

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, August 14th, 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 meeting on July 24, 2025:
The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.
Commissioner Rona Fischman moved to approve the minutes as written and
Commissioner Patrice Faulkner seconded. The minutes were approved unanimously.
- II. Standing Agenda Items
 - Facebook page update- Commissioner Dennis Fischman explained that the Commission has a Facebook page, which can be found by searching SomervilleFairHousingCommission on Facebook. An article related to fair housing is posted on Mondays and a question of the week is posted on Fridays. The post that got the most interest in the last month was an article about landlords who use an algorithm to determine how much rent they can charge, which is the subject of a lawsuit on the basis of unlawful price fixing. The post received 165 views, 7 reactions, and 6 shares. The second most popular post was an article about a property manager who was demanding sex from tenants, which violates fair housing and other laws. This post received 82 views and 5 reactions. Commissioner Patrice F. asked what went into the rent calculation algorithm. Commissioner Dennis F. explained that landlords are using the same software which uses data in an area to create price recommendations at the highest possible rent they can charge, which the suit claims is price fixing, rather than landlords and agents competing with each other in the open market. Commissioner Rona F. followed up to share that the software sets an artificial minimum, where landlords feel they are not getting the highest rent they can get if they do not charge higher and higher amounts. She added that the software adds the most expensive, new apartments to the data that landlords of older properties are using, which drives up the minimum for all units. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that the City's Office of Housing Stability, in an effort to counteract rising rents, has incentives for landlords who are maintaining below-market rate rent.
 - Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon Lawler shared that there was one complaint received in the last month. A household with a child under six requested lead abatement, which the landlord stated was performed after their request. When the landlord sent their lease renewal, it was changed from an annual lease to

tenancy-at-will, despite all the other tenants in their building (who do not have a child under the age of six) receiving annual lease renewals. This may be discriminatory treatment on the basis of family status. The property manager indicated that they believed the landlord could not increase the rent due to lead abatement. Shannon clarified that while the landlord cannot increase the rent in retaliation for the lead abatement request or within six months of the written request, it would have been more than six months between the request and the lease renewal date. The household reached out to the property manager and stated that they were open to a rent increase if they could be on an annual lease. Shannon also reached out to the property manager and left a message introducing herself and asking the reason why this household is being moved from an annual lease to tenancy-at-will. They are still awaiting a response from the property manager.

Shannon also received a call about a resident in a Somerville Housing Authority building in a unit that is not accessible. She now needs to be moved to an accessible unit and wanted assistance learning how to request that and what her options are. Shannon is working with the Office of Housing Stability to help her request a reasonable accommodation.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- Metropolitan Area Planning Council technical assistance-
 - Shannon shared that she meets with Gloria Huangpu from MAPC every two weeks. In the community engagement process, they have so far met with Connexion Church and have spoken with Somerville Homeless Coalition. Somerville Homeless Coalition shared that the most common fair housing issue they encounter is landlords who do not want to rent a household with a voucher, which echoes the most common complaints the Commission receives. They also noted that landlords deny people with vouchers using proxies, such as eviction history and low credit score. Another challenge they reported is that units must be de-leaded to pass a Housing Quality Standards inspection for voucher holders to move in, but that a landlord is not required to de-lead until a household with a child under six or pregnant person is in the unit, which makes it difficult to lease up family sized units in older buildings. Shannon added that lead abatement is a priority for the Home Improvement Program, through the City, but that it is currently only a priority if there is a child under six or pregnant person in the unit. Somerville Homeless Coalition also suggested that Project Soup is a good place to spread information, such as through tabling or flyers. Shannon shared that she and Gloria have also discussed how MAPC can assist with engagement as well as addressing structural barriers to accessing housing related to discrimination.
- Fair housing questionnaire for incumbent and challenging candidates to City Council-
 - Commissioner Patrice F. shared that she and Commissioner Dennis F. work together on a questionnaire for candidates to City Council and for mayor. The questions gauge candidate knowledge on fair housing to share with voters, and they also raise awareness about fair housing with the candidates themselves. The questionnaire answers will go to local media sources and to be published on the Commission's webpage. There will also be a QR code, which the Commission will post around Somerville. Commissioner Dennis F. shared that the questionnaire answers, along with previous election cycle questionnaires can be found at <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/fair-housing-commission>. He added that the Fair Housing Commission is non-partisan and does not endorse any candidates. No responses are edited.

- Tabling events-
 - Commissioner Rona F. was contacted by Mutual Aid Medford And Somerville, which does a “free store” event, to see if the Commission would like to table at the event. The Commission would need translated materials for this event and would likely focus on vulnerable populations who are most at risk for housing discrimination.
Commissioner Patrice F. suggested inviting one of the community organizations that the Commission is hoping to partner with to co-table, particularly an organization that is focused on the immigrant community. This could strengthen the Commission’s partnership with that organization, help build trust in the Commission with the community, and most importantly, help provide needed resources to the people who attend the event. Commissioner Rona F. suggested inviting the Office of Immigrant Affairs to co-table.
- Online education and outreach-
 - Commissioner Dennis F. shared that Commissioner Kay Mammo is setting up an Instagram page and asked that all the Commissioners send a still photo and short bio to her.
- Adding protected classes to the Fair Housing Ordinance
 - Shannon introduced the idea of adding criminal background as a protected class to the Fair Housing Ordinance. She asked that the Commissioners read the materials sent to them around the use of criminal record in housing to discuss at future meetings. The Commission could consider adding criminal record to the Fair Housing Ordinance as a protected class in Somerville, they could consider creating a Fair Chance Ordinance that protects criminal record in housing, or they do not have to consider the issue at all. Currently, people are sometimes able to make a fair housing complaint of disparate impact when discriminated against due to their criminal record, if the group disproportionately impacted is an existing protected class. However, this does not protect every instance of discrimination based on criminal record. While the Commission is not currently able to enforce fair housing law, adding a second protected class that is more comprehensive than State law may help the Commission gain the ability to enforce fair housing law in the future. Shannon highlighted Commissioner Rona F.’s comment from the previous meeting that even if this new protected class is not immediately enforceable, it may make a statement of support for adding these protections on the State level if it is protected in Somerville. She will reach out to Boston to understand whether they are trying to add a similar protected class to their Fair Housing Ordinance.

IV. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon asked the Commission if they have any comments on the annual report. They will check in at the next meeting to vote on whether or not to approve the FY24 Annual Report at the September meeting.
- FY25 Annual Report – Shannon updated the Commission that the report has been started but is not complete nor ready for the Commission’s review. She hopes to have the first draft done ninety days after the end of FY25. The annual reports are sent to City Council for approval after the Commission approves them.

V. Announcements

- The next meeting is scheduled for 3:00 PM on September 25, 2025.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 4:05 PM by roll call vote.

Meeting Documents:

- Fair Housing Center for Rights and Research- Fair Housing for People with a Criminal Record Toolkit
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development- April 4, 2016 Office of General Counsel Guidance on Application of Fair Housing Act Standards to the Use of Criminal Records by Providers of Housing and Real Estate-Related Transactions
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development- June 10, 2022 Implementation of the Office of General Counsel's Guidance on Application of Fair Housing Act Standards to the Use of Criminal Records by Providers of Housing and Real Estate-Related Transactions