

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, June 26th, 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:

The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.

II. Update on MAPC Technical Assistance:

Gloria Huangpu from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council reviewed the landscape analysis. The organizations identified for one-on-one conversations were Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs, Connexion Church, Community Action Agency Somerville, and Somerville Homeless Coalition. More organizations may be identified after the initial round of conversations. Gloria asked the Commissioners if there were any other organizations that they would suggest including in the first round of conversations and none were identified. Commissioner Dennis Fischman noted that if the Commissioners know of any particular contacts within the identified organizations, they should share them with Gloria. Gloria also asked for input on the conversation guide to customize it to the context of Somerville fair housing.

III. Review of Draft Minutes:

- A motion was introduced by Commissioner Patrice Faulkner to approve the minutes from the Commission's meeting on May 22, 2025. Commissioner Kay Mammo seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously. Commissioner Rona Fischman introduced a motion to approve the minutes from the meeting on June 5, 2025. Commissioner Kay M. seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

IV. Standing Agenda Items:

- Facebook page update- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that the Commission has a Facebook page where a fair housing question of the week is posted on Fridays and a news article on Mondays. The Facebook page has 566 followers, two-thirds of whom are women. Somerville residents make up the largest portion of the followers, but there is a significant number of followers from Cambridge and Boston, with some followers from other municipalities (including internationally). He noted that the question of the week does not always directly relate to fair housing but is of interest to people who may

experience housing discrimination. The most popular question of the week in the past month was “How do I get my security deposit back?” The post received 58 views and 5 reacts. The news article with the most attention was about the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD is not enforcing Civil Rights Laws that should be enforced, due to staff cuts and because lawyers are being told to slow walk some complaints and grants. The post received 58 views, 5 reacts, and 2 shares. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that there has been much less engagement with the page in June than in April and May. Commissioner Janine Lotti asked how people can see the posts or find the Commission’s Facebook page. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that many of the viewers are already followers of the page or people who have the posts placed on their feed. Commissioner Patrice F. stated her concern over the defunding of HUD and the impact this will have currently and years down the line on fair housing in communities, and how long it will take to recover from the effects of this defunding. Shannon Lawler shared that HUD is currently investigating the complaint of a constituent who submitted it in December. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that a recent Boston Globe article notes that housing vouchers across the state are being placed on hold due to impending federal funding cuts.

- Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon shared that there have been three complaints received in the last month. The first rented a room without a lease and was facing what may be considered quid pro quo harassment from her landlord. She also stated that the landlord had a history of this behavior with other tenants. Shannon referred her to Greater Boston Legal Services to get more advice around harassment, and she provided her with resources on the Violence Against Women Act. She also referred her to the Community Outreach Help and Recovery (COHR) program through the Somerville Police Department because this appeared to be more than just a fair housing case. Commissioner Dennis F. asked if Shannon would be able to find out if other people have reported this landlord. Shannon said that she aims to have a list by the end of the summer of the owners of all properties about which the Commission has received complaints. Commissioner Patrice F. asked whether individuals renting without a lease can make fair housing complaints as tenants. Shannon responded that individuals can submit complaints even if they do not have a lease if they are experiencing any type of housing discrimination and noted that people who do not have leases or who are tenants-at-will may be even more vulnerable to discrimination and housing instability. The second call received was a question from an individual who learned about the Fair Housing Commission at a tabling event. They anticipated having difficulty when applying to units with an emotional support animal and asked to copy Shannon in on emails with a potential landlord when disclosing the animal and providing documentation, to which she agreed. She also provided resources on their rights with regard to having an assistance animal. The third complaint came from an individual who is a tenant-at-will. Their landlord is applying pressure for them to vacate the unit because their spouse is coming to live with them. The landlord has offered to pay them if they leave and has been dismissive of their rights, repeatedly stating that he does not want to talk about their legal rights. The tenant does not have any written notice of the lease being terminated. Shannon may be able to call the landlord to tell them about the tenants’ rights. Commissioner Dennis F. asked if the household are members of a protected class and Shannon responded that they are being pressured to leave because their spouse is moving in, so the complaint may fall under family or marital status. Commissioner Rona F. shared that even the State Sanitary Code does not require a large amount of square footage per person, so it is unlikely that having another person in the unit is a violation. She added that there was a discrimination case which may be a precedent to this complaint in the 1985 that went to the Cambridge

Rent Control Board where a landlord was only advertising to households who were in a partnership/couple to apply and stated that the unit was too small for two unattached adults. This was ruled as discriminatory.

V. Updates on Specific Activities:

- Tabling events
 - Debrief Carnival- Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the event had a great turnout and the Commission's table was with community organizations' tables, including some that the Commission wants to form a partnership with. People walked up to ask questions and Patrice had between ten to thirty conversations, and many had questions about rental assistance and other resources, which she and Lisa Davidson, the interim Housing Division Director, shared. They also shared resources with other community organizations tabling nearby. Commissioner Rona F. asked if she had any feedback about the activities and Commissioner Patrice F. responded that the giveaways were popular and that the game may have been more successful if it were not a windy day. She added that Gloria had suggested standing in front of the table to grab attention and to have people feel more comfortable coming up to the space. Commissioner Janine L. noted that most of the people who she conversed with had questions about the Commission itself. Shannon noted that the tabling may be successful because both she and Lisa have received calls from constituents who said they learned about the Commission from a tabling event.
 - Planning for ArtBeat- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that ArtBeat will take place on July 19 from 12-7 PM and asked that the Commission sign up to take a shift to table at the event. Commissioner Rona F. noted that when the Commission tabled the previous year, the community organizations and City divisions tabling ended around 5 PM. She also marked the number of people she spoke to in order to measure engagement. Commissioner Patrice F. recommended having conversations with organizations that the Commissions want to partner with while tabling at ArtBeat.
- Fair housing questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council- The Fair Housing Commission has historically sent out a questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates with questions related to fair housing. This year, there are two incumbents and ten challengers running for the four at-large City Council seats. The questionnaire will be sent out to the Mayoral candidates, ward specific Council candidates, and at-large Council candidates. Commissioners Patrice F. and Dennis F. will be working on this project. Commissioner Patrice F. proposed reaching out to new media sources to publish the candidates' answers.
- Online education and outreach- Commissioner Kay M. asked that the Commissioners and Shannon provide bios and a headshot to her. They can send them to Shannon who will share them with Commissioner Kay M. Commissioner Dennis F. added that the City website video introductions should also be updated.
- Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference- tabled to the July 24, 2025 meeting.
- Adding protected classes to the Fair Housing Ordinance- tabled to the July 24, 2025 meeting.

VI. Continued Business

- Debrief 2025 Fair Housing Month events- Commissioner Rona F. commented that the inter-Somerville communication was better than last year because the Department of Racial and Social Justice and Office of Housing Stability were partners in the events and

because of their budget, the events had food available. She also noted that this year, Todd Kaplan from Greater Boston Legal Services and Susan Chimene from the Office of Housing Stability presented together, which allowed questions from the audience to be answered in real time. The panel event had a good balance and was able to provide the audience with a depth of information through the discussion informed by *The Color of Law*. Commissioner Janine L. added that the map comparing redlining and current incomes in Somerville was eye-opening. Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the events could become even bigger in the future with more partnerships with local organizations, and that the Commission should consider going to and supporting the events that those organizations host.

- FY24 Annual Report- tabled to the July 24, 2025 meeting.

VII. Announcements

- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on July 24, 2025.
- The August Commission meeting is rescheduled to August 14, 2025 at 3:00 PM.

VIII. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:13 PM by roll call vote.