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GRAND FORKS: Human rights group possibly in the works

By Lisa Gibson
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Community members ranging from preachers to representatives from Mayor Mike Brown's office gathered at the Grand Forks Public Library Wednesday evening to discuss the possibility of a Human Relations Commission in Grand Forks.

The meeting was held by representatives from the North Dakota Human Rights Coalition. Fargo, Dickinson and Bismarck all have their own local commissions, according to Cheryl Bergian, executive director of the NDHRC.

"The three Human Relations Commissions that are in existence are creatures of their own cities," Bergian said. "Their power is to provide recommendations to the city."

The existing commissions provide a forum to address discrimination issues, according to Bergian.

"Their purpose is to discourage all forms of discrimination," she added.

In attendance was Bob McConn, who served as the chairman of the Grand Forks Human Rights Commission in 1971, which he said "died out."

"What we ran into 35 years ago in most instances was disbelief that anything was going on," he said. "We really weren't able to point out a significant necessity to get the public to agree that it is needed."

McConn said that one of the reasons for the failure of the commission 35 years ago was that they had no subpoena power.

"We had the charge from the city, we thought, but we lacked the means to carry it out," he said.

Other commissions of the same sort have existed in Grand Forks. One participant cited a commission that was in existence in the area five years ago.

"It petered out three or four years ago," he said.

Bergian also recalled a commission before 1997.

McConn said he is unsure of the individual need for Grand Forks to establish another such commission again because he had been living elsewhere for some time.

The NDHRC does not actually help individuals, which is why it is crucial to form a local commission to address local issues and individual needs, according to Bergian.

Bergian stressed the fact that neither Dickinson nor Bismarck provides its commission with funds. Fargo has allocated a budget for its commission, but funding for the local commissions is completely up to the people of the community and the city council.

"Members of the NDHRC are just like everyone sitting around this table," said Gerry Even, chair of the NDHRC board. "We are not politicians."

The decision and responsibility of starting the commission rests squarely upon the shoulders of the community, Bergian said. NDHRC can facilitate meetings, but the members of the community need to express their desire to start such a group to the city council.

The attendees expressed a strong desire to come up with an original commission, not to repeat what has already been done in the other locations.

"If the community decides to make the commission a creature of the city, the ordinance needs to be passed by the city council," Bergian said.

Those who attended the meeting expressed interest in meeting again in September to further discuss and brainstorm ideas for the potential commission.

"We are all passionate, but not yet educated," said Kendra Wobbema, volunteer with NDCHR. "But this is just an informational meeting. We didn't intend for this meeting to end with a strategic plan."

Details regarding the next meeting will be provided when they are established.

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