

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, January 2nd, 2025, 3:00 pm
Via Zoom
Online Video Platform

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

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 Janine Lotti to approve the minutes from the Commission's meeting on December 5, 2024. Commissioner Rona Fischman seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

II. Standing Agenda Items

- Facebook page update- The Fair Housing Commission has a Facebook page which can be found by searching "SomervilleFairHousingCommission" on Facebook. A question of the week is posted on Fridays and a news item related to fair housing is posted on Mondays. Commissioner Dennis Fischman shared that in the past month, the post with the most traffic was a question about what type of questions landlords can ask prospective tenants that do not violate fair housing law. The questions that a landlord can ask are related to the applicant's ability to pay rent and verification of eligibility for properties restricted to elderly and/or disabled tenants. The post received 114 views, 2 reacts, and 5 shares. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that another popular post was an article about a Black woman who was discriminated against due to her race and was refused purchase of a unit after making a bid and down payment. The post received 103 views, 1 react, 1 comment, and 5 shares.
- Shannon L. reviewed complaints received since the December Commission meeting. There was one complaint received, which was on the basis of family status with a child under the age of six. The complainant stated that several real estate agents stopped responding to them when they found out they had a child under the age of six. They also had a phone conversation and a written conversation with real estate agents where they were explicitly told that the owner would not rent to them because they had a child under the age of six, due to the lead abatement rule. Shannon L. referred them to Suffolk Law testing program for the real estate agents who stopped responding after learning the age of their child and offered to assist in filing a complaint with HUD and MCAD for the explicit written and verbal violations of fair housing law on the basis of family status. The complainant was concerned about retaliation and said they would consider their

options. Commissioner Rona F. shared that real estate licensing law is very clear that this is discrimination.

Shannon L. shared the details about the City's Home Improvement Program (HIP), which includes lead abatement for low- to moderate-income units. Lead abatement is a top priority for the program. Shannon L. encouraged any owners interested in applying for the program to reach out to Russell Koty at rkoty@somervillema.gov. The regulations and instructions on how to apply can be found on the HIP website at <https://www.somervillema.gov/homeimprovementprogram>.

III. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon L. shared that she and Lisa D. have started working on the report and are looking into the requirements of the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing interim rule as well as the increase in State funding for MCAD. They will also be adding information about education and outreach in FY24.
- FY23 Annual Report – Shannon L. shared that the report is still with the Housing Community Development Committee. Councilors Strezo, Clingan, and Mbah are on the Committee.
- Commissioner Rona F. provided more information on how fair housing law applies to roommate situations. She spoke with the legal council for the Greater Boston Real Estate Board who shared that according to a federal court, “the Fair Housing Act does not apply to roommate decisions. Roommates cannot discriminate in advertisement, but they can have preference when making decisions.

“US Court of Appeals 9th Circuit in 2012 distinguished that ‘the FHA is not intended to interfere with personal relationships inside the home.’ ‘Holding that the FHA applies inside a home or apartment would allow the government to restrict our ability to choose roommates compatible with our lifestyles. This would be a serious invasion of privacy, autonomy, and security.’”

Housing providers, regardless of whether they are owners or tenants looking for roommates, are still covered by fair housing advertising requirements.

They added, “shared tenancy best describes these roommate apartments. Shared tenancy occurs when the apartment is being rented by multiple tenants as roommates, with each tenant having equal rights and responsibilities under the lease.” Commissioner Rona F. shared that cooperative housing entails ownership of a share of the company that owns the housing, and is subject to all fair housing laws, unlike in shared tenancy situations.

IV. Updates on Specific Activities

- Future events for Fair Housing education
 - Planning for April (Fair Housing Month)
 - Shannon L. shared that she submitted the TAP application along with a letter of support from OSPCD Director Tom Galligani. She also shared that the Media team confirmed that they will post Fair Housing Month events on the City's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages. Commissioner Patrice Faulkner. clarified that the application should be a conversation between MAPC and the applicants.
 - Commissioner Patrice F. updated the Commission on how *The Color of Law* event will be expanded. She and Commissioner Rona F. set up a meeting with the Department of Racial and Social Justice (RSJ) to discuss partnering with them, because their mission aligns with that of the Commission. They reached out to the Community Engagement Specialist and Director of RSJ and will meet with them in January.

Commissioner Rona F. added that she will be looking at the calendar to find out what times are best for Commissioners to come to the event.

Commissioner Janine L. shared that Thursday nights could be best because City staff work late.

Commissioner Dennis F. asked the subcommittee to report back at the next meeting about potential dates for the book event.

- Planning for tabling events
 - Commissioner Dennis F. asked the Commissioners to add to the spreadsheet of potential tabling events, including any festivals, such as National Night Out.
- Online education and outreach
 - Commissioner Rona F. shared that there is a tenant union handbook and tenant rights handbook which are both on the City website.
 - Lisa D. reminded the Commission that there was previous discussion around fair housing presentations to voucher recipients. Commissioner Janine L. shared that there are voucher orientations held by Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) for new voucher holders, and that she will share the Section 8 Manager's information with Shannon L. so that she can reach out to see if there can be fair housing presentations during these orientations.
 - Commissioner Janine L. shared that people can be hesitant to file fair housing complaints because they fear retaliation, and that it could be part of the Commission's educational efforts to make sure it is clear that they are protected from retaliation. Commissioner Patrice F. suggested creating an email template that could be translated for applicants to easily send to landlords. Lisa D. added that it can be helpful to share the benefits of filing a fair housing complaint if someone has experienced discrimination in housing. Commissioner Rona F. suggested creating a one-page document telling people their rights and the benefits of filing a fair housing complaint.
 - Commissioner Janine F. added that it could be helpful to expand outreach to landlords to share that public vouchers are guaranteed rental payments, and that accepting them, in addition to being a legal obligation, is in their benefit.
 - Commissioner Dennis F. asked whether staff are still presenting at the Somerville Community Corporation's First Time Homebuyer Courses. Shannon L. confirmed that she presents at the course monthly. Commissioner Dennis F. asked whether the information sessions for Inclusionary units could include a section on fair housing law. Shannon L. responded that these information sessions have been replaced by office hours once a week and open house sessions. Lisa D. suggested having an open "know your rights" fair housing meeting, similar to the Inclusionary office hours.
 - Commissioner Rona F. reminded the Commission that within Fair Housing month they have landlord and tenant focused meetings planned, which could address some of the mentioned concerns.
- Fair housing questionnaire for candidates to City Council
 - Shannon L. called the Elections Commission, which did not know the date registration is due for candidates to City Council in 2025. However, during the election cycle two years ago, nomination papers were

available in May, the last day to submit was in early June, the preliminary election was in September, and the election was in November.

- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that the Somerville Times, other local papers, and the City's website have posted the candidates' answers in past election cycles.
- Commissioner Rona F. suggested putting together a "how-to" document for candidate questionnaires. Commissioner Patrice F. added that the media that publishes the answers should be included in the how-to guide.
- Commissioner Patrice F. also suggested adding a more nuanced question to the questionnaire to have candidates think deeply about fair housing.

V. Announcements

- Commissioner Janine L. shared that it was a successful year of home purchasing for people who worked with SHA, with one successful Section 8 for Homeownership program purchase and several purchases without the assistance of Section 8 by families with vouchers.
- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on January 30, 2025.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:17 PM by roll call vote.