

Brendan Salisbury

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I'm writing to provide input on the Commission for Women. My impression, based on an admittedly small interaction, is that this body lacks the structural support that would be necessary for it to be effective.

A few years ago, I was interested in getting engaged with the city by serving on an advisory body or city committee. I've been a mentor and advocate for women throughout my career. Nearly a decade ago, I was part of the organizing committee for a group in my workplace called "Women at Broad." More recently, I was on board of directors and chaired the governance committee for a 25 year old nonprofit named "Women in the Enterprise of Science and Technology" (WEST), and an organizer and sponsor of the Boston area Women in Bioinformatics group. Joining a city committee dedicated to advocating for women seemed like a natural step for me. At that time, the Somerville commission for women had vacant seats, and a current member invited me to attend a meeting.

I had hoped that the commission would advise the city on policy matters, for example, telling the administration what we could do to prevent domestic violence and root out workplace harassment. I imagined that they might lead data-driven initiatives like the ones we had at my former organizations - collecting and reporting on metrics like pay and promotion disparities. Unfortunately, the commission I saw did none of these things, and nothing substantially similar. I asked why not, and was told that no-one in the administration was required to engage with the commission - either acting on its advice or even providing data. The commission was hanging in the wind.

At the meeting I attended, I learned that the commission's main activity was an annual vigil to raise awareness about domestic violence. While there is nothing wrong with this type of work, my preference is to work on prevention. I want to spend my time making life better for women, not just grieving the wrongs that have been done to us. That is why I deferred on applying to be a member.

I am still looking for opportunities to volunteer my time and expertise with the city. Unfortunately, the Somerville commission for women, as currently structured, is not it.

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