

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION
Katjana Ballantyne
Mayor

Staff

Hanalei Steinhart
Program Specialist, Fair Housing and
Inclusionary Housing Support

Commissioners

Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Janine Lotti

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 30th, 2023, 3:00pm
Via Zoom
Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members: Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman, Janine Lotti
City staff: Hanalei Steinhart, Lisa Davidson

I. Call to Order and Review of Draft Meeting Minutes

The meeting was called to order by roll call vote at 3:05pm.

A motion was introduced to approve the minutes from the Commission's August meeting. The minutes were approved by unanimous roll call vote.

II. Standing Agenda Items

Dennis Fischman and Hanalei Steinhart led review of the two standing updates on the agenda: Fair Housing 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, shares, and engagements (e.g. "shares" or "likes") that the post had.

The most popular post was seen by 100 people and was shared by 4 people. The post 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 answer detailed which Fair Housing rules apply to the situation. For example, there are no exemptions to protections on tenants receiving public assistance or housing subsidies. The exemptions solely apply to owner-occupied buildings with no more than four units, single family homes sold or rented by the owner without an agent or broker, and housing operated by religious organizations or private clubs that limit occupancy to members of their group. For more information on Fair Housing Act exemptions please visit the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's website titled "Housing Discrimination under the Fair Housing Act" or see Massachusetts state ordinance "RE19RC20: Fair Housing."

The next most popular post shared a news article regarding a settlement reached in a sexual harassment case. The property manager was accused of sexually harassing female residents over a period of years. 73 people saw this post and 9 shared it.

2. Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Hanalei reported that no calls or complaints had been received since the last Fair Housing Commission meeting. One previous complainant has successfully appealed a denial of eligibility for an affordable unit on the basis of discrimination against source of income. This complainant had a Section 8 voucher and was searching for an apartment to rent in Somerville.

Commissioner Rona Fischman asked for the total number of complaints in 2023. Hanalei shared that 18 complaints have been received since January 2023. Rona mentioned that Cambridge has received 25 this calendar year.

III. **Communications**

1. Status update on new Commission member appointment process: Hanalei shared that there is an interview with a candidate scheduled for next week. The interview panel consists of Dennis in his capacity as the Chair, Mike Feloney, and Hanalei. The call for new members has also been updated and is ready for translation. The new member recruitment guidelines require that at least two candidates are interviewed. When the second call for new members is ready, Hanalei shared that she intends to contact community organizations such as churches to help ensure that the call for new members is widely circulated.
2. FY23 Annual Report is awaiting internal review: Hanalei shared that the FY23 Annual Report is awaiting internal review before it can be shared with Commissioners and the public. Dennis noted that he does not expect to see the draft until the January meeting.
3. Request for updated contact information: Between the last two commission meetings, Hanalei sent an email to each Commissioner asking for their current contact information. All Commissioners sent back their updated information; two phone numbers were no longer accurate.

IV. **Updates on Specific Activities**

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

1. Anti-Displacement Task Force updates: Rona Fischman, who is a Task Force member, shared that the home rule petition for rent stabilization will be voted on by the City Council on 11/30/23. The Commission discussed the exemptions outlined in the rent stabilization petition, such as new construction for 15 years and owner-occupied properties. Commissioners briefly discussed the Subsidized Housing Inventory in the context of rent stabilization, as some properties in Somerville receive subsidies to ensure that they remain affordable. Dennis mentioned Clarendon Hill Towers which has 460 affordable units and is currently expected to remain affordable in perpetuity.
2. City Council Activity Areas:
 - a. MCAD and related issues follow-up: The Commission submitted a letter to the Somerville City Council in regard to MCAD's case backlog in December 2022. Dennis reminded the Commissioners that it has been one year since that letter, and there has been no substantive change in the status of the backlog. Hanalei has reached out to MCAD to ask for current data on this matter.

- b. Summary of 11/10/23 meeting regarding MCAD backlog: Dennis summarized the meeting with legislative analyst Brendan Salisbury, Mike Feloney, Hannah Carillo, and Hanalei in regards to steps that Somerville can take to address the MCAD backlog. At present, Somerville Fair Housing ordinance requires that all Fair Housing complaints must be referred to MCAD. In comparison, the neighboring cities of Boston and Cambridge have enforcement agencies that are substantially equivalent to HUD, allowing them to enforce complaints within the city and bypass the MCAD backlog. This meeting discussed whether Somerville could do something similar, and what can currently be done to further Fair Housing enforcement without creating a substantially equivalent agency. The Fair Housing Commission remains committed to ensuring the enforcement of Fair Housing in Somerville, and advocates for the path that is most likely to result in addressing the complaint resolution backlog.

3. Fair Housing Month Planning

- a. Color of Law event planning: The Commission discussed their plans for educational outreach during Fair Housing Month in April. Rona suggested seven events for the month: a book discussion group on the *Color of Law*, a discussion of the film *Segregated by Design*, an information session for property owners and sellers, a know-your-rights session for renters and those looking to purchase, a panel discussion on fair housing, the April Commission meeting, and potentially versions of the above events in other languages.

Rona shared that these events are included in the TAP application for outreach and technical assistance. Rona shared that she has begun coordinating with the Somerville Public Library for the use of their spaces for these events as well as with members of the Office of Housing Stability for the panel. The Commission hopes to set dates for these events in January and begin outreach efforts in February.

- b. TAP Application: Rona and Hanalei created a first draft of the application and shared it with Commissioners individually. The Commissioners generally approved of it and will be sharing any edits with Hanalei by December 10th, 2023.

V. **Announcements**

- 1. The next meeting will be on December 28th at 3pm via Zoom. Commissioners discussed changing the meeting time to accommodate members of the public who work during the day; this will be added to the December agenda.

VI. **Adjournment**

- 1. The meeting was adjourned at 4:00pm by roll call vote.