

January 8, 2025

Mayor McNamara:

First, thank you for trusting the members of the Community Relations Commission with our efforts to connect with community members, organization leaders, and subject-matter experts. We spent much of the last two years listening to our community in an effort to better understand not only their experiences but also to create a space where the community feels welcome.

This year, we specifically asked to make it clear to residents that we were here to listen to their thoughts and concerns and provide you and the City of Rockford Leadership team with information directly from residents.

Marginalized Communities

One of the first things we tasked ourselves with this year was to ask representatives from underserved communities to join us in talking about what they feel when they think about Rockford.

- Some of our residents who identify with marginalized communities feel like gaps in services have an impact, and that not all of the agencies communicate with each other or effectively communicate how to access their services. One notable example relates to mental health. While we know that several organizations provide services and support, members of our community mentioned not knowing where to access them for themselves or for the people they serve.
- Related to effective communication, we heard from residents that the City should place more of an emphasis on communicating in multiple languages, across all platforms so residents have better access to the services and supports they need, including all of the steps it takes to secure that service or support.
- Housing continues to be a topic of discussion for the Community Relations Commission. As it relates to underserved communities, specifically the LGBTQ and Disability Communities, we heard a need to address housing and support needs. This would include things like crisis and transitional housing. We heard in previous years and, through conversation this year, reaffirmed that the City of Rockford should ensure that community partners tasked with serving people who are currently unhoused prioritize accessibility, gender-affirming practices, and equity. Further related to housing, we heard from community members who would like to see more done to lower the cost of renting or purchasing a home, and more programs to support residents



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purchasing their first home. Residents also mentioned a need for more affordable and accessible housing. Accessible, meaning the ability to obtain and be physically accessible.

We also noted last year that our ordinances, as currently written, may create barriers to affordable and accessible housing. The Community Relations Commission is willing to review those ordinances and provide feedback and opportunities to improve, if City leadership sees that as a priority.

Further, in a meeting separate from our conversations with underserved communities, we heard that collaborative relationships between the Winnebago Housing Authority and the Rockford Housing Authority are strained. We recognize that we only heard from one of the providers, and would welcome open dialogue with the other provider. Any strain on relationships between our public housing providers could negatively affect all Rockford residents, including those from underserved communities.

- A fear of discrimination was also mentioned during these discussions when it relates to housing. A potential solution could be for the CRC to partner with fair housing agencies in our community to provide opportunities for them to educate our residents and housing providers.
- Related to employment, we heard that there are still transportation barriers for residents in our community. We know that in the City we have the Rockford Mass Transit District, and in the County, we have the Regan Mass Transit District. A potential step towards minimizing that barrier could be to hold a conversation with local transportation providers to educate the community on available resources, while also creating a space for the community to share their perspectives with these providers.
- We also heard from some that there were still concerns about employment discrimination based on their identity or the groups they belong to. A step towards this could be holding a community conversation on employment, including protections against discrimination and resources for when discrimination occurs.

Mental Health

Mental health support was also mentioned by the panelist from underserved communities. Including not being sure that services and supports are available as well as how to access them. In a subsequent meeting, we heard from Jason Holcomb about the services available through the Winnebago County Community Mental Health Board. We also heard from leaders employed by the City of Rockford to address mental health for our residents. The services we heard about are numerous, but representatives from our community still did not feel connected to those opportunities.

Safety

One of the questions we asked our panelists from marginalized communities concerned safety. Those representatives expressed the following:

- A fear of losing services and supports- tied to the impact of what could happen, and what is happening at the State and Federal level.
- Panelist indicated they would like more specific communication from the City of Rockford related to efforts to counteract any State or Federal policies or statements that could negatively impact Rockford Residents.
- Panelist encouraged the City to continue work around inclusion and provide city-wide affirmation that inclusion is a priority, including providing training to City staff.
- Encourage City staff, specifically the Rockford Police Department, to not only attend events in their professional roles, but also as neighbors and fellow citizens.

Open Forums

Throughout the year, we held a couple of open forums for residents to share with us anything they felt we needed to be aware of.

- Much like mentioned above, housing, transportation, and access to jobs for specific groups in our community were topics brought to us by the residents.
- Effective communication and translation services were also a theme in these meetings and should be prioritized by the City.
- There was interest in creating an incentive for businesses to recycle. The Community Relations Commission could look into this further if the City considers it a priority.
- There was interest in a compost program, which the Community Relations Commission could look into if there is an interest from City leadership.
- Fixing the roads came up, and residents would like to see the City prioritize these efforts. It may be beneficial to ensure residents have access to and awareness of the most up-to-date infrastructure improvement plans, with well-communicated opportunities to share their perspectives.

Communication with the CRC

We recognize our role as residents within the City who have a unique opportunity to help the City communicate its efforts. We have benefited from increased communication of events that are



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happening within the City, so we can provide that information to residents we interact with. One area we should prioritize with City leadership over the next year is identifying more ways to get regular, timely updates when things happen within the City.

An example from the past year is our open forums. We heard from two residents who had a rather significant drainage issue in their neighborhood. They shared pictures and stories with us on the impact that the issue has.

Because we have an excellent support team of City staff who attend our meetings, we knew that staff in the room would quickly communicate with the appropriate departments if an issue arose. We did not, however, hear from those departments as quickly about the work done to address the issues residents brought to us. We recognize that, moving forward, we can and should request representatives from any department to provide us with those updates as they happen. We will prioritize that moving forward and welcome the support of City leadership to make it happen.

We also welcome and encourage the City to work with the Community Relations Commission on a plan for communicating back to residents who come to us. We find it essential that communication not only comes from City staff but also from the Community Relations Commission.

REGROW

The Community Relations Commission has played a role in the REGROW grant funding since the program began, and we would like to continue to be part of those efforts as we all work to serve our community with an equity-minded approach in line with current or future policies that impact REGROW.

We note that recently, during budget discussions, REGROW was very much a topic of discussion. The Community Relations Commission would appreciate more transparent communication from leadership, given our role in the work, about whether the program will face changes or be part of broader discussions. We received information, after requesting it from City leadership, on how the funds affected the budget. Communicating with us earlier in the process could help bring residents' ideas and concerns to the table.

A few members of the commission also expressed interest in being more involved in evaluating programs that receive REGROW funds. We are involved in the early stages of reviewing applications and we receive reports from staff related to outcomes, but we feel we could do more. An idea we have is to assign commission members to funded programs so we can conduct regular check-ins with grantees, increase opportunities for improvement, and amplify the successes these programs achieve each year. We would work with City leadership to develop evaluation tools and could provide reports to the City on progress.



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Moving Forward

As you will note, we have spent the last two years focused on listening and learning. Our priority moving forward is action. We are working with staff to schedule a strategic planning session with the commission so we can structure our work in an action-focused way now that we have heard from the community. An additional step we will take next year is to add space on each agenda to discuss action steps from previous meetings and any follow-up we need from staff.

We welcome any additional input you, the leadership team, or council has as we continue to support the efforts of the city, and most importantly the voices of our residents.

Respectfully,

Eric Brown
Chairperson, Community Relations Commission.