences for the city's Municipal Equality Index score.

Efforts to Modernize Chapter 11 of the City Code

The gap described above is why the Commission has spent nearly four years trying to update its enabling legislation. Since November 2022, the Commission has worked to bring the chapter up to date: to define hate crimes and hate-bias incidents, to revive the Commission's mediation and complaint functions, and to consider the Human Rights City framework that the Mayor and Council heard about in earlier reports.

The Commission has followed the pathway staff set out in September 2024: input to the Mayor and Council through the City Manager, and drafting with the City Attorney through the staff liaison. Nearly four years after the effort began, there is no active drafting process, no scheduled legal review, and no worksession on the calendar. Three staff liaison transitions over that period played a substantial role in resetting the work each time.

In September 2025, in response to a question about the Commission's investigative and mediation authority, the Commission learned that Chapter 11, including Section 11-41(3) (Powers and Duties), the Community Mediation Program, and Section 11-57 (Investigations of

Complaints), was under review for modification. Those are the same enforcement provisions listed above. The Commission had not been consulted on that review and has not been briefed on who initiated it, what prompted it, or what it is meant to produce. On February 18, 2026, the Deputy City Manager confirmed at the Commission's monthly meeting that Chapter 11 is under review and that no timeline for Council discussion has been set.

On June 27, 2026, the co-chairs submitted a Reform Memorandum through the City Manager requesting three things: a worksession with the Mayor and Council, a written status of any staff-led rewrite, and direct engagement with the City Attorney. **The 2021 Policies and Procedures for Citizen Boards, Commissions, Committees and Task Forces provides that a board may request a worksession with the Mayor and Council on matters of mutual concern. The Commission makes that request here and asks that it be scheduled before the end of 2026.**

Liaison Work and Community Engagement

Commissioners attended the City's budget hearing in spring 2026 to speak to funding priorities, and the Commission has been asked to take part in the JEDI Strategic Plan through listening sessions and surveys.

Priorities for 2027

1. A decision from the Mayor and Council on designating Rockville Pride an official City Special Event, and a written resolution of how Pride funds are to be held from year to year.
2. A worksession in the first Quarter of 2027, with the Mayor and Council on Chapter 11, beginning with the Article III enforcement duties the Commission is not currently being permitted to carry out, and a seat for the Commission in any rewrite of its own enabling legislation. This should lay out a path to the revitalization of the Human Rights Commission, reestablishing its original role under Chapter 11, while also laying plans for training commissioners in proper mediation that will hold up to Judicial oversight.
3. Continued programming through the Student Ambassador Program, Disability advocacy through focused Taskforces, Human Rights Day on December 10, and engagement with the JEDI Strategic Plan.
4. Expanded recognition of Rockville's diverse communities, building on the Commission's work with MLK Day and Pride, including Hispanic Heritage Month and Women's History Month, and coordinating community organizations to receive these proclamations, as we have with Autism Acceptance Month.

Mayor and Council History

The Mayor and Council have been presented a report by the Rockville Human Rights Commission annually in the interests of informing the Mayor and Council of HRC activities and raising awareness of their role in advising and uplifting human rights in Rockville.

Boards and Commissions Review

Ratified on October 21st 2026 by the Rockville Human Rights Commission with unanimous consent.