

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Jacob D. Wilson
Mayor

Staff

Shannon Lawler-
Program Specialist, Fair Housing and
Inclusionary Housing Support

Commissioners

Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Janine Lotti

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 26th, 2026 — 3:00 PM

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

- I. Call to order and review of draft minutes from the meeting on February 26, 2026.
The meeting was called to order by roll call vote.
Commissioner Janine Lotti moved to approve the minutes as written, Commissioner Patrice Faulkner seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

- II. Standing Agenda Items
 - Facebook page update- Commissioner Dennis Fischman shared that the Commission's Facebook page can be found by looking up SomervilleFairHousing. In the past month, the question of the week with the most attention asked what types of questions a landlord can ask an applicant; it received 135 views and 6 interactions. A news post about the new Massachusetts bill that mandates that people with real estate licenses get fair housing training also received a high amount of attention: 109 views and 6 interactions.
 - Review of calls and complaints since the last meeting- Shannon Lawler received five fair housing referrals in the past month.
The first complainant was a tenant who brought issues that were taking place with their neighbors to the property manager and asked if they could resolve it. The property manager took some measures which did not fully resolve the issues for the complainant. The complainant then reported the specific behavior of one neighbor to the property manager, after which the property's attorneys asked the tenant to refrain from hostile and confrontational behaviors. The tenant was then served notice by constable that the lease would not be renewed. The complaint is based on the language used and notice served that may be the result of stereotypes based on the tenant's protected classes of race or color. The tenant now has stable housing elsewhere. However, when they initially tried to file a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD), the complainant shared that online intake interviews were completely booked out and that that, combined with the in-person intake interviews only being available during regular business hours, had deterred them from filing a complaint. They shared that they would take time off to file a complaint in person after their phone intake with the Fair Housing Specialist.
The second complainant learned about the Commission from Somerville Community Corporation's first time homebuyer course. They stated that they were told by a property's listing agent that there were no other applicants, but after submitting their application, the listing agent became non-responsive, despite the applicant's broker

sending several messages for an update. The complainant shared that the listing agent became non-responsive after learning from the application that they had children and a Section 8 voucher. This may be discrimination based on source of income and family status. Shannon recommended reaching out to Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program to request that they run a test on the listing agent. The household was able to contact Suffolk who will reach out to them with an attorney. The third complainant shared that they were recently told by the landlord that they could not smoke medical cannabis on the property, outside, and are currently being evicted, which they believe may be violating their fair housing rights based on the protected class of disability. The lease prohibits smoking indoors but does not have any listed prohibition about smoking outdoors. Shannon will speak to the tenant to get more information. Commissioner Patrice F. asked for more information around medical cannabis and disability as a protected class. Shannon shared that her understanding is that if the lease has a "no smoking" clause, that would include medical cannabis. She was uncertain about what would be considered reasonable within a reasonable accommodation request in this case, particularly where there is a potential health impact on other tenants. She spoke with the Director of the Office of Housing Stability (OHS) and the Housing Counsel to get more information. Shannon will try to get the household connected to eviction assistance through OHS.

The fourth complaint is for an address outside of Somerville, but the property management company is based in Somerville. The Commission has received a complaint about this company previously. In this instance, the tenant submitted two candidates to the property manager to sublet their unit. According to the tenant, the first candidate was denied because they had a child, which would trigger the requirement for lead paint remediation, and the second candidate was denied because they had an emotional support animal. After denying those candidates, the landlord approved a household of two single women with no children to sublet the unit. The sublessor cannot bring the case to MCAD, but Shannon asked that they pass along her contact information to the applicants so that she can do an intake interview with them and see if they would like to submit complaints. Commissioner Janine L. asked if that property management company owns or manages other properties in Somerville. Shannon will try to find out.

The final complaint came from Somerville, New Jersey, so Shannon called the borough of Somerville, NJ to find out the best contact for fair housing complaints there. She also provided the household with resources for the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights and the federal Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), because the complaint was for a protected class under federal law.

III. Updates on Specific Activities

- Fair Housing Month
 - Council on Aging event- Commissioner Dennis F. reported that this event will be on Friday, April 10 at the Council on Aging. Commissioner Janine L. shared that the focus will be on older landlords and what they are and are not allowed to do under fair housing law. She provided more information about the structure of the event, including bingo and "myths versus facts." Shannon L. and Dennis F. noted the outreach done for the event. Commissioner Dennis F. added that Gloria Huangpu, from MAPC, has been helping increase outreach for the Commission with community partners.
 - *Color of Law* library event- Commissioner Dennis F. reported that this event will take place on April 16 at the Central Branch of the Somerville Public Library. He shared that this event has been run several times by the Commission and that it focuses on the book *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein about how housing

segregation has been perpetrated and perpetuated by government policies and subsidies. The video “Segregated by Design,” which summarizes the book, will be shown at the beginning of the event followed by breakout group or open discussion, based on the number of attendees. He announced that former Commissioner Rona Fischman, who currently holds a position on the Community Preservation Committee, will be bringing an exhibit to the event where people can express their opinion on how Community Preservations funds should be used, including affordable housing. In advance of the event, Shannon will also try to get a poster for people to add sticky notes answering “What makes Somerville home to you?” up in the library in order to promote the events. Shannon and Commissioner Patrice F. planned a practice session for the event presentation. Commissioner Dennis F. asked if there are plans for language interpretation. Shannon shared that if someone needs interpretation, they can call 311 to request interpretation, which will be free through the Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA). Commissioner Dennis F. suggested doing a new event in 2027.

- Capacity building for future Commission members
 - Vacant seats- Commissioner Dennis F. shared that there are two open seats on the Commission, one of which is restricted to renters with low-to-moderate incomes. Shannon L. shared that the top two candidates for the open, unrestricted seat will be sent to the Mayor’s office for selection. The deadline to apply for the income restricted seat is March 31 and the interview process will take place in April. Commissioner Dennis F. noted that there has been much more interest in the open seats this year compared to when filling an open seat two years ago. He also noted that many of the candidates were very strong. He added that earlier in the year, he and other chairs of commissions sent a letter to the Mayor’s Office asking them to streamline the selection process for new members.

IV. Continued Business

- FY24 Annual Report – Shannon shared that the report will be sent to the Housing and Community Development Committee and she will be asked to present it.
- FY25 Annual Report – Shannon will be sending the draft to the Deputy Director of Housing for review, then send it to the Commission for review after the Fair Housing Month events are over.

V. Announcements

- The next meeting is scheduled for April 23, 2026 at 3:00 PM.

VI. Adjournment

- The meeting was adjourned at 3:57 PM.