

Meeting minutes for January 29, 2025, Work Session

The Housing Authority of the City of Meadville board of commissioners met in the Community Room at Holland Towers at 2:00 pm on January 29, 2025, for a work session to discuss: (1) the roles and responsibilities of board members, (2) public accessibility of board meetings, (3) the interaction between board of commissioners with resident councils, (4) the necessity of updating the board bylaws, and (5) regular board meeting agenda format options.

Board members in attendance:

- Richard Zinn, Vice Chair
- Marcia Yohe, Treasurer
- Cena Kneubehl, Secretary
- Jane Osborne
- Joe Tompkins

Also present:

- Christopher Ferry, solicitor
- Shannon Ferry
- Jacqueline Commins, Holland Towers resident
- Kathleen Dunlap, Holland Towers resident

Mr. Tompkins asked each board member to share their thoughts on what they take to be the roles and responsibilities of housing authority board members.

Ms. Yohe stated that “HUD feels it’s their housing, so we need to be clear on that. They [HUD] feel our role is to provide financial oversight and assist the Executive Director.” Ms. Yohe further stated that the role of the board is to support and work primarily with the Executive Director (ED) who “knows the ins- and outs of HUD rules” and board members are “not supposed to get into the minutiae of tenant issues.”

Mr. Zinn echoed Ms. Yohe, stating: “The board works with the ED and shouldn’t get involved in the day-to-day.” Also: “If the board starts to accept issues that don’t come through the proper channels and bypass staff, that will become the norm and you don’t want that.” Mr. Zinn stated that he believes the board’s role is to work with the ED to develop rules, policies, and budgets. He noted that the board must also keep in mind that HUD is “our sole financier.” Mr. Zinn stated that he had previously attended, years ago, a week-long seminar on roles and responsibilities of board members that was sponsored by HUD. Overall, Mr. Zinn stated, the objective of the authority is the same as it existed in the 1970s: to provide decent, affordable housing.

Ms. Kneubehl stated that she joined the board because of her experience as a resident of public housing. As a resident Ms. Kneubehl said she didn’t feel that resident concerns were being heard by the board or adequately addressed by the staff. Ms. Kneubehl gave an example of mold problems in some of the units and noted that residents were not adequately informed about the meetings to discuss it. Ms. Kneubehl also stated that she had a hard time getting information about board meetings and resident council meetings during her time as a resident, despite repeated requests to the Resident Initiatives Coordinator for such information. Ms. Kneubehl

stated that residents are generally not informed about board meetings and the functions they serve. Ms. Kneubehl noted that when she did follow board meetings, she sometimes heard the ED tell a different story than what residents said or experienced. As Ms. Kneubehl put it, “I didn’t feel like the board was always getting the full picture.”

Ms. Osborne stated that she previously served on her resident council [in Morgan Village] and didn’t think that the function of resident council was always made clear to the residents. Ms. Osborne further noted that attendance at resident council meetings tended to be low.

Mr. Tompkins stated that the main reason he wanted to hold the work session is because he has been doing the training for new board members on the HUD exchange website, and the first module is on board roles and responsibilities where he learned a lot. Mr. Tompkins said that wanted a chance to discuss what he had learned with the rest of the board, including the importance of hearing directly from residents. Mr. Tompkins noted that the HUD training explicitly states that interaction with residents is one of primary roles and responsibilities of board members, quoting module 1 of the HUD training: “Go out, visit your housing developments, get to know your residents— that’s absolutely something you could and should do as a Commissioner.”

Ms. Yohe interjected to say that we’ve “got to be careful” about the trainings on the HUD exchange because they are run by consultants hired by HUD, so sometimes “people just say things” in the course of those trainings. Ms. Yohe said that the board would be better off referring to the resource guide that Ms. Yohe herself authored while working for HUD.

Mr. Zinn stated that “if you speak to residents, you can’t say that you’re a representative of the board.” Mr. Zinn said that he was not trying to deny there are issues “we need to improve on” and suggested that “maybe we need better directives from our initiative coordinator, or more education for resident council officers.”

Ms. Kneubehl responded to Ms. Yohe and Mr. Zinn by asking if the board can create another channel of communication for residents so that residents have access to the board.

Ms. Yohe said that residents are always welcome at board meetings. She also noted that in years past, residents did come and present to the board.

Mr. Tompkins suggested a regular agenda item at board meetings to hear directly from representatives of the resident councils. Mr. Tompkins noted that Ms. Yohe’s resource guide includes a section on the importance of gathering input from residents and resident councils. Mr. Tompkins stated that he believes it is a primary responsibility of the board to keep informed of resident concerns, and to gather information not only from the ED, but also from residents and community members. Mr. Tompkins noted that he has been hearing from various community members who have expressed concern about the current state of HACM. Mr. Tompkins stated, “Residents and people in the community are telling me that we can do better, and I think we owe it to residents and the community to do better.” Mr. Tompkins stated that board members are ultimately representatives of the community, and that’s why board members are appointed by the City Council.

Kathleen Dunlap, a resident of Holland Towers, asked Ms. Osborne what resident council she previously served on. Ms. Dunlap also noted that “Jackie [Commins] is a wonderful resident council president and wants only the best for residents. That’s something that Vanessa [Rockovich] doesn’t like. I feel people don’t come to the board meeting because they don’t trust Vanessa; they think she lies. She does lie. I cannot understand some of things that Vanessa does, and how the board can agree with her when they know that she’s wrong. I go to board meetings despite my physical ailments. This has been really hard on me as a senior citizen.”

