

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION  
*Katjana Ballantyne*  
*Mayor*

Staff

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

Commissioners

Patrice Faulkner  
Dennis Fischman  
Rona Fischman  
Janine Lotti  
Kay Mammo

**Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 3:00 pm  
Via Zoom  
Online Video Platform

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

**I. Call to order and review of draft minutes:**

The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.

A motion was introduced by Commissioner Rona Fischman to approve the minutes from the Commission's meeting on October 24, 2024. Commissioner Janine Lotti 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 related to fair housing on Mondays on the Fair Housing Commission's Facebook page. The post that got the most traffic since the last meeting was a question asking whether source of income fair housing laws apply if one is an owner-occupant of a two-family home and rents out a unit. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that fair housing laws do still apply, and the owner cannot discriminate against a tenant because they are paying the rent with a mobile housing voucher. He added that other fair housing laws also apply to that situation and encouraged owners to follow the Fair Housing Act, whether or not they are exempt from doing so, because it creates a more inclusive community. The article was seen by 174 people, 2 reacted, and 6 shared it. Another post with high traffic noted that veterans are a protected class. The post was seen by 102 people, 1 reacted, and 7 shared it.
- Shannon L. addressed a question from the previous Commission meeting about fair housing rules regarding co-operative housing, sharing that co-ops have to abide by all fair housing laws and cannot select new members by excluding protected classes. Co-op members cannot discriminate, and they do not have any exemptions from fair housing law.  
Commissioner Rona F. wrote to the lawyers at the Greater Boston Real Estate Board asking whether co-ops have to follow both Massachusetts and federal fair housing law. She also asked what roommate rental units are called. She has not received a reply yet but will return to the topic in the next meeting.

- Shannon L. reviewed the five complaints received since the October meeting. The first complaint was on the basis of race, religion, and source of income as protected classes. Due to the nature of the complaint, which was a rodent infestation, they were referred to the Inspectional Services Department (ISD). The second complaint was regarding a City staff member and therefore was not directly a fair housing issue because it did not involve a landlord or agent providing housing. It was referred to the staff member's supervisor and the Mayor's office was notified. The third complainant was referred to ISD after communicating to staff that they were not looking to make a fair housing complaint but wanted to know the proper department to reach out to regarding their unit's safety. The fourth complaint was regarding a request for reasonable accommodation and modifications to their current unit. Shannon L. assisted in submitting the accommodation and modification request in writing to the property manager. The final complaint was on the basis of source of income but was recently received and the individual has not yet followed up.  
Commissioner Janine L. asked whether the first complaint was resolved. Shannon L. responded that when the individual followed up it was to inform her that ISD had issued a citation to the landlord.

### **III. Continued Business**

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon L. shared that she and the Deputy Director of Housing Division, Lisa Davidson, are meeting the following week to start the annual report.
- FY23 Annual Report – Shannon L. shared that the FY 23 report was referred by City Council to the Housing Community Development Committee who will discuss it in a later meeting.  
Commissioner Dennis F. asked which Councilors are on the Committee and Shannon L. replied that she would check for the following meeting.

### **IV. Updates on Specific Activities**

- Future events for Fair Housing education- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that education is at the center of the Commission's mission.
- Planning for April (Fair Housing Month)-
  - Commissioner Rona F. shared that she and Commissioner Patrice Faulkner will be talking to the Racial and Social Justice department about collaboration. She added that she updated the grant application for Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) assistance and sent it to Shannon L. to complete and submit. Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the Technical Assistance Program (TAP) provides MAPC staff time which would assist in making the connections to have successful Fair Housing Month events. The application must be submitted by an executive of Somerville.  
Shannon L. shared that Tom Galligani, the Executive Director of OSPCD, would need to write a letter of support and that the application deadline is December 13, 2024.  
Commissioner Rona F. acknowledged that former Fair Housing Specialist Hanalei Steinhart did much of the initial work on the TAP application.
  - Commissioner Rona F. shared that in 2024, the Fair Housing Month activity was two meetings of *The Color of Law* book group. The book is a detailed history of how *de jure* housing discrimination, in the form of mortgages and use of federal money, was structurally set up to exclude Black and Brown people and create racially segregated neighborhoods. A short film was also shown. This activity has been done for the past three or four years.

Commissioner Janine L. asked whether Todd Kaplan presented at Fair Housing Month in 2024. Commissioner Rona F. confirmed that he came in 2024 to discuss credit scores and how they are arbitrarily excluding people from housing. Many studies show there is no correlation between people's credit and their ability to pay their rent. Commissioner Dennis F. gave context that Todd Kaplan is a Somerville resident and Greater Boston Legal Services lawyer. He added that previously, Somerville schools had a poster contest, but it didn't reach as many people as necessary. He also shared that Shannon L. sent out an article he found by Richard Rothstein. The article mentioned that Rothstein was originally studying educational inequities but discovered that looking at student outcomes individually misses that neighborhoods are segregated, resulting in some having worse outcomes than others.

- Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the Commission will have an event that expands upon the previous book group and asked whether the credit score educational event could be done again in 2025.
- Commissioner Janine L. suggested reintroducing the poster contest and opening it up to different age categories to reach more people. Commissioner Rona F. added that having the posters in City Hall brought attention to fair housing, but that the activity took a large amount of effort from teachers. She suggested making it smaller, with flyers in the library. In the past, local businesses supplied the reward for the winning poster. She asked that this item be discussed at the next Commission meeting.
- Planning for tabling events-
  - Shannon L. updated that Lisa D. is looking at pricing to see if Housing Division can buy a tent for tabling events. She added that she spoke with the Administrative Assistant for the Elections Commission but has not heard back yet regarding whether tabling outside of polling places is permitted. Commissioner Janine L. shared that she will look into tabling at Somerville Housing Authority events.
- Other outreach-
  - Commissioner Dennis F. shared that in previous local election years, he and Commissioner Patrice F. sent out questionnaires to incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council. These questionnaires need to be sent, returned, and published in local journals before September 2025. He asked that Shannon L. look into what date registration is due for candidates to City Council. Commissioner Patrice F. added that they need to decide whether the questions will remain the same or new questions will be added.
  - Commissioner Dennis F. asked that potential tabling events be added to the spreadsheet of events.
  - He added that the Commission will expand online outreach when Commissioner Kay Mammo is sworn in. Shannon L. asked whether the City of Somerville's Instagram and Twitter could post about fair housing events. Commissioner Rona F. said that it has not been done before. Shannon L. will ask Media if fair housing events can be posted, particularly for Fair Housing Month. Commissioner Rona F. suggested that some ideas for fair housing question of the week for the Facebook page could be drawn from complaints received.

## V. Announcements

- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that the commissioners received communication from the City regarding open and expired Commission seats and beginning the process of inviting the community to apply for those seats. He noted that the positions are volunteer based, which can decrease interest in participation. He added that when it is more difficult for community members to apply, that is prohibitive to the diversity of the Commission.
- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on January 2, 2025.
- The tentative calendar for Fair Housing Commission meetings for the upcoming year was shared. Changes may occur throughout the year.

#### **VI. Adjournment**

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:04 PM by roll call vote.

#### **List of documents shared:**

- Fair Housing Commission Agenda for 12/5/2024
- Draft Fair Housing Commission Meeting Calendar