

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, December 1, 2022 4:00 pm

Via GoToWebinar

Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members Janine Lotti, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman

City staff- Andres Bueno, Mike Feloney

Members of the public- One member of the public participated as an attendee without identifying him-, her-, themselves.

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

I. Call to Order and Review of Draft Meeting Minutes

Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to call the meeting to order at 4:12 which was *seconded* by Rona Fischman and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote. Andres Bueno explained this meeting was being held Thursday December 1, 2022 rather than the fourth Thursday in November, which coincided with the Thanksgiving holiday.

- October 27, 2022 meeting: Andres requested feedback on the draft meeting minutes. Rona identified a need to clarify and correct confusing language. The meeting minutes indicated that there were no recent articles regarding a backlog of fair housing complaints filed at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). She said even if initial information regarding a backlog at HUD was not found, information may still exist. Andres confirmed that he would remove the HUD reference and keep the Boston Globe article.

Rona introduced a *motion* to accept the October 27, 2022 meeting minutes as modified. The motion was *seconded* by Dennis and *approved* unanimously by roll call.

- July 7, 2022 meeting: Dennis noted that in the conversation relating to tenant unionizing at SHA he had suggested that written materials should be multilingual and in simple language. Andres confirmed that this would be incorporated into the meeting minutes.

Dennis introduced a *motion* to accept the July 7, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. The motion was *seconded* by Rona and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote.

- July 28 2022, meeting: Andres sought comments for the July 28, 2022 meeting minutes. Regarding Part 2 of the minutes on FHC Facebook posts, Dennis said commissioners discussed how members of the public may not know how to file complaints, particularly when they are in the process of securing housing. If these households knew of what notes to take and what processes to follow, then they would be in a better position to bring complaints

to the attention of the commission. Commissioners noted that this could be a focus of activity during Fair Housing Month in April by both the FHC itself and by the Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) for tenants of public- and/or Section 8-assisted housing. Dennis asked that this comment be reflected in the meetings as to not lose track of it. Andres noted that there is a standing agenda item specifically to keep track of FHC objectives and goals and said he could add it as an activity for Fair Housing Month, to be carried under that standing item.

Dennis Fischman introduced a *motion* to approve the July 28, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. The motion was seconded by Rona Fischman and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote.

II. Standing Agenda Items

Dennis and Andres led review of the two standing updates on the agenda, Facebook page update and review of Fair Housing calls and/or complaints, respectively.

- Facebook page update: Dennis stated the FHC’s Facebook page is found by searching “SomervilleFairHousingCommission” and that he generally posts a question of the week on Fridays and a fair housing related news item on Mondays.

The most popular question, posted October 28, asked: “I own a two-family home in Somerville. I live upstairs and rent out the downstairs apartment. Do all the Fair Housing rules apply to me?” The question received 95 views, 6 people commented or shared it and 5 read the article. Dennis mentioned in his reply that many fair housing rules do not apply for small owner-occupied properties, while noting that owner-occupants may opt to observe such practices. He noted that all owners, including owner occupants, must abide by fair housing laws and may not refuse housing to households that are part of what is known as a “protected class.” He mentioned source-of-income and Section 8 voucher holders as an example.

The second most popular posting was a Washington Post article titled “D.C. wins historic \$10 million in housing voucher discrimination.” Dennis explained that real estate firms in Washington D.C. had been found legally liable for refusing households with Section 8 voucher or for imposing harsh conditions that made it nearly impossible for voucher holders to rent apartments. This received 87 views and four ‘clicks’ to read the article. Four people also liked, commented, or shared the article.

- Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Andres reported that there had been no complaints reported since October 27, 2022.

III. Update on Specific Activities

Andres and other staff attending reviewed 6 areas activities in the order they follow below.

1. Draft FHC Annual Report for FY 2021 status update: Mike Feloney updated the FHC on the status of the report transmittal. He shared that he needed to review the most current draft that Andres provided. Dennis asked how the final report may be accessed by the public and Mike explained that it will be posted on the FHC homepage of the City’s website.
2. Draft Letter to Mayor Regarding Fair Housing Enforcement: Andres noted the timeliness in sending the letter as an accompaniment with the FY21 Annual Report. Doing so would raise awareness to the MCAD backlog and to the lack of FHC enforcement powers as they are not addressed in the annual report. Rona noted the timing would bring focus to these issues.

Dennis sought confirmation on who would receive the letter; Mike confirmed it would go to the Mayor and all City Councilors. He noted it would also go to staff in the Mayor’s Office.

