

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, March 20th, 2025 — 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 Janine Lotti to approve the minutes from the Commission's meeting on February 27, 2025. Commissioner Rona Fischman 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. A fair housing question of the week is posted every Friday and a news article is posted every Monday. The fair housing question of the week that received the most attention was: "Is it legal for a landlord to refuse to rent to anyone below the age of 25?" The answer is no, age is a protected category and age discrimination violates fair housing law, with the exception of senior (55+) housing and minors (under 18). The post had 137 views. Another popular post was a news article about making it easier to get reasonable accommodation exemptions to zoning regulations for properties built for people with disabilities. The article had 84 views and was shared twice.
- Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon Lawler shared that one complaint was received since the previous meeting, a referral from the Department of Racial and Social Justice's Investigator. They met with Shannon to give an overview of the complaint, which was on the basis of race and national origin, before Shannon spoke with the complainant over the phone and by email. The complainant was harassed for holiday decorations on her apartment door and treated differently from other tenants who also had holiday decorations up. The complainant is also in contact with the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs. The complaint has been submitted to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.
Shannon also provided updates on previous complaints. She helped one complainant remove all language that was potentially discriminatory and not related to assistance animals on the animal addendum, per the property manager's request. She assisted the other complainant in communicating with Somerville Housing Authority regarding her reasonable accommodation request to transfer or have modifications to her current unit.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- Planning for April (Fair Housing Month)
 - Commissioner Rona F. shared that in the past month, both events have been posted on the library website and the flyers are translated into the most commonly written languages in Somerville.
 - Commissioner Rona F. also met with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), which now has quorum. However, because they have five new members who had not yet joined, they could not substantially move on anything until those new members join. A member of the HRC asked if the Fair Housing Commission would address eviction, to which Rona responded by saying that Fair Housing addresses historic discrimination which can be correlated with affordable housing work, but it does not fully overlap with eviction. She added that most complaints happen at the point of purchase or rental, not eviction. Shannon shared that she has not received any complaints regarding eviction in the past year, and that if she did receive a complaint regarding eviction, she would treat it the same as any other fair housing complaint in addition to bringing in the Office of Housing Stability to assign someone to help with the eviction part of the case.
 - Commissioner Dennis F. shared that the Commission has applied for technical support from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC). Commissioner Rona F. elaborated that MAPC is good at community organizing and making relationships with people by meeting them where they are to help groups work together. The Commission is getting staff time, likely through the next few months. The MAPC staff working with the Commission are waiting for final approval on the proposal. Shannon shared that the staff will be coming to this year's Fair Housing Month events.
 - Commissioner Dennis F. asked what the Commissioners can do to promote the event. He will make sure the flyers will go on the Commission's Facebook page, Commissioner Rona F. will put it on her blog, and Commissioner Janine L. will send out emails. Shannon shared that she will send a short social media blurb and the translated images of the flyers so that they can be posted on the City's social media pages and that she will try to get the events posted by the Cambridge Day and Somerville Times. She asked the Commissioners to post flyers in any physical spaces they frequent. She will also flyer with the Community Engagement Specialist from the Department of Racial and Social Justice in East Somerville, Union Square, and Davis Square. Commissioner Dennis F. suggested flyering in faith-based spaces and organizations. Commissioner Janine L. suggested using EventBrite to advertise. Shannon shared that Kerry O'Donnell from the library is flyering at all of the library locations. Kerry also shared that the reference librarians will be doing a book display for fair housing month and requested suggestions for books. Commissioners Dennis F. and Rona F. offered to send a list of books for the display.
 - Commissioner Rona F. brought up the April 10 *The Color of Law* event and shared that she is starting to create questions for the event, particularly around restrictive covenants. Commissioner Patrice Faulkner added that it might be helpful to have a map of redlining in Somerville alongside a map of where existing communities of color are in Somerville today at the event. She also suggested showing a map of current median income in Somerville to compare with the other two maps. Shannon added that the event will be a panel discussion and asked that Commissioners Rona F. and Patrice F. meet with her to come up with questions for the panel around *The Color of Law* and the comparison

between redlining and the current racial and economic composition of the city. She mentioned that Commissioner Kay Mammo offered to facilitate the panel discussion at the February meeting. Commissioner Dennis F. added a reminder that the events do not need to be perfect and to remain cognizant that Commissioners not become burned out on April events. He also reminded the Commission that the language used at the events should be clear and accessible to everyone and that the moderator should ensure that attendees have the chance to ask questions and participate. Commissioner Janine L. added that panelists can be limited in the amount of time that they can speak about their expertise in order to leave time for audience questions.

- For the April 17 “Know Your Rights” event, Commissioner Rona F. shared that Todd Kaplan will speak about his recent case involving the use of credit in screening as well as voucher holders’ rights under fair housing law, followed by the landlords and tenants in the room splitting into two groups. One Commissioner will sit with the landlords and talk about the Somerville Voucher Incentive Program (SomerVIP). The tenant group will role-play what to do when a landlord asks whether an applicant is using a voucher. Shannon added that Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC) runs the SomerVIP program and asked whether someone from SHC or OHS should attend the event to explain more about the program. Commissioner Dennis F. added that by collaborating with other City departments and community partners, there is more awareness of the work of others, which can help ensure that people get the resources they need, regardless of where they go.
Commissioner Rona F. asked Shannon if she can find out whether SHC or OHS needs a webpage for the SomerVIP program, and offered to make a webpage, if needed. Commissioner Janine L. confirmed that a SomerVIP program administrator should be invited to the April 17 event.
- Planning for tabling events-
 - Civic Day- Shannon shared that Civic Day will take place on April 5 in the parking lot beside City Hall, and Housing Division will be tabling. She will be there for half the time and Interim Housing Director Lisa Davidson will be there for half the time. She asked the Commission members to drop by for an hour or two if they are available. There will be Fair Housing Commission pens to give out, alongside the flyers for the Fair Housing Month events.
 - Carnival- Tabled to the April 24, 2025 meeting.
- Online education and outreach- Tabled to the April 24, 2025 meeting.
- Fair housing questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council- Tabled to the April 24, 2025 meeting.

IV. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report- Tabled to the April 24, 2025 meeting.
- FY23 Annual Report- Tabled to the April 24, 2025 meeting.

V. Announcement

- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on April 24, 2025.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:03 PM by roll call vote.