



Tom Barrett
Mayor, City of Milwaukee

December 2, 2008

To the Honorable
Members of the Common Council
Common Council
City of Milwaukee

Dear Council Members;

File #081017 proposes language to revise and update Chapter 109 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances to reconstitute Milwaukee's Equal Rights Commission.

Since its inception in 1944 as the Mayor's Committee on Inter-Racial Relations, the Equal Rights Commission has experienced several changes in name and responsibility as City leaders have recognized the need to address shifting priorities while facing tighter fiscal resources. In 2007, the Common Council amended Chapter 109 to expand the scope of protected groups covered by Milwaukee's housing and employment discrimination ordinance to include gender identity or expression, past or present membership in the military service, and affiliation with or perceived affiliation with these protected categories.

Since that amendment, the administration has been researching ways to establish a viable Equal Rights Commission that can strengthen the City's leadership position as an equal rights advocate while minimizing the provision of duplicative services in the areas of employment and housing discrimination given the jurisdiction and enforcement capabilities the State of Wisconsin Equal Rights Division (ERD) and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have in those areas. In addition to revitalizing the Equal Rights Commission to be in compliance with Chapter 109, the paid sick leave ordinance recently enacted by the residents of the City pursuant to Wisconsin's direct legislation statute is to be enforced by the Equal Rights Commission.

The proposed changes to Chapter 109 maintain the City's oversight, investigative and enforcement capabilities over discriminatory employment and housing practices not addressed within the jurisdiction of federal and state agencies. This will ensure that the City of Milwaukee is not providing duplicate services and protections already established and enforced by federal and state laws.

This proposed model for a new ERC recognizes the importance of the City's role in promoting racial, social, and economic equity. It establishes broader oversight and accountability over City of Milwaukee programs and services in meeting equal rights standards. The model recognizes that we can forge partnerships with the business community, educational institutions, and other community based organization to facilitate, coordinate, and/or implement awareness, prevention, and education strategies to address the City's equal rights challenges.

The proposed broad functional responsibilities of the new ERC include:

- Establishing an accountability structure that ensures all city departments, policy makers and elected officials know about, consider and address equal rights issues and needs in policy formation, resource allocation and delivery of services.
- Overseeing, monitoring, and recognizing city policies, programs and services that impact equal rights issues, needs, and accomplishments.
- Working with public and elected officials to identify and recommend opportunities to improve the equal rights climate in and around the City of Milwaukee.
- Preparing and publishing timely reports on efforts, accomplishments and continuing challenges.
- Establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships with local community based, private, and educational organizations to plan, conduct and facilitate educational programs, raising the awareness of equal rights issues and educate residents about related services and programs as well as their rights under applicable laws.
- Forging partnerships and alliances with key community stakeholders to facilitate discussion on Milwaukee's equal rights climate as well as identify and address impediments to the city's socioeconomic growth and provide specific recommendations for improvement.
- Enhancing referral and follow-up complaint mechanisms with state, federal, and other community agencies.
- Promoting an environment of fairness, respect, access and opportunities by developing policies that ensure that reports of bias, exclusion and discrimination are handled in a meaningful and consistent manner by media, policy makers and elected officials.

In defining the new role of the Commission we have collaborated with many groups including the Milwaukee Fair Housing Council, Marquette University's Human Rights

Institute, and representatives from the Greater Milwaukee Human Rights Coalition. They have committed strong support for a revitalized Equal Rights Commission.

Potential ERC Commission members are being identified and nominations for Council approval are anticipated by the end of the year. I trust you will support this important initiative to re-establish a viable Equal Rights Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Barrett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and a stylized "B".

Tom Barrett
Mayor