Dennis noted Housing Division leadership diligence in face of staffing challenges. Dennis reiterated the importance of this effort because the FHC, unlike MCAD, does not have enforcement powers. The lack of enforcement powers by the FHC combined with the MCAD backlog poses serious impediments to the implementation of fair housing in Somerville. He

hoped this letter generates serious attention to this issue. Janine Lotti agreed with Dennis and Andres reiterated that the letter will be timed with the FY21 Annual Report transmittal.

3. Fair Housing and Anti-Displacement Task Force (FHADTF) Meeting Update: The FHC member that had been representing the commission on the FHADTF was not in attendance. Andres reported he did not have information on the Task Force's work. Mike suggested contacting as to whether new staff in OSPCD may be working with the Department of Racial and Social Justice to staff the effort.

Dennis requested staff provide context regarding the FHADTF. Mike explained an order was introduced in Somerville to explore fair housing through a lens which considers the disparate impact of displacement on communities of color. Staff from the Mayor's Office in collaboration with the Office Housing Stability (OHS) conducted community outreach to staff an FHADTF. Mike understood the FHADTF's next step as to establish subcommittees to identify and specify anti-displacement measures focusing on displacement impacts on small businesses and residences. There was additional interest to strengthen the City's zoning code beyond fair housing enforcement. Mike noted the City's strong positioning to begin this work due to, in part, an Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance embedded into zoning code.

4. Follow-up Status on Tenant Union Information Posting to City Website: Andres explained ongoing tenant unionizing efforts at the SHA Mystic Housing development and Janine's involvement in helping initiate the tenant union through community outreach efforts. He recalled that in the last FHC meeting, Janine expressed interest in sharing information about the tenant union and the union organizers on the Housing Division website.

Janine specified that this tenant unionizing effort is for Mystic development residents and she had a "Getting Organized" handout from Massachusetts Legal Help to publicize on the City's website. Janine reported recent SHA translation and interpretation efforts have included collaboration with the Welcome Project and the City, and leveraging internal staff with language capacity. Janine said that she would share additional information from the SHA about how they communicate with households in different languages.

Rona explained prior FHC conversations on tenant unionizing were not specific to the Mystic development. She noted the multitude of larger apartment buildings in Somerville with enough residents to form a tenant union and that tenants may not know how to unionize. Janine and Rona agreed the "Getting Organized" handout may be helpful to residents in apartment buildings citywide. Janine asked whether the FHC can connect with groups experienced in tenant union organizing and Rona volunteered to contact the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS). She presented the idea of sharing information as to how tenant unionizing functions in different groups (Mystic, SCC, CAAS, CASLS).

5. FHC "Wish List":

- *Color of Law Events:* Andres recalled the FHC's interest in publicity materials being available in multiple languages. He noted marketing materials were not translated last year due to changes in how Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA), formerly SomerViva, processed translation requests. Andres reiterated the FHC's interest to initiate this process early to maximize accessibility. He proposed using last year's flyer as a template as most content is translation ready, pending date(s).

Rona set a January 2023 deadline to set the event date(s) and identified Kerry O'Donnell to assist with scheduling. Rona mentioned last year included an in-person and a virtual and wanted to repeat this approach.

- *Event Tabling:* Andres noted this as a standing item. Rona mentioned commissioners should share events of interest through Andres. Andres noted yearly events, such as

Main Streets, that can be leveraged to promote fair housing. Rona requested that all fair housing-related material be prepared in a traveling “kit” to facilitate tabling. Mike noted that the Fair Housing pamphlet may require updating and identified staff who may assist with establishing a traveling tabling kit.

- *Candidate Questionnaire*: Andres discussed the FHC’s interest in conducting another questionnaire for all City Council and Mayoral candidates their stances and goals on fair housing for the next municipal election cycle. Dennis clarified that municipal elections occur on the odd number years, the next being 2023. He clarified that the FHC is a non-partisan entity, and he stressed the importance of making the extra effort to ensure all candidates feel welcomed so that all voices are heard.

Rona wanted to assign target dates and deadlines for “Wish List” items during the next meeting.

IV. Announcements

1. Monthly Meeting: Dennis shared that the next scheduled meeting is Thursday January 26, 2023.
2. Program Specialist Hiring: Mike updated commissioners that there are two interviews scheduled next week for the Fair Housing/Inclusionary Housing Program Specialist.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona, seconded by Dennis, and *approved* unanimously by roll call vote. The meeting was adjourned at 5:12 pm.

Attachments:

Getting Organized Handout