

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION  
*Katjana Ballantyne*  
*Mayor*

Staff

Andres Bueno,  
Acting Fair Housing Commission staff liaison

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade  
Patrice Faulkner  
Dennis Fischman  
Rona Fischman  
Janine Lotti

**Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, August 25, 2022 4:00 pm

Via GoToWebinar  
Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman  
City staff, Stayce Pelton, Mike Feloney

Minutes distribution: FHC members and (upon acceptance) others attending; also posted to City website upon acceptance.

The meeting was convened at approximately 4:05pm. Mike Feloney requested that one announcement be included at the start of the meeting, ahead of its placement on the agenda. Mike proceeded to share that Fair Housing and Inclusionary Program Specialist Stayce Pelton had provided notice that they had accepted a position with another agency and that August 26, 2022 would be their last day of employment with the City of Somerville. Stayce shared that they would be beginning a position with the Committee for Public Counsel Services. Commissioners attending expressed appreciation for Stayce's efforts.

Mike noted that he had not yet had chance to review draft minutes for the July FHC meeting, in part due to materials he and Stayce were involved with preparing prior to Stayce's departure. Mike shared that he had reached out to a former Housing staff member who may have availability to help maintain the work of the Commission until the vacancy created by Stayce's departure can be filled. He expressed cautious optimism that Andres Bueno would be able to provide at least limited support on a parttime basis.

**I. Standing Agenda Items**

Facebook page update: Dennis Fischman shared data regarding the most popular posts to the Fair Housing Commission Facebook since the July FHC meeting. The most popular post was a "Question of the Week" asking, "My dog is essential to my physical and mental health. Do I have a right to have my dog live with me in my apartment?" Dennis explained there typically is a distinction between service dogs and emotional support dogs. Service dogs are included under fair housing law. Accommodations for 'comfort animals' are encouraged under the Fair Housing Act but not mandated. The post received 131 views and three shares.

The second most popular post was the article, "Are fair housing laws falling by the wayside in today's market?" This post received 128 views, three likes and three shares. The article concerned so-called "love letters" that buyers sometimes write to sellers in an effort encourage acceptance of an offer to purchase the seller's home. Letters of such a nature may open avenues for discrimination based on a protected class/family information about the buyer that is divulged through such letters.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Stayce reported that there had been three online submission since the last meeting. While they had attempted to contact the individuals to initiate or continue follow-up, they had not heard back from any. Stayce noted they provided contact information for various housing support groups including OHS, MCAD, HUD, and agencies such as CAAS and CASLS.

### Summary information from the complaints included:

- First submission - Based on the online report, the case appeared to involve race. A landlord reportedly did not rent to the household, telling them it was not available, even though it was at the time of the reporting. Stayce reported they attempted to schedule an intake twice; the household did not show up for either one
- Second submission - involved a Somerville resident with a housing voucher, who believed they had been denied housing due to a lack of credit history. The incident occurred in Arlington and so prompted the question of what municipality had ‘jurisdiction’ over this case. Stayce reported two attempts to schedule an intake and that the household had not responded.
- Third submission - involved an update from the last FHC meeting. An individual had called requesting a ‘test’ on their residence. They expressed suspicion that the landlord was discriminating but could or perhaps would not specify the basis for the discrimination. (The household member did note that they were in an interracial relationship.) They said that they felt hostility from the landlord and consequently were concerned. Stayce reported that the Suffolk Law Anti—discrimination program did set up a test in which a party is sent to the residence to inquire about the unit. The test yielded inconclusive results; Stayce was to let them know and refer them to Suffolk before leaving.

Stayce reported that prior to leaving, they will reach out again to these households again to share resources such as OSPCD OHS, MCAD, and HUD. Rona inquired as to whose name and contact information would replace Stayce’s on the website. Mike indicated he expected to ask Administrative Assistant Janine Randall to be that resource on an interim basis. In addition to leaving an ‘out of office’ email, Rona suggested that Stayce also leave a message on their phone sharing the same information.

