

**CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION**

*Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor*

Staff

Vicki Wairi
Program Specialist

Commissioners

Helen Corrigan
Claudia DeAndrade
Jose Filho
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman

Meeting Minutes

August 31, 2017
Somerville Library – Central Branch
Conference Room
79 Highland Ave.
1:00 pm

The meeting began at 1:02 pm.

Attending: FHC members Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman, Claudia DeAndrade, and city staff, Vicki Wairi, Mike Feloney, and Mona Al-Abadi

Members not attending: Helen Corrigan and Jose (Joe) Filho

1. Announcements

- The meeting began with this agenda item that is usually last, because the question of who would be the city staff liaison to the FHC upon Vicki Wairi's retirement at the end of September came up at the start of the meeting. Housing Director Mike Feloney explained that while Vicki's position is vacant, other staff will serve in the liaison role on an interim basis. Mike has asked Housing Compliance Coordinator Mona Al-Abadi to staff the September meeting, which Mike plans to attend as well.

2. Standing Agenda Items

- Meeting minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes prepared by Vicki Wairi. Dennis Fischman made a motion to accept the minutes, which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously approved.
- Facebook page update: Dennis reported the June 7th "question of the week" was about LGBTQ-related issues, and received 264 views. The next most popular questions were about discrimination regarding families with children and issues faced by families trying to utilize Section 8 voucher assistance.
- Review of calls/issues/complaints: Vicki reported on a call she received from a woman who felt her lease was not being renewed because of her ethnicity. The notice to not renew the lease was given to only her and not to her house mates, and occurred after a visit from the tenants' parents. Vicki referred the caller to the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston.

For staff transition purposes, Vicki noted that information on this and other calls are kept in a Fair Housing Call Log available to other staff at: K:\TRANSFER\BOARD, COMMISSION, SA TRUST FUND MATERIALS\Fair Housing\Fair Housing Call Log\Fair Housing Complaint Log.

A commissioner noted that it would be good to “beef up” how enforcement is done. There was some further discussion about the traditional role of staff serving as a referral source, as Somerville’s Fair Housing ordinance does not itself have an enforcement provision.

Discussion segued to the “Tenant Helper Handbook”, which at one point in time served as a general resource to tenants who may inquire about fair housing or other tenant-landlord issue. Mike confirmed his understanding that there had been an updated version prepared, but which may have been less ‘user friendly’ than a prior version; at this point neither version is being actively used. Vicki explained that both versions are available to staff under K:\TRANSFER\BOARD, COMMISSION, SA TRUST FUND MATERIALS\Fair Housing\Other Resources\Tenant Helper Handbook.

Mike plans to have staff (existing, or staff to be hired) review them and follow up, to get an updated version on the City website.

3. *Update on specific activities*

- AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing) -- Status update/action items.

Vicki reported on multiple areas of activity since the June meeting, including:

- Nepali Festival, July 9th – Commissioners and staff helped w/ tabling. Rona and Dennis tabled at the festival from 12-2 pm; Mona tabled from 2-4:30 pm, and Vicki from 4:30 – 6 pm. There was an activity to help engage with residents, in which they were asked to place a pin on a map of the city showing where they live, and indicating if they pay less than 30%, 30%-50%, 51-80% of their income toward their rent.
- SHA outreach June 29th -- An outreach event was held at the Somerville Housing Authority’s Mystic View public housing development.
- AFH preparation – Preparation of the Assessment to be submitted to HUD by October 4th began in earnest in mid-July, with graduate intern Allison Curtis and other Housing staff leading AFH preparation efforts. Assignments for drafting specific sections were reviewed; selected other Housing Division and other staff will serve in a review capacity. Drafting of an initial version and corresponding reviews continued most of July.

The first draft of the AFH was the subject of a public comment meeting held on Thursday, August 24, 2017. Three members from the public attended; Vicki briefly summarized feedback shared at the meeting.

A commissioner brought up issues related to fair housing that she is aware of, and has experienced, as a resident of public housing in Somerville. The commissioner described efforts to have an issue involving mice in her apartment addressed, and the feeling of being discriminated against due to her status as a public housing resident. Frustrations shared included having to make repeated phone calls and in person visits to the management office before action was taken. She also spoke about being hung up on when initially trying to report the issue and her concerns about treatment that residents sometimes receive.

Commissioners and staff discussed the concerns, with one question and area of potential follow-up being to post signs in the City's public housing development on how to report a fair housing complaint.

A last area of discussion under AFFH-related issues involved feedback Dennis had provided on the draft AFH that had been emailed to community stakeholders. Mike explained that since the feedback had been sent to all recipients of the transmittal email, he was considering the most appropriate way to incorporate feedback provided. In the meantime, Mike shared information prepared as an initial, draft response to Dennis's comments; points briefly discussed included:

- The benefits of outreach to faith based organizations, and efforts by Housing staff to identify groups and institutions to contact.
- The challenges associated with balancing the scope of fair housing challenges, with what is realistically within the power of the FHC and the City to do in the context of legal (i.e., the Fair Housing ordinance) and funding constraints posed by major reductions in federal and state funds for affordable housing.

4. Announcements (resumed)

Next meeting: September 28, 2017 from 1-2 pm at the Central Branch Library, 1st floor Conference Room.

A motion to adjourn was introduced by Rona Fischman and seconded by Claudia DeAndrade, and approved unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 2:25PM.

Documents distributed at meeting:

- Draft response to AFH comments