

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION
Katjana Ballantyne
Mayor

Staff

Shannon Lawler-
Program Specialist, Fair Housing and
Inclusionary Housing Support

Lisa Davidson-
Deputy Director of Housing

Commissioners

Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Janine Lotti
Kay Mammo

Meeting Minutes

Thursday September 26th, 2024 — 3:00 pm
Via Zoom
Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members: Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman, Janine Lotti
City staff: Lisa Davidson, Shannon Lawler

Call to Order

- I. Call to order and review of draft minutes from the meeting on August 22, 2024-
The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.
A motion was introduced by Commissioner Janine Lotti to approve the minutes from the Commission's August meeting, Commissioner Rona Fischman seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.
- II. Standing Agenda Items
 - Facebook page update- Commissioner Dennis Fischman posts a fair housing question of the week on Fridays and an article or news item related to fair housing on Mondays, and the Commission's Facebook page can be found by searching SomervilleFairHousingCommission on Facebook.
Commissioner Dennis F. shared that in the past month, the most popular question of the week posed was "My Realtor won't answer basic questions like whether there are other families with kids in the neighborhood. Why?" He explained that a real estate agent cannot steer towards or away from a neighborhood based on protected class. The post received 106 views, 1 reaction, and 8 shares. Commissioner Rona F. mentioned that a real estate agent stating that there are a lot of children in the area can be considered steering even if they are not directly saying whether a household should move in; if they describe the demographics of a neighborhood based on protected class that is a violation of the Fair Housing Act. Commissioner Dennis F. elaborated that an agent can advise someone to spend time in the neighborhood and observe for themselves.
The most popular article was about a family subjected to attacks based on race and sex which received 73 views and 2 reactions. The goal of the Facebook page is education and helping people understand what does and does not constitute a fair housing violation.
 - Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon Lawler reported that there were no calls or complaints received since the last meeting. Commissioner Dennis

F. asked what time of year the office typically receives the most complaints and Shannon L. said that she would check and report back at the next meeting.

III. Continued Business

- Annual Fair Housing Report – Lisa Davidson responded to a question posed at the August meeting regarding where the fair housing annual report is submitted by sharing that Shannon L. uploaded the report to the City’s Fair Housing webpage. The report still needs to be submitted to City administration who will read it and provide questions and comments to the City staff liaison to the Commission. Rona F. shared that the report is easy to find online under “Reports” on the Fair Housing webpage. Dennis F. asked for the URL to the page which Lisa D. shared was <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/fair-housing-commission>. Dennis F. asked if there was a way to know whether the administration had viewed it yet and Lisa D. responded that staff did not yet have access to the system used to upload the report. Dennis F. requested that staff let him know when the next report becomes available so that he can send it to the Mayor and City Council.
- FY24 Annual Report – Lisa D. shared that Hanalei Steinhart, former staff liaison to the Fair Housing Commission, started the frame of the report. Lisa D. and Shannon L. hope to have it ready for the Fair Housing Commission to review by the meeting in January of 2025. Janine L. confirmed that a fiscal year refers to July through June. Lisa followed up on Rona F.’s question from the previous meeting to clarify that there is no timeframe or deadline for the report to be completed specified in the Fair Housing Ordinance. Dennis F. asked about the difference between the FY24 report and the previous report. Shannon answered that it is the same report but for the fiscal year that ended in June of 2024 rather than 2023. Dennis F. also shared that previously there was a federally required report on impediments to fair housing and that even after the requirement was removed, the City continued to do the report for several years. Lisa D. responded that the current federal administration has reintroduced the requirement for the report, but that they have not yet specified what needs to be included in it. She further shared that a Housing Needs Assessment is being done and it will be shared when it is complete.

IV. Communications

- Reappointments – Shannon L. shared that the City administration is looking at when Commissioners’ appointments expire or have expired in order to reappoint for those roles. This will begin in January. The Fair Housing Commission has three members whose appointments are currently expired. Rona F. said the Commission members have been functioning under the assumption that they are grandfathered in until told otherwise. Dennis F. confirmed this because formal reappointments were not a top priority. He also noted that some members have been on the Commission for a long time and look forward to the procedure for reviewing and renewing appointments.

