

To: Brendan Salisbury bsalisbury@somervillema.gov

Hello Brendan,

As a member of the Community Preservation Committee and a longtime member of the Fair Housing Commission, I think it is important that your office gets input from community participants before making changes to the multiparty boards that run on (mostly) volunteers. It is a mistake to implement changes while disregarding the people who do the work on these boards, committees, task forces and commissions.

1. The Onboarding procedures are too cumbersome.

Fair Housing Commission (FHC)

A. I resigned from the Fair Housing Commission November 4, 2025.

- Members of the Fair Housing Commission completed interviews for my position in the winter and submitted to the Mayor. You can check the dates with Shannon Lawler.
- Approval by the Mayor and City Council took another four months (or more).
- My replacement Commissioner is due to be sworn in today (July 27th, 2026).

B. A second position opened up in January.

- One name was submitted in the winter, since one of the interviewed candidates met the criteria for the specified seat on the Commission.
- Another recruitment search was conducted by HR.
- Subsequent interviews were conducted by HR *with members of the Fair Housing Commission specifically excluded from attending those interviews.*
- The chosen candidate was the one that had been preferred by the Fair Housing Commission from their interviews in the winter.
- That Commissioner candidate is also due to be sworn in today (July 27th, 2026).

Do NOT write off this long timeframe as due to the change in administration! There are many more examples of 8+ month onboarding. The previous low-income tenant seat candidate spent nearly a year waiting for approval (in 2023-4, check with Shannon).

Why this matters:

- The Fair Housing Commission is a five-person board. So, quorum is three. With two commissioner seats vacant, attendance was required by all three remaining Commissioners; if one could not attend, the meeting could not be held.
- The 2/5 reduction in membership affected the performance of the Commission for eight months or more.

- Any imposition of term limits will make this board significantly less effective, since it takes nearly a year to replace a commissioner.

Having HR holding interviews for these positions without participation of members of the commission is problematic on many levels. Beyond the disrespect of it, there are also some functional problems:

1. Commissions are intended to be resident participants who work with the City but are not part of the City government. Having members picked by HR flies in the face of that principle. Commissioners are not employees. Commissioners are residents who choose to work for the City, adding an outside-the-box view and sharing their professional skills.
2. HR staff have *no idea* about the skills and experience of the current members of the Fair Housing Commission. Therefore, HR has no knowledge of what skills are needed and what skills are redundant. HR has no experience of the dynamic nor the work style of the current Commission. HR is unequipped to choose someone who will work well with other commissioners, who they (HR) have never met. The candidate cannot fully understand the goals, functioning style nor the interpersonal dynamic of the commission, having never met *any* of the current members.
3. Without interaction with members of the commission, it is even harder for candidates to maintain their dedication to the process over the many months until the City approves their appointment.

Community Preservation Committee (CPC)

- I interviewed for my position on the Community Preservation Committee in late September, 2025. It is a different process than the one for filling seats on the Fair Housing Commission; it is dictated by Commonwealth regulations.
- I was interviewed twice in September and October by the staff person, plus several members of the CPC.
- I was chosen, my name was submitted, and I was approved by Mayor Ballantyne in October.
- I was through City Council approval in mid-November.
- I was sworn in early in January, when my term was scheduled to begin.

The process took roughly three months, which is far better than eight months or more that has been the experience of the FHC.

Anti-displacement Task Force

- Onboarding was ill-defined. The FHC had a designated seat. Patrice Faulkner took that role at the outset. I took over in the second year. When seats turned over, some members were required to submit an application while others just

took the designated seat without any process. This led to inconsistencies in membership.

(Example: Natasha from CAAS resigned and David Gibbs from CAAS filled in. However, Patrice from FHC resigned and I, from FHC, had to write an application and wait 8 weeks to be approved by OSPCD staff. Patrice did not complete any application.)