### **III. Update on Specific Activities**

Draft FHC Annual Report for FY 2021 status update: Commissioners noted selected events that were not referenced in the draft, including virtual “Know Your Rights” events. Patrice Faulkner asked if all 2021 outreach efforts were to be listed or whether the report was more of an “overview”. Mike noted that goal as being to capture as many activity areas as possible and clarified dates comprising Fiscal Year 2021 (July 11 2020-June 30, 2021). It was noted the election questionnaire” and “Color of Law” events occurred in September 2021 and April 2022, respectively (and so were outside of FY 21 and would be included in the FY 2022 report.

In the interest for moving this agenda item forward, put forth a proposal to approve the report with the addition of the omitted “Know Your Rights” event that occurred in April 2021. A logistical issue to be clarified, as to whether the report is transmitted to the City Council or Mayor. Staff will check.

A *motion* to approve the report with the addition of the April 2021 “Know Your Rights” event was introduced by Rona and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote.

Draft Letter to Mayor Regarding Fair Housing Enforcement: Stayce opened by asking about next steps.

Dennis expressed the importance of the City Council being aware of the two-year backlog at MCAD that was the subject of recent articles and FHC discussion, and that households in Somerville facing discrimination are left without viable recourse with such a backlog. Dennis also noted that securing “substantially equivalent agency” status is a long process with capacity implications. He suggested that a letter on the subject should not describe specific action steps but rather urge the City Council to help ensure that MCAD has funding and other needed support to address the backlog.

Patrice expressed excitement for expeditiously sending the letter and Rona asked Stayce to prioritize sending the letter before leaving, if feasible. It was decided that Dennis would be listed as the interim contact person in the letter for a future response. Stayce agreed to share a copy of the draft letter to "Mike and Dennis.

Fair Housing Anti-Displacement Task Force Meeting Update: Stayce noted that the taskforce last met August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022. As of August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Luis Roldan (Strategic Planning and Equity Manager) would run the taskforce.

The taskforce consists of a housing subcommittee and a zoning subcommittee. The Mayor expressed their desire for soliciting input from small businesses on policies pertaining to zoning changes regarding each subcommittee's respective purview.

Follow-up Status on Tenant Union Information Posting to City Website: Stayce referred to this as a standing item. Janine emailed Stayce information regarding a tenant union project/investigation at SHA. Information on this initiative was compiled in a folder and nothing has been acted on. There was nothing else to report on with Janine being absent.

Confirmation/discussion of monthly FHC meeting dates and time for remainder of calendar year 2022: Stayce presented a proposed list of future meeting times for the remainder of the calendar year. The commissioners discussed the importance of ensuring the meetings did not conflict with various religious and secular holidays. They agreed to skip the meeting in November 2022 and opt for an early December meeting instead to avoid various holidays. The commissioners agreed to re-assess scheduling needs closer to the end of the calendar year.

#### **IV. Announcements/Updates**

Transition Materials: Rona expressed the importance of multiple people knowing where essential information and documents are located to help facilitate the transition. Mike mentioned that at least four individuals have seen the folders.

Wish List: Patrice inquired if there was a standing "wish-list" of FHC goals, objectives, and efforts in the form of a living document, separate from meeting minutes. Rona requested that the next meeting agenda include this wish-list as an agenda item. Commissioners noted that a list would also be a helpful transitional tool so new staff are familiar with ongoing efforts.

Commission Term Limits: Rona wanted to know when the terms expire for the commissioners to help think about the future of the commission's work. Rona also reiterated a point that Stayce made about adjusting the meeting times to be more inclusive of others' schedules. It was pointed out that a 4PM weekday meeting time may be inaccessible, even to commissioners.

Patrice's Birthday: Her birthday is September 7<sup>th</sup>.

Meetings will continue virtually: Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022 was signed into law on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022, which extended certain pandemic-related policy measures. These measures included virtual meetings. This means that the Fair Housing Commission will continue to meet virtually and may continue doing so until at least March 31, 2023. The Commissioners agreed that they would like to revisit how to make meetings accessible to the public once this extension of virtual meetings has expired.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis, seconded by Rona, and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 5:23 pm.