

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 30th, 2025 — 3:00 pm
Via Zoom—Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members: Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman, Janine Lotti, Kay Mammo
City Staff: Shannon Lawler

I. Call to order and review of draft minutes:

The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.

The Commission introduced themselves to new member Kay Mammo.

A motion was introduced by Commissioner Rona Fischman to approve the minutes from the Commission's meeting on January 2, 2025. Commissioner Janine Lotti seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

II. Standing Agenda Items

- Facebook page update- Commissioner Dennis Fischman shared that the Commission has a Facebook page that posts a question of the week each Friday and a news item related to fair housing each Monday. In the past month, the post with the most traffic was an article about banks denying repair loans to Black homeowners. It received 168 views and 3 shares. Another popular post addressed the state law that landlords cannot require their tenants to shovel snow.
- Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon L. shared that there were three complaints received since the previous meeting. The first was a call asking for more information on what a landlord can legally ask a tenant to provide to make a reasonable accommodation for an emotional support animal. She responded with a message with information and resources. The next complaint was a landlord-tenant dispute that was not specifically related to fair housing law; the landlord passed a City fine for non-removal of snow along to the tenants, which violates state law. After the tenants informed the landlord of their legal rights, the landlord responded that their rent was at its current rate due to their agreement that the tenants have snow removal responsibility and that they would raise the rent if the tenants did not agree to this. This was referred to the Office of Housing Stability. The third complaint was from a tenant having trouble receiving communication from Boston Housing Authority in order to move out of her current unit. Shannon L. facilitated a connection between the tenant and Boston Housing Authority.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- Planning for April (Fair Housing Month)

- Commissioner Rona F. shared that she and Commissioner Patrice Faulkner met with the Director of the Department of Racial and Social Justice (RSJ) regarding collaborating on an event for Fair Housing Month. The Director shared that she would support the Commission's event. Commissioner Rona F. noted that it is much more difficult since 2020 to get in-person attendance at events, even for events that RSJ has put on recently. She also noted that RSJ has good communication with Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA) for translation and better ways to contact communities where they are for broader outreach and more participation at the April event.
- Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the subcommittee was also thinking about how the Commission can be a good partner to RSJ and have a reciprocal relationship. Commissioner Rona F. added that the missions of RSJ and the Fair Housing Commission are aligned. Shannon L. also mentioned that the Director has a connection to a Tufts professor who could be a speaker at the event.
- Commissioner Dennis F. opened the discussion for the Fair Housing Month event planning. Commissioner Rona F. shared that they have reserved Thursday, April 10 and Thursday, April 17 for events. Todd Kaplan agreed to be the speaker for a "know-your-rights" event on April 17. The April 10 event will be a hybrid book discussion on *The Color of Law*. She noted that the Central Library is not accessible to everyone in Somerville, so the Commission is open to looking into new locations. She asked whether the content of the "know-your-rights" event should be the same as the previous year (a discussion on how the use of credit scores to determine whether someone will pay rent is discriminatory) or have new content. Commissioner Patrice F. responded that she believes an important topic for discussion is housing choice vouchers and that this topic has a big impact on Somerville's community. Shannon L. added that she would like to keep vouchers as the FHC's theme for the year. Commissioner Rona F. noted that it is very difficult to get landlord participation in these types of discussions. Commissioner Patrice F. added that it might be best to have the event aimed towards both landlords and tenants. Commissioner Rona F. responded that an effective way to educate the attendees would be to teach tenants their rights through a role-playing situation, addressing what a voucher holder can do when they are denied housing due to having a voucher. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that Commissioner Janine L. is a good connection for reaching the target audience of voucher holders to attend the event through Somerville Housing Authority and the RSJ may be able to publicize the event more widely to reach community members. Commissioner Kay M. suggested making the event "How to educate your landlord," as tenants are more likely to attend, and that she is considering making an Instagram account to broaden outreach.
- The Commission will brainstorm titles and one-sentence descriptions for the speaker event which they will send to Shannon L. She will send the options to Commissioners Patrice F. and Rona F. who will decide on the best title and description, then send them back to Shannon L. to make the flyer and send it to SOIA for translation. The book event flyer will have the date changed and be submitted for translation.
- Commissioner Rona F. shared that the Office of Housing Stability has an incentive program for landlords renting to tenants with Section 8 vouchers, and that the webpage with information (<https://somervillehomelesscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SomerVIP-Flyer-new.pdf>) could be shared on the FHC Instagram and Facebook pages to lead up to Fair Housing Month's theme of accepting housing choice vouchers.

- Planning for tabling events-
 - Shannon L. asked for suggestions of community events or festivals that the FHC could table at in the upcoming months. Commissioner Rona F. suggested tabling at ArtBeat again, along with Civic Day. Shannon L. will share the dates of both events once they are released.
- Online education and outreach-
 - Commissioner Kay M. suggested creating a BlueSky account in addition to Instagram and would like to learn more about the Commission's current outreach efforts.
- Questionnaire for candidates for City Council-
 - Commissioner Dennis F. shared that Commissioner Patrice F. has taken the lead in past years on creating a fair housing-related questionnaire for candidates to City Council and asked if the Commission would like to continue this effort for the 2025 election. Commissioner Patrice F. supported the idea of doing the questionnaire again because it educates both the candidates running for office on the fair housing issues facing community members and educates constituents on the candidates running in their ward. She would like to add an additional question based on a study by The Boston Foundation entitled "Qualified Renters Need not Apply: Race and Voucher Discrimination in the Metro Boston Rental Housing Market" that ties in Section 8 voucher discrimination. This is in keeping with the Commission's theme for the year. Commissioner Rona F. responded that the question could be taking something from the study that is not well known by the public and forming it into a question in order to educate the candidates and members of the public reading the question. Commissioner Patrice F. added that this question could be a way to educate those who might discriminate against voucher holders.
- Collaboration with Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) on voucher orientations-
 - Commissioner Janine L. shared that every new voucher holder receives an orientation and informational documents from the housing authority when they receive their voucher. Shannon L. met with the Director of Leased Housing, who shared that the orientation is done individually with each household, and they receive information on their fair housing rights. Logistically, it would be difficult for the Commission to present at each of these orientations, but SHA was open to receiving a one-page flyer that could be included in the orientation packet materials. Commissioner Rona F. noted that at an upcoming meeting, there should be discussion on what should go on a flyer specifically for the Section 8 orientation and Somerville Housing Authority's constituents could be notified of the Fair Housing Month "know-your-rights" event.
 - Commissioner Janine L. will find out the best way to do outreach to all voucher holders through SHA.
 - Shannon L. added that it would be good to have the (translated) flyer to hand out at the Fair Housing Month events as well as for new voucher holder orientations. Commissioner Janine L. added that it should focus only on key points because voucher holders are already receiving a large amount of information at the orientation events. Commissioner Dennis F. offered to look at the existing information given by SHA and make it into a one-page flyer to be translated, with a link to more information.

IV. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon L. is working on the Fair Housing Annual Report with Lisa Davidson, the Deputy Directory of Housing. They will be adding information about education and outreach in FY24.
- FY23 Annual Report – No update, the report is still with the Housing Community Development Committee who needs to approve it before it goes to City Council. Shannon L. will present the report when requested by the Committee.

V. Announcements

- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on February 27, 2025.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:28 PM by roll call vote.