Overview notes:

From 11 years on the Fair Housing Commission, these are some takeaways about how City support has changed:

The good:

The number of hours and the skill and knowledge base of the staffing for the Fair Housing Commission improved significantly since the last Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) initiative.

The ordinance that allows for Zoom meetings has facilitated the participation of people who work standard office-hour jobs. Face-to-face meetings were a hardship for people who needed to leave their workplace to attend FHC Meetings. If the City wants to encourage participation of professionals, the use of Zoom is a significant plus. Specific to Fair Housing Commission: One of our mandatory seats is for City housing staff. Meetings have been held in the 9-5 timeframe to accommodate that person (and the FHC staff person), with the resident volunteers needing to accommodate their needs/preference. The resident volunteers include one commissioner who uses her lunch break to Zoom into the meeting from Boston.

Since the Ballantyne administration, there has been a general movement towards greater inter-group communication and cooperation. In 2025, the Fair Housing Commission worked more closely with Racial and Social Justice (RSJ), the Human Rights Commission (HRC), and the Office of Housing Stability (OHS) to broaden the reach of our events. We have had a relationship with OHS staff since their inception. They support our programs, and they lend their experience and technical knowledge about housing law and tenants' rights.

The Community Preservation Committee (CPC) has a significantly different structure from the FHC. Because of the volume of work being done and the financial responsibility of the CPC, it has a full-time staff person who is doing a high volume of administrative work. That body works more like how commissions are designed to work: the membership consists of both City staff and other professionals with specialty

skills. The composition of the group creates this; there are designated seats on the committee.

In my opinion (based on less than year on the body), this is a well-functioning committee. I see how discussions benefit from having members who know the financial instruments that may be used (like bonding), as well as the physical process of the work being proposed (like rainwater mitigation materials), and the historic significance of the buildings being renovated. This makes a very functional coalition of City staff and resident members.

The Anti-displacement Task Force (ADTF) functioned well in the time I was in it; which was roughly the second year. By that point, it had identified the goals. Therefore, members were able to take assignments and complete them between meetings; a lot got done. A big part of its success was outstanding leadership.

The bad:

The turnover of workers in the staff position is a problem for the FHC. Housing Division staff who have staff the Fair Housing Commission (FHC) since the last AFFH initiative have been specialists in fair housing. They are doing more than administration; they are adding to the quality of the FHC output. Although this may not be the time to address this, the increase in the quality of the FHC staff position has led to instability of personnel in that position because the position does not support, financially, people of this caliber.

The Fair Housing Commission has been all-but unfunded throughout the 11 years that I participated in it. When we used to work in the schools, we held a pizza party for the winning group; commissioners paid for the pizza. If there were prizes, commissioners paid for them or solicited donations. When we tabled at Art Beat, a commissioner first borrowed, and the next year, bought the tent. When we held events for Fair Housing Month, commissioners bought the snacks served at events until 2025 (when RSJ paid for them).

Thoughts about changes:

If term limits are developed, the following procedures are critical:

1. Onboarding must be streamlined!
2. The commission chair and one designee must participate in the selection process for new members.
3. City Council must approve commission candidates in a timely manner (within 2 months, perhaps?)

4. A leadership transition plan should be developed for each Commission.
5. Terms must be long enough to develop new leadership. (Example: 6-year term for members. Chair position term to be: 1-2 years as chair, plus 1 year as past chair).
6. Staff must be held responsible for creating an archive of event materials and notes for future projects. This prevents loss of historic memory. Subsequent members will not have to reinvent the wheel.

