

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

Minutes

Thursday, July 24th, 2025 — 3:00 pm
Via Zoom—Online Video Platform

Attending: FHC members: Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman
City staff: Shannon Lawler

I. Call to order and review of draft minutes from the meetings on June 26, 2025:

The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.

Commissioner Dennis Fischman requested that item number V from the minutes from June 26, 2025 be updated to reflect that the fair housing questionnaire will be sent to the mayoral and ward Council candidates in addition to the at-large Council candidates.

Shannon Lawler will make the modification to the minutes. Commissioner Rona Fischman introduced a motion to accept the minutes as modified, Commissioner Patrice Faulkner seconded, and the minutes were approved, as modified, unanimously.

II. Standing Agenda Items

- Facebook page update- The Commission has a Facebook page that posts an article related to fair housing on Mondays and a question of the week on Fridays. The most popular question this month was a post about whether fair housing laws apply to subletting situations. Fair housing laws do apply to subleased housing. The post was viewed by 79 people and shared by 5. The news article with the most attention was about a proposal by the Federal Administration to convert current Federal rental assistance into block grants, which would include reducing the amount of money provided to states and would allow states to decide what they will do with the money, with less Federal oversight. Commissioner Rona F. pointed out that Governor Healey has been supportive of addressing issues with housing in Massachusetts. Commissioner Dennis F. added that the states have been asked to do many new tasks that the Federal government is no longer doing, which can become an issue with state budgets.
- Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon shared that there have been two complaints in the last month. The first complaint was a tenant who gave their landlord notice that they would move out more than 30 days in advance of the end of the lease cycle. The landlord then demanded rent through 60 days from the date of her notice, including a period after the lease cycle would be ended. The lease did not state that the tenant needed to provide 60 days' notice for non-renewal. Shannon referred this complaint to the Office of Housing Stability (OHS), as it did not appear to be discrimination based on a protected class, and OHS addresses landlord-tenant issues.

The second complaint was from a current tenant at a Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) property. They are the primary caregiver to their parent, who also lives in an SHA building. When they were transferred to another property for safety under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), they assisted their parent in requesting a reasonable accommodation to transfer to that same building, with documentation from a medical provider stating need. The reasonable accommodation request was denied on the basis that the caregiver could drive to their parent when the parent needs assistance. Shannon reached out to SHA requesting clarification on the denial given that the caregiver was transferred out of their parent's building under VAWA protections. The family has a case manager with OHS who is assisting them in getting documentation to appeal the denial and succeeded in rescheduling the grievance meeting to give the family more time to prepare.

Commissioner Rona F. asked when the new mixed income building at Clarendon Hill is opening. Shannon responded that it is opening in phases, and some are being advertised currently. Commissioner Rona F. added that as more units become available, it may be easier to transfer the family into two units in the same building.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- MAPC technical assistance-
 - Commissioner Rona F. shared that she, Gloria Huangpu (the MAPC staff assisting the Commission with research and outreach), and Shannon met with Pastor Jordan Harris from Connexion Church. He mentioned many barriers to accessing services, including distrust of government bodies, which means that needs are not addressed because people are hesitant to use the services available in the City. He also noted that there need to be more wraparound services because people still need help after being housed, and that when they are housed, it is often in different municipalities that they are unfamiliar with navigating and which are far from the services and people they are comfortable using, which creates a barrier to them maintaining housing. Commissioner Patrice F. reflected that steps need to be taken before people are able to take advantage of the services the Commission can offer, and that the Commission should consider what those steps are and how to avoid causing unintentionally negative impacts. For example, she mentioned that when substandard housing gets brought to the City's attention, this may cause the unit to no longer be available at all, rather than causing the owner to make it livable. She added that it will be a slow process to be able to fully assist marginalized communities. The Commission discussed the difficulty in connecting people to all of the services that could assist them when they are moving into housing. Even when services are available, they are from different sources which can be difficult for people to navigate. Commissioner Rona F. mentioned that Connexion has free clothing available in their front entrance, and that they need donations of men's clothing. Commissioner Dennis F. added that the Connexion website can be found at <https://www.connexionumc.org/>.
- Fair housing questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council-
 - Commissioner Dennis F. provided context that Somerville has municipal elections in odd numbered years. In the previous two elections, he and Commissioner Patrice F. sent questionnaires to the candidates for Mayor and City Council related to fair housing. The Commission is non-partisan and does not endorse candidates. Commissioner Patrice F. shared that the questionnaire has been updated, removing one question and adding two. The new questions relate to the Federal Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its

impact on fair housing and what Somerville does to assist small landlords in preventing discrimination. There are 26 total candidates running in the Mayoral and City Council elections. The candidates' answers to the questionnaire will be made public. Commissioner Dennis F. added that the deadline for answers is August 14, 2025 because the preliminary election will be on September 16, 2025. Commissioner Rona F. asked whether all of the answers will be printed in the newspaper and Commissioner Dennis F. responded that the newspapers will likely run excerpts but that all of the answers will be available on the Commission's webpage. The Commission will send the full answers to the press. Commissioner Patrice F. suggested making a QR code that links to the candidates' answers that could be posted throughout the City.

- Online education and outreach-
 - Commissioner Dennis F. shared that Commissioner Kay Mammo is creating an Instagram page for the Commission and asked the Commissioners to send their bio and photo to Shannon to share with Commissioner Kay M.
- Tabling events
 - Debrief ArtBeat- Commissioner Patrice F. shared that tabling at ArtBeat allowed the Commission to meet the community where they were. She added that not every question was directly fair housing related, and they were able to point people in the direction of applicable services, but many questions were related to fair housing and tenant rights. She and Director of Housing Lisa Davidson did an interview for Somerville TV and plan to set up an interview with Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs to be televised. Commissioner Rona F. shared that the Commission now has a board that includes a list of protected classes under federal, state, and local law, which was helpful to share and explain.
- Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference- Shannon shared that she and Lisa attended the Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference in Springfield in May.
- Adding protected classes to the Fair Housing Ordinance- Based on an event at the Fair Housing and Civil Rights Conference where a representative from Justice 4 Housing spoke about adding criminal background as a protected class in Boston, Shannon opened the discussion to looking into adding criminal background as a protected class under Somerville's Fair Housing Ordinance. She noted that this protected class could be added to the Fair Housing Ordinance or the City could explore the creation of a Fair Chance Ordinance that encompasses criminal background as a protected class in housing. She will share HUD guidance from 2016 and 2022 that explores housing disparities and disparate impact associated with the use of criminal background to screen applicants. Commissioner Rona F. noted that if criminal background is added as a protected class to the City Ordinance, it would not be immediately enforceable but would make a statement and support State level changes and allow the Commission to teach landlords that discriminating based on criminal background is not permitted. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that this would take thoughtful consensus building to add to the Ordinance.

IV. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon sent the draft report to the Commission and asked for any feedback or changes before it is submitted to City Council.

V. Announcements

- Appreciation Night- The event will be on August 11 at 5:30 PM and all Commissioner
- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on August 14, 2025.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:04 PM by roll call vote.