Jaqueline Commins, President of the Holland Towers Resident Council, asked Ms. Yohe about her statement that the role of the board is to support the ED. Ms. Commins asked Ms. Yohe, “Does that mean you don’t question anything?”

Ms. Yohe responded, “No, we ask questions.” Ms. Yohe gave a recent example involving communication at Holland Towers, and Ms. Commins thanked Ms. Yohe for her help in that matter. Ms. Yohe noted that “our job is to verify what we think is true.”

Ms. Commins stated that “what’s missing here is the role of resident council. Maybe all resident councils need to find out the issues from residents and present them. The MOUs state that the ED needs to meet with resident council to address our issues, but she [the ED] has not been meeting with us.”

Mr. Ferry stated that the board as a unit is the “principle” and “the agent” is the ED. “She [the ED] works for you. She’s your employee, you can give her directions. She has a certain skill set that you don’t have. You do the macro policy work and she does the micro work.” Mr. Ferry noted that board members who go out and talk to residents should avoid giving residents the impression that they are acting on behalf of the board. Mr. Ferry stated that board members can meet regularly with resident councils, and the former board chair, Tom Youngblood, had begun to set up this kind of arrangement. Mr. Ferry stated that board members occasionally serve on hearing boards, “so you don’t want to be in a position that would jeopardize the fact-finding. You don’t want to create a conflict of interest in the grievance process.”

Ms. Commins stated that her resident council has asked for revisions to the grievance process and has not heard back for months.

Mr. Ferry said that is correct.

Ms. Commins stated that the ED did away with the grievance policy and called it a comment policy, which filters the grievance process through the ED; in effect, Ms. Commins said, “she [the ED] took away our voice.”

Mr. Tompkins asked Mr. Ferry for clarification, and Mr. Ferry confirmed that HACM does in fact have a grievance procedure and it is separate from the comment policy.

Ms. Commins stated that she did not think the difference between the two policies is clear to residents.

Ms. Commins also asked if each board meeting agenda item has to go through the ED. Mr. Zinn and Ms. Yohe said, no.

Mr. Zinn noted that if a resident wants to bring something to the board's attention for discussion it is best to send the board any relevant info in advance so that the board can be fully prepared for the discussion.

Mr. Ferry stated that if there's a line item on the agenda, it is helpful to submit info in advance if a resident or resident council wants the board to act on it.

Mr. Tompkins suggested that the board create a committee to address tenant council issues, similar to what Mr. Youngblood was working on.

Mr. Ferry noted that regular meetings between board representatives and resident councils are in part determined by the resident council MOUs, and the board needs to determine who will be present at those meetings.

Mr. Tompkins raised the issue of updating the board bylaws.

Ms. Kneubehl stated that she thinks the bylaws need to be updated and that the board should look at the model provided by HUD.

Mr. Ferry stated that, in the past, the ED has approached the board about the bylaws. Mr. Ferry said that "it makes sense for you guys to update the bylaws." Mr. Ferry suggested that, if the board wants to update the bylaws, a committee be appointed by the chair to do the initial work.

Mr. Tompkins asked how that would work procedurally.

Mr. Ferry said that the board would put it as a discussion item on the regular agenda. Mr. Ferry also noted that the ED "is going to have to be involved in that," so the board "should be attentive to that."

Ms. Kneubehl asked if the deputy ED could step in for the ED to help with the bylaws. Ms. Yohe and Mr. Zinn didn't think that was a good idea.

Mr. Tompkins asked about making board meetings more accessible to the public, noting that some community members who might otherwise attend are at work during the regular meeting times, so perhaps the board could start to record the meetings and post the recordings on the HACM website and/or a Facebook page.

Ms. Yohe suggested contacting Armstrong Cable to see if they would be interested in recording the board meetings.

Mr. Tompkins asked who is responsible for the website and noted that it's not always up to date.

Mr. Ferry stated that the board has control over the staff in charge of the website.

Mr. Tompkins asked about what recourse the board has if staff or the ED are not executing board policy. He also asked if the board has conducted annual reviews for the ED.

Mr. Zinn stated that the board has conducted reviews of the ED in the past, but “nobody wants to do it.” Mr. Zinn stated that, as a former board chair, he used to send out an evaluation form to the other board members, and this was typically done at the anniversary date of the ED’s hiring.

Mr. Zinn stated that “right now, we’re three people short on administrative staff,” and the ED “can’t take any more on. So maybe we have to investigate the possibility of hiring somebody full time or part time. But I will not vote for anything that will put more stress on the administrative staff.”

Mr. Tompkins asked if the board could hire staff to help with the administrative workload.

Mr. Ferry suggested a third-party consulting firm to handle administrative work, should the board choose to go that route.

Mr. Ferry also said there is a contract with the ED, so the board needs to “see what it outlines.”

Mr. Zinn said there is no contract with the ED.

Ms. Kneubehl asked if there is a job description for the ED and other administrative staff.

Mr. Zinn said there should be “a civil service one” and “one for the interviews,” and job descriptions will likely be in the employee files.

Mr. Tompkins stated that while he acknowledges the current staffing shortage and understands why this limits the current scope of possible work, he is growing increasingly frustrated with the situation, where explanations tend to give way to excuses. Mr. Tompkins noted the explanation of the staff shortage as the reason why the board is currently unable to address some problems within HACM, but he also stated that he’s “leery” of this explanation becoming an excuse for doing nothing. Mr. Tompkins stated his preference for the board to become more active in addressing problems rather than relying on excuses for inaction.

Mr. Zinn stated that he understood Mr. Tompkins frustration, but that time was running long, and he had to leave because he had other obligations.

Mr. Tompkins ended the meeting and thanked everyone for their time.