

Monday, July 27, 2026

Dear Brendan:

I understand that you are the person staffing the City of Somerville committee reviewing the work of multi-member bodies associated with the City. One of those bodies is the Somerville Fair Housing Commission (FHC). I have been a member of the Commission for about eighteen years and its chair for five years or more.

From my perspective, City government's support for the FHC's work has varied from almost nonexistent, some years, to substantial but still quite limited. Currently, there are significant weaknesses in the City's support that both the previous administration and the current one have failed to address.

Historically, there was a time not that many years ago when I was the *only* sitting member of the Commission! Also, for many years, we had only a few hours a month of staff support per month, provided by someone who had no prior experience with Fair Housing or the issues involved.

I give credit to former Housing Division Director Michael Feloney for responding to vocal criticism of that state of affairs by Commissioners and restructuring a staff position to it was, and is, 50% devoted to Fair Housing. (He also raised the bar for the training and competence he required from that position, and Director Lisa Davidson has continued that commendable policy.) However, our talented staff have often left us, sometimes after a year or less, to seek higher-paying jobs with more prospects for advancement. Also, we do not have a budget for our work, at all.

Recently, under both the Ballantyne and the Wilson administration, the City has placed some obstacles in the way of the FHC doing its work and refused to address Commissioners' concerns about those obstacles.

On January 5, 2026, along with co-chairs of the Commission for Women and the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, I wrote to the incoming mayor highlighting the following three issues:

1. Streamline the process of getting new members nominated and their appointments approved when there are vacancies on the Commissions. [Note: at the time, there were two vacancies on the five-member FHC. To reach a quorum, *all* the remaining members would have to attend every meeting.]
2. Seek out interpretations of the Open Meeting Law that would allow working groups to act between meetings of the full Commission, to plan events and carry out other tasks that do not require a majority vote. [Note: two Fair Housing Commissioners

could work together, but if three did, that would require us to make the conversation public and give advance notice!]

3. Support City employees who staff the Commissions in a manner that preserves continuity and prevents constant turnover.

Neither the FHC nor any of the co-signers received word back. Mayor's Community Partnerships Liaison Brenna Broderick wrote to our excellent Staff Liaison, Shannon Lawler, but not to me until I emailed her directly. This pattern of ignoring Commission chairs and communicating only with staff has continued throughout the first seven months of the Wilson administration.

Substantively, the administration did allow the FHC to proceed with the process, already begun, of filling the vacant seat that was open to anyone who lived or worked in Somerville. It delayed filling the crucial seat allotted to a low-to-moderate income tenant for months. When it began that process, it excluded the chair or any member of the FHC from participating in the interviews and put those interviews into the hands of the Human Resources Department, claiming that would increase the professionalism of the process.

As I wrote to Brenna Broderick at the time:

Commissioners are not City employees who merely happen to work for free! We do not work for the City: the City government works for people like us. Somerville residents and voters who take part in the Commissions are bringing the voice of the people into the affairs of the City in a direct manner. Commissions not only "expand the reach of City government" [quoted from the email sent in January]. We also inform the work of City government and provide thoughtful and critical insights into policies and practices. This is rule by the people in action.

The reply we received was non-responsive. The process of filling these two seats dragged on: the new Commissioners are being sworn in *only today*. And at no time in 2026 has the Mayor's Community Partnerships Liaison or anyone in the administration responded to the other concerns we raised (about working groups and about maintaining staff continuity) in any way, shape, or form.

Brendan, please convey to the committee that the FHC (and several other MMB's we know of) are disappointed by this treatment and outraged at the administration's dismissive attitude toward citizen participation in municipal government through the Commissions.

We expect better.

Sincerely,

Dennis Fischman, Chair, Somerville Fair Housing Commission