Closing thoughts:

1. Writing this out took considerably longer than it would have taken me, or any articulate person, to talk to you about this. I resent that the City did not reach out to Commissioners directly.
2. The onboarding processes currently in place seems designed to discourage civic volunteer participation. We need to do the exact opposite.
3. Commissions are treated like an afterthought by City Council. They are used to meet legal requirements or as window-dressing to show how cool and liberal Somerville is. It's demoralizing to citizen volunteers who give their time, effort, and expertise in hopes of making Somerville a better place.
 - A. Slow confirmation of candidates, as mentioned previously.
 - B. Glaring lack of communication on commission issues. For instance:
 - *A Fair Housing Ordinance was put in place by City Council without any consultation to the Fair Housing Commission.*
 - The Anti-Displacement Task Force had several members of the City Councilors on it. One attended one meeting in the year that I was on this body. Another attended three. Both, of course, attended the photo op.
4. HR is treating commissions (or at least the Fair Housing Commission) like they are incompetent and cannot be trusted to have an opinion on who will be a good member of their multi-person body. This change was enacted in the name of "professionalism". How professional is it to hire someone for a team while forbidding interaction with members of that team until after the choice is made by HR?

Resume summary. This is City appointed work I do/did, because I care:

- Community Preservation Committee, Somerville 2026-present
- Somerville Fair Housing Commissioner 2013-2025
- Somerville Anti-Displacement Task Force, 2023-2025

There is much more that I do/did for this city, which the City had no ability to get in the way of. See resume, attached.

Rona Fischman

Somerville, MA 02144

What I do:

Housing:

Ongoing outspoken critic of Realtor initiatives that focus on increasing the profit gained from owning land.

- Community Preservation Committee, Somerville 2026-present
- Somerville Fair Housing Commissioner 2013-2025
- Somerville Anti-Displacement Task Force, 2023-2025
- GBIO speaker on housing initiative, 2024
- Teacher at SCC first time homebuyer's classes for moderate income buyers 2006-2024

Interfaith/Faith Community work:

- Accessibility Chair for Project Yachad. 2025. Project includes removing pews and increasing sound quality in a 1920s building sanctuary.
- [Daughters of Abraham](#), women's book groups: 2002-present. Founding member (2002) and Steering Committee member (2004-2009). There are approximately 500 women participating in interfaith discussions, nationwide.
- Led workshops at Temple B'nai Brith and Open Beit Midrash about racism within the Jewish Community. 2017.
- Somerville Interfaith Group: 1991-1998. This group of faith leaders did annual Thanksgiving events, pulpit exchanges, and other coalition building between faith communities. Launched Stand By Me campaign to support racial justice and support immigrants. Developed a safe home network through this coalition and provided volunteers to several domestic violence organizations in the area.

Active Bystander Intervention:

[Teaching](#) and [writing](#) on the topic of how to interrupt hateful speech and action. 2016-present.

Legislative action:

Actively supported these bills/initiatives in writing and testimony at the State House:

- Affordable Homes Act: H.1438
- Transfer fee legislation: H3845 H4063, H2747, S1771

Skills I bring to the table:

- Writing
- Speaking
- Conversant in American Sign Language. Familiar with adaptive design for deaf, blind, and mobility impaired people.
- Familiar with residential real estate practices in Massachusetts.

Honors received:

Was recognized by Somerville Board of Aldermen (now City Council) twice:

1992: For work housing disabled adults in Somerville.

1993: For starting Safe Homes of Somerville, a safe-home network for women fleeing domestic violence.

What I did for pay:

Exclusive buyer's agent 1992-2024:

Licensed real estate agent, working only on behalf of home purchasers. I held a specialty in working with home purchasers who had special needs.

- 1992-1997: Homebase Real Estate, Belmont
- 1997-2008: Buyer Brokerage Realty, Newton
- 2008-2024: Owner, 4 Buyers Real Estate, Cambridge

Deaf-Blind Rehab Specialist 1984-1991:

Various positions in teaching, counseling, and administration serving the needs of middle-school-aged and adults who were deaf, blind, deaf-blind, or cognitively impaired.

- North Suffolk Mental Health, Chelsea
- HRI Hospital (outpatient services), Brookline
- Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, Germantown, PA
- Belchertown State School, DMR Region 1, Belchertown
- Deaf Community Center, Framingham
- The Learning Center for Deaf Children, Framingham