

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION
Katjana Ballantyne
Mayor

Staff

Stayce Pelton,
Fair Housing Commission staff liaison

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Janine Lotti

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, July 28, 2022 4:00 pm

Via GoToWebinar
Online Video Platform

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

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

I. Call to Order and Review of draft minutes for meetings held July 7, 2022

Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to call the meeting to order at 4:05pm which was *seconded* by Janine Lotti and *approved* by roll call vote.

The commission did not review the meeting minutes as they were not distributed in advance of the July meeting. The commission plans to review both July 7th and July 28th minutes at the start of the next meeting.

II. Standing Agenda Items

Facebook page update: Dennis Fischman shared information on the most popular posts to the Fair Housing Commission Facebook since the July 7th meeting. The most popular post was a “Question of the Week”, which asked “What do I do if I believe I’ve faced housing discrimination?” Dennis answered the question by saying anyone who believes they have faced housing discrimination in Somerville should Contact the Fair Housing Program Specialist at the City’s Housing Division. The post garnered 81 views and 3 people who saw the post either liked/commented or shared it. Commissioners discussed that members of the public may not know how to file fair housing complaints, particularly when searching for housing. Households would be better positioned to bring fair housing complaints the FHC’s attention once housing is secured if they know what notes to take and what process to follow. Commissioners mentioned that this may be a good activity in April for Fair Housing month and that Somerville Housing Authority could do a similar activity for their tenants.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Stayce Pelton shared that they received three referrals in May. The first complaint involved reported discrimination based on Source of Income. This constituent was going forward with a fair housing complaint because their landlord was refusing to accept rental assistance funds. Stayce reported they were working with both CAAS and a local legal services organization to assist the constituent so they can remain housing-stable.

The second complaint involved an allegation of discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, disability, and/or sexuality. A person with a disability who speaks a language other than English is

facing an eviction and making a fair housing claim because their landlord has made disparaging comments about the person. Additionally, this individual noted they have roommates who have not paid rent; evidently, however the landlord is only ‘going after’ this person. This person believes they are being targeted and treated differently due to being a member of several protected classes. Commissioners noted that this case highlights the intersectionality of several identities and the importance of having translated services for Somerville residents.

The third complaint concerned a tenant who lived in a public building complex. This person believes that they and several other individuals in a protected class are facing a fair housing violation, but fear retaliation. Commissioners noted that this is a particularly important issue to pursue, given the apparent concern that it involves more than an isolated incident. Stayce reported that they have attempted to follow up with the individual several times but have not received a response.

III. Update on Specific Activities

Draft FHC Annual Report for FY 2021- status update: Stayce reported that they circulated a draft of the FY 2021 agenda to the commissioners. The commissioners discussed the best way to review the document and synthesize their feedback prior to next meeting while abiding by open meeting law. The commissioners decided that they will all independently send comments to Stayce, who will synthesize the notes and prepare to discuss further at the next meeting.

Follow up to discussion at last meeting re. MCAD backlog and potential response: The commissioners discussed new developments since last month’s discussion. Stayce shared a press release from MCAD that stated the agency would be receiving increased state funding to respond to the backlog of discrimination complaints. Commissioners agreed that while MCAD is working towards addressing its backlog of cases, the commissioners still wanted to move forward with writing a letter to the Mayor and City Council, to be sure they are aware of the large backlog.

The commissioners also discussed some of the implications that would arise if the commission became a substantially equivalent agency, which was previously discussed in the July 7th meeting and outlined in the draft letter. Stayce and Mike suggested meeting internally within the city to discuss potential implications becoming a substantially equivalent agency. There was agreement about the importance of understanding of what the duties and time commitment would be for both City staff and the commissioners before definitively pursuing enforcement powers.

Discussion of posting Tenant Union Information to Fair Housing home page: Commissioners discussed a continued desire to post tenant union information on the Fair Housing home page on the City website. The commissioners agreed that Janine Lotti would be a valuable resource in getting tenant union information from Somerville Housing Authority. Rona proposed that the commission work over the next year to collect this information, confer with other housing organizations, and potentially put on an event that shares what we have found. The commissioners agreed to keep this as a Specific Activity on the agenda with the understanding that it would be worked on over time.

Additionally, the commissioners asked Janine if Somerville Housing Authority tenants were given fair housing information or tenant union information during tenant orientation. Janine offered to look into the question and report back when more information was available. The commission discussed how adding fair housing and tenant union information could be important for people with vouchers or other public benefits because there is an ongoing issue of source of income discrimination.

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 in order to avoid various holidays. The commissioners agreed to re-assess scheduling needs closer to the end of the calendar year.

IV. Announcements/Updates

Meetings will continue virtually: Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022 was signed into law on July 16th, 2022, which extended certain pandemic-related policy measure, including virtual meetings.

The Fair Housing Commission therefore 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 Patrice, seconded by Rona, and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 5:25pm.

