

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION
Katjana Ballantyne
Mayor

Staff

Hanalei Steinhart
Program Specialist, Fair Housing and
Inclusionary Housing Support

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Janine Lotti

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 25, 2023 3:00pm
Via GoToWebinar
Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members: Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman
City staff: Lisa Davidson, Hanalei Steinhart
Members of the public: Elenice Silveira

I. Call to Order and Review of Draft Meeting Minutes

The meeting was called to order shortly after 3:00pm.

A motion was introduced to approve the minutes from the Commission's March meeting. A motion to approve the minutes was not introduced, as there was not a quorum of members present who had also attended the March meeting.

II. Announcements

Hanalei Steinhart reminded commissioners that signed Boards and Commissions Code of Conduct forms are due to her by the week of June 5th, 2023, to allow to send them to the Mayor's Office by June 12th, 2023.

Rona Fischman shared a suggestion previously made, to make the 'Color of Law' event(s) an annual April activity for Fair Housing month, to be coordinated between the Commission and Somerville Public Library.

III. Standing Agenda Items

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

1. Facebook page update: Dennis noted, for anyone who may later watch a video of the meeting, that the FHC's Facebook page can be found by searching "Somerville Fair Housing Commission" and that he generally posts a question of the week on Fridays and a fair housing-related news item on Mondays. Dennis reviewed the two most popular posts and the number of views, comments, and shares the post had.

The most popular post was seen by 124 people and shared by 9 individuals. It asked, "What can you do if you're a buyer or renter who suspects you might be a victim of housing discrimination?" Dennis included an informational article and Program Specialist and FHC staff liaison Hanalei Steinhart's contact information as the answer.

The next most popular post asked “I’m a landlord with a lease coming to an end. What do I have to do to increase the rent?” It was seen and interacted with by 114 people. The answer provided focused on the amount of notice required to tenants. Dennis shared that the Facebook page often sees more activity when it involves questions and answers about support animals. He noted that if anyone has a Fair Housing question that they would like addressed that he will bump it up to the top of the post queue.

2. Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Hanalei reported that 5 complaints had been received since the last meeting and were reviewed as follows:
 - One concerned discrimination against someone with small children, and they chose to file a complaint with HUD. This complainant simultaneously reached out to the City as well as HUD.
 - A second concerned discrimination based on sexual orientation; they were referred to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) as well as the Somerville Department of Racial and Social Justice.
 - The other three involved complaints with follow-up ongoing, including one about racism, another about illegal lease terminology, and the last pertaining to concerns about potential broker misconduct. Hanalei shared that all 5 complaints have been entered into the Fair Housing Complaint Tracker.

Some commissioners expressed concerns about Fair Housing coverage during Hanalei’s recent absence for medical leave. Rona noted concern that the ongoing status of some cases was due to a lack of immediate follow-up. Patrice Faulkner inquired about what happened when calls came in while Hanalei was out and/or not working in person. A suggestion was made that Hanalei’s voicemail greeting be Fair Housing specific, including a list of Fair Housing resources. Hanalei explained that her role was not exclusive to Fair Housing, and that voicemail is checked daily. Hanalei also noted that several of the ongoing complaints have yet to respond to attempts to connect and discuss their situation (as is frequently the case).

Hanalei summarized the process for reviewing Fair Housing complaints. Individuals can submit a complaint via the Fair Housing homepage of the City’s website, or call the office. After receiving the report, Hanalei reaches out to the person to schedule a time to obtain information about the perceived discrimination. Cases typically are referred to agencies identified in the City ordinance based on the nature of the complaint. Hanalei also noted that she works with Somerville’s Office of Housing Stability to refer cases involving not involving discrimination to OHS for follow-up.

IV. **Update on Specific Activities**

Hanalei Steinhart reviewed 6 areas of ongoing activity in the order they follow below.

1. FHC Annual Report for FY 2022: Hanalei reported that she has compiled most of the data and has begun drafting the text of the report. She stated that she hopes to have a full draft by the next meeting.
2. Ensuring a continuing presence on the Anti-Displacement Task Force: Rona shared that she is now on the Anti-Displacement Taskforce as a part of its residential displacement committee. They have met once so far and will next meet in mid-June 2023. Rona shared equity-related concerns regarding the application process, given the time and effort required. Rona further noted she was unsure if the application materials were available in multiple languages.

Hanalei noted that the task force would remain a standing agenda item.

3. Follow up on posting Tenant Union information to City website: Rona reported that she has not heard back from the groups she contacted. Hanalei stated that she could also reach out. They agreed to touch base via email to see if the right people can be reached to grant permission. It is expected that this item will be discussed again at the next meeting.
4. Updating Commissioners videos on the website: Hanalei noted that she is still waiting for one bio, and that she would like to send both bios together to be updated on the website. She stated that the website has been updated to reflect current Commission members and meeting times.
5. Questionnaire for candidates and incumbents: Hanalei reviewed the Commission's decision at the previous meeting to keep the questions primarily the same, except for an additional question for incumbents. Dennis and Patrice will collaborate on drafting the additional question(s). The Commissioners discussed the best methods to share the questions with voters, including language access, print, and digital options.
6. Other updates: Hanalei shared that information from a draft memo prepared on Fair Housing data from the last five years was shared with the Council's Legislative Matters Committee. That memo is being finalized and will be shared with the commission and committee members when completed.