

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

February 25, 2021

Via GoTo Meeting Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:21 pm.

Attending: FHC members Claudia DeAndrade, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman and Natasha Sierra;
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 January 28, 2021 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Rona Fischman made a motion that the minutes be amended to reflect that the previous and outdated version of the tenant handbook be removed from the City website as to not confuse constituents. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the amended minutes which was seconded by Natasha Sierra and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: One of the Facebook posts that Dennis discussed was the question of the week if a tenant has a right to have their dog live with them since they are essential to their health. The answer depends on whether you have a service dog (specifically trained to assist you) or an emotional support animal that is a dog. Service dogs assist individuals with disabilities and tenants have a right to have them under federal and state law. Emotional Support Animals (ESA) that are dogs can also live with a tenant. A letter from the tenant's medical provider stating the need for the ESA based on the person's disability would be needed.

The other question of the week was about a tenant who wanted their boyfriend to move in with them. Can a landlord refuse to rent to them because they're not married? The answer was that "Marital status" is a protected class under the state fair housing laws. Except if you are looking to rent an apartment in a two-family house that the landlord lives in, they cannot discriminate against you because you're not married.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there was a housing discrimination complaint received in February. The constituent shared that they were discriminated against by a housing provider in the City based on the protected class of disability and source of

income/receipt of public assistance. The constituent has shared that they will file a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD). Bryant is following up with the constituent regarding the Suffolk University Housing Discrimination Testing program.

Dennis shared that the constituent is doing a public service by moving forward with filing a complaint with MCAD to ensure individuals are held responsible for their discriminatory actions. Claudia shared that some people will not ask for help or come forward with complaints especially if they feel embarrassed about their limited English speaking skills.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant informed the Commissioners that the Know Your Rights-Fair Housing presentation has been postponed to April 8th at 5:30 pm and will be held virtually. One of the reasons it was postponed was to ensure there were interpreters available for constituents and that a concise marketing plan was put into place. Natasha shared that she often advertises events by utilizing robocalls, mass texting and posting flyers throughout a development. Claudia cautioned that flyers should be simple and not contain too much information otherwise, a passerby will not read them. Bryant shared that the marketing plan will also include disseminating the flyer/ad to community partners, agencies, social media and on the City events calendar.

Bryant shared that he attended a recent meeting of the Land Use Committee of the Somerville City Council. In the meeting it was discussed that the City should move forward in looking to incorporate fair housing and displacement in the Zoning ordinance. This policy decision is based on the work the City of Boston has done to address fair housing and displacement in their zoning code. Dennis shared that this action seems like a good step in the right direction and that developers need to pay attention to historical exclusion of certain communities and how their development project could impact the local neighborhood. Rona shared that once the Director of Racial and Social Justice is hired that person should be included in the decision making in revising the zoning ordinance.

Bryant informed the Commissioners that the federal order to halt evictions has been extended to March 31, 2021 through a declaration signed by the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Tenants will have to provide their landlord a declarant form that can be found on the CDC website. Natasha shared that the Somerville Housing Authority has promised to not evict tenants while these federal orders are in place. Rona inquired if there is still a state eviction moratorium in place. Bryant stated that he would follow up on Rona's inquiry. He will also email the Commissioners the declaration form from the CDC extending the federal order.

Lastly, Bryant shared the new federal administration is reviewing all the changes that were made to the Fair Housing Act and Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) rule by the previous administration. The current administration has stated that they are committed to fair housing and the AFFH rule. Rona shared that it may be too early to tell what actions the current administration will take in regard to fair housing, but we should re-evaluate their actions and the progress made in the next two or three months.

III. Announcements

Rona thanked the Housing Division for taking the steps to start creating a consolidated waitlist that will ease the number of applications a resident has to complete to apply for an inclusionary unit. She also shared that she and Dennis are both celebrating their birthdays in March.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona Fischman and seconded by Natasha Sierra and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:28 pm.