V. Updates on Specific Activities

- Future events for Fair Housing education
 - Shannon L. shared that an editor from the Somerville Times reached out to publish the Fair Housing Commission Facebook question of the week. She thought this would be a positive way to expand the Commission’s educational outreach and agreed. Dennis F. noted that it should appear both in print and online. Rona F. asked if it would be the same question that is posted on the

Facebook page and Dennis F. confirmed that it would. Janine L. noted that the paper has a lot of readers because it is free.

- Patrice F. will share thoughts on April Fair Housing Month at the next meeting and signed off of the meeting.
- Rona F. asked if new content is needed for the question of the week. Dennis F. confirmed that new questions would be appreciated. Rona F. shared that a question to be added might be whether a condo association can prohibit Christmas lights. Lisa D. agreed that this question is very topical and was in the Fair Housing Specialist training materials. Rona F. also shared that another question to be used could be about fair housing search violations with roommate postings. Lisa D. added that this could be posted when it is timely based on the semester calendar. Dennis F. shared that historically this kind of question is posted at the end of the spring semester, and that this can be a fair housing issue because when renters are advertising for a subletter, they are playing the role of the landlord. Sometimes the question of the week isn't directly related to fair housing but relates to a topic that can disproportionately impact protected classes, which draws more eyes to the page. He shared that the new commissioner may be able to add some ideas when they are sworn in.
- Dennis F. opened up the conversation for April Fair Housing Month education ideas. Janine L. shared that she is glad the April event is being discussed in September because although the education is good, the Commission has sometimes waited too long to prepare. Rona F. shared that activities that worked for education at ArtBeat can be expanded upon and that it could be easy to have a true/false quiz about protected classes with a prize for people who get a high score. Dennis F. provided the context that at ArtBeat, the table had an exercise with advertisements that contained fair housing violations.
- Lisa D. shared that she is putting together some additional questionnaires so that there is quantity to draw from. She also brought up expanding outreach beyond April and asked if everyone got the spreadsheet of potential events for fair housing education. She emphasized that just because no complaints have been received in the last month does not mean discrimination is not occurring and that more education is needed about recourses that could happen if the complaint is filed, such as fines and educating the landlord, with the benefit to the complainant emphasized. Rona F. clarified that the fine is against the landlord but does not go back to the tenant, and that filing a complaint can also result in Suffolk Law taking action against the landlord. She added that the Office of Housing Stability is working with De Novo to freeze the landlord's ability to rent an apartment until the complaint is settled.
- Lisa D. is training Shannon L. and they are looking into trying to remove barriers to filing complaints with City staff acting as a Duly Authorized Individual. Shannon L. shared that she spoke with the Housing Council and more discussion needs to be had in order to find out if this is possible. Dennis F. requested that Shannon L. provide an update at the next meeting.
- Dennis F. shared that there is also education provided by the City around fair housing at the first time homebuyer courses offered by Somerville Community Corporation, because there is also discrimination that can occur when someone is purchasing a home.
- Janine L. shared that for April Fair Housing Month last year, the Commission applied for technical assistance. She asked if they can apply again and Rona F. responded that the Commission can apply again, but that last year the agency did not provide anything constructive and that it may be better to adjust what has

already been done. Dennis F. suggested asking Commissioner Patrice F. to be the contact for this application because she works at the agency that provides those grants. He asked the staff members to reach out to her. He also shared that there are now materials in many languages that can be reused. Rona F. specified that these materials for the book group. Dennis F. asked for the City office that provides translations and Shannon L. responded that it is through the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA). Rona shared that the Commission cannot reserve a time and date in April at the library for events until January. Dennis F. encouraged the commission to spend more time on fair housing leading up to April and think creatively about it. Rona F. asked about whether the Commission can obtain a tent, which would be necessary if they are to do more tabling events. Lisa D. will speak with the director of Housing Division about getting a tent.

VI. Announcements

- Dennis F. shared that the meeting is taking place during Hispanic Heritage Month.
- Rona F. shared that the next meeting is scheduled for a Jewish holiday (Simchat Torah). Dennis F. noted that for people who may be observing and not able to attend the next Commission meeting, recordings are made so that the public can view meetings afterwards.
- The next meeting is scheduled for 3pm on October 24, 2024.

VII. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:02 PM by roll call vote.