

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

Staff

Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade
Patrice Faulkner
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman
Natasha Sierra

Meeting Minutes

November 19, 2020

Via GoTo Meeting Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:18 pm.

Attending: FHC members Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman and Rona Fischman;
City staff, Bryant Gaspard.

Minute distribution (upon acceptance) to: FHC members and others attending; also posted to City website.

I. Standing Agenda Items

Meeting Minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes from the October 22, 2020 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Patrice Faulkner made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: Dennis discussed a Facebook post that was the fair housing question of the week. ‘What kind of questions can a landlord ask you if you are looking to rent from him or her?’ Dennis explained that you can be asked questions that will show whether you meet the requirements all applicants must meet. For example:

- Show that you will be able to pay the rent, including whether they have a Section 8 subsidy
- Show that you have a positive credit history
- Give prior landlord references
- In housing that is specifically reserved for persons with disabilities, verify your disability.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no housing discrimination complaints received in November.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant provided the Commissioners a draft version of the Fiscal Year 2020 (FY '20) Fair Housing Commission report and went over some of the main topics addressed. He discussed the inclusion of the 2017 Assessment of Fair Housing Report (AFH) that was worked on by staff in the Housing Division and some of the Commissioners. The report included objectives and goal such as, but not

limited to increasing fair housing awareness, education, and programming in Somerville. Increasing collaboration efforts with local agencies such as Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program was part of an objective in the AFH that has been accomplished in recent years.

Bryant shared that the number of fair housing complaints he received increased each fiscal year from FY '18 (5 complaints received) to FY'20 (13 complaints received). The reason for the increase is varied, such as an increase in staff time to respond to complaints, awareness of fair housing issues and/or an online reporting system. Bryant also discussed outreach efforts to increase fair housing education/awareness such as two events held in April 2018 and 2019. The 2018 event was about basic fair housing law for tenants presented by an Attorney from the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD). The 2019 event was a property owner workshop that informed owners about fair housing law and exemptions, services provided by the City and the introduction of the Office of Housing Stability. In 2020 Dennis and Rona presented at the SomerVIP (Voucher Incentive Program) event hosted by the Office of Housing Stability. They shared their positive experience as landlords who rented to households with Section 8 Vouchers. They discussed the benefits of renting to voucher holders such as the assurance of getting monthly on time payments from the agency that issued the voucher.

Rona shared that the Commissioners spent time in the Summer of 2017 helping to gather data and resident feedback regarding fair housing issues in the community. She also discussed her work on updating a tenant's rights handbook with new and relevant information and resources. She added that she also presents about the role of a real estate professional during the home buying process at Somerville Community Corporation's First Time Home Buyer class. This work has helped to increase the education/awareness of fair housing law and concerns in the City. Dennis shared that even though the federal government was no longer requiring municipalities to comply with the 2015 Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule, that it was incumbent upon the City and the Commission to continue working on accomplishing various fair housing objectives. He added that the Commission's Facebook page is an important source of information where residents can seek out help and gain assistance on a myriad of issues related and unrelated to fair housing.

Bryant informed the Commissioners that a federal judge in Boston blocked an order from the current federal administration that would make it harder to sue landlords and mortgage lenders over housing discrimination. The judge issued a temporary nationwide injunction, siding with several Massachusetts-based housing groups that are suing the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to stop changes to the Fair Housing Act that would significantly raise the legal bar for discrimination lawsuits. All the Commissioners agreed that this was good news and that the Fair Housing Act needs to be strengthened, not weakened.

Lastly, Bryant shared that the online real estate company, Redfin, was recently sued in federal court and accused of systemic racial discrimination in housing by several fair housing organizations. The suit specifically states that the company offered fewer services to homebuyers and sellers in minority communities that has depressed home values. An investigation was conducted on the company's "minimum price policy" and it found that the company was less likely to offer realtor services, virtual tours, online promotion or commission rebates for homes listed in overwhelmingly minority

neighborhoods than it was in overwhelmingly white ones. This policy caused homes in minority neighborhoods to likely stay on the market longer and sell for lower prices than they otherwise might have.

Rona shared that in her experience as a real estate professional this sort of behavior is about trying to maximize profits. She does not believe that these sorts of actions are sound businesses decisions and most importantly they unfairly harm minority communities and lead to a new age version of redlining.

III. Announcements

Bryant announced that the City is currently searching to hire a Director of Racial and Social Justice that would eventually help build an Office of Racial and Social Justice. The director is responsible for organizing community-led processes to identify strategies to dismantle systemic racism and social inequality; the director will work with residents, community organizations, elected officials, and City staff to implement those strategies. Patrice announced that the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) is planning system wide cuts of service to subway, bus, commuter line and ferry services. The MBTA claims the cuts are a result of loss of ridership and income as a result of the pandemic. Patrice added that these cuts may affect residents who rely on public transit and encouraged everyone to submit comments about the cuts on the MBTA's website.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis Fischman and seconded by Patrice Faulkner and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:10 pm.