

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, February 27th, 2025 — 3:00 pm
Via Zoom—Online Video Platform

Call to Order

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 January 30, 2025. Commissioner Kay Mammo 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 which can be found by searching SomervilleFairHousing on Facebook. The post with the most attention was a question about whether marital status based on gender is a protected class under fair housing law. He clarified that marital status is protected under state and local law. The post received 143 views, 7 shares, and one like.
- Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon Lawler shared that two complaints have been received since the previous meeting.
The first was an individual with an emotional support animal whose property manager was making them sign an "Animal and Pet Addendum" to allow the assistance animal. The addendum has language that does not apply to assistance animals and only applies to pets (such as breed restrictions). They provided the property management with documentation that the animal is an emotional support animal and shared with them that the addendum was in violation of fair housing law. Shannon L. reached out to the property manager and explained that the addendum should not be necessary for her to sign in order to live at the property. The property manager responded that she is allowed to live there with the emotional support animal but that the addendum was to hold her responsible for any damage caused by the animal. They offered to rewrite the addendum and remove the discriminatory language. Shannon L. noted that tenants are responsible for wear and tear caused by an assistance animal in the same way they are responsible for all wear and tear caused, and that they cannot be charged extra for having an assistance animal. Commissioner Rona F. suggested that after an addendum is drafted, it be sent to the Fair Housing Commission and posted on the website as a resource for landlords to use. Shannon L. will run the idea past the City's legal team.
The second complaint was from an individual whose landlord ceased making repairs as needed in the past few years. The complainant shared that Inspectional Services Department came to take pictures of all repairs needed. They believe the lack of response on repairs may be tied to racial discrimination, but they were uncertain. Shannon L.

provided resources on making a fair housing complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) and suggested that doing an intake interview with MCAD might provide more clarity on whether the lack of response was due to discrimination. The complainant is withholding rent until repairs are made, so Shannon L. provided the information for Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services to give assistance with this. Commissioner Janine Lotti suggested that if they have a mobile housing voucher, they should ask for an inspection through the housing authority.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- Planning for April (Fair Housing Month)-
 - Commissioner Rona F. shared that there will be an event held on April 10. It will be a screening of the short film “Segregated by Design” and a discussion of *The Color of Law*. The second event will be a talk by Todd Kaplan from Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services around fair housing law, aimed at both landlords and tenants. She added that the Office of Housing Stability has the SomerVIP program which offers cash incentives to landlords who have tenants with mobile vouchers. Shannon L. has requested translations for both event flyers from the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs. Shannon L. and Commissioners Patrice F. and Rona F. will be meeting with the Somerville Office of Racial and Social Justice (RSJ) to discuss the collaboration on Fair Housing Month events. Commissioner Rona F. asked that Shannon L. send the flyers once they are translated, in order for the Commissioners to advertise them on their personal social media, the Somerville Fair Housing Facebook page, and other physical spaces. Commissioner Kay M. offered to facilitate the book discussion. She and Commissioner Rona F. will work together on preparing the discussion questions. Shannon L. will be working with RSJ staff to do flyering for the two events. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that reaching out to faith-based communities is a good way to meet sometimes overlooked residents where they are, including immigrant communities.

IV. Announcement

- Housing Division Director Mike Feloney shared that his last day will be Friday, February 28, 2025, after ten years with the City of Somerville. He will now be working for the State Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that before Director Mike F. started with the City, most of the Commission seats were empty and the role staffing of the Commission was very limited.

V. Updates on Specific Activities

- Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) technical assistance proposal-
 - Shannon L. shared that the Technical Assistance Program application with MAPC was approved, and that MAPC sent a proposal of activities that will expand what the Commission currently has in mind for Fair Housing Month as well as extend their assistance beyond Fair Housing Month. Commissioners Rona F. and Kay M. will attend a meeting with MAPC along with Shannon L. Commissioner Patrice F. asked if capacity building for the Commission is built into the proposal. Commissioner Rona F. added that if the assistance is closing in June of 2025, there is not enough time to fully benefit from the assistance. Her ask would be to extend the assistance to next April. Commissioner Janine L. shared that it could help increase education and outreach efforts, but that the Commission’s role is not clear from the proposal. It is important to know how the

Commission is integrated into this for long-term capacity. Commissioner Patrice F. emphasized the importance of any tools or resources generated from this assistance being able to be used for other Somerville departments and commissions.

The Commission agreed that Commissioners Kay M. and Rona F. have authorization in the upcoming meeting with MAPC to make decisions on behalf of the Commission.

- Planning for tabling events-
 - Civic Day will be on Saturday, April 5 from 12-4 PM and will have most City departments and divisions tabling to educate the community on what they do. Housing Division will be tabling and Deputy Director of Housing, Lisa Davidson, is looking into getting two tables so that the Fair Housing Commission can table separately. Commissioners Rona F., Kay M., and Janine L. offered to assist with Civic Day tabling. Commissioner Kay M. suggested that there be a prize for answering the question right. Shannon L. asked that any prize ideas be sent to her so that she can check if there is a budget for them.
 - East Somerville Carnival is organized by East Somerville Main Streets. Commissioner Rona F. will look into the deadline for tabling at the event.
- Fair housing questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council
 - Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the Commission will be expanding the questions asked to candidates. The purpose of the questionnaire is to get candidates thinking about fair housing issues and for voters to have access to the candidates' responses.
- Online education and outreach
 - Tabled to the March meeting.

VI. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon L. is working on the report, no update.
- FY23 Annual Report – Shannon L. will be presenting the report to the Housing Community Development Committee on March 4, 2025.

VII. Announcement

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

VIII. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:15 PM by roll call vote.