

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone

Mayor

Liaison

Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade

Dennis Fischman

Rona Fischman

Meeting Minutes

January 23, 2019

Somerville Central Library

79 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA

12:00 pm

The meeting began at: 12:11 pm.

Attending: FHC members, Claudia DeAndrade, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman;
City staff, Bryant Gaspard

Minutes 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 December 19th meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard and reviewed by Mike Feloney. Rona Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Claudia DeAndrade and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: Dennis shared that the Facebook item that was the most popular was an article about whether a landlord can require a tenant to shovel snow around the property the tenant resides at. The answer is, generally a landlord cannot ask a tenant to shovel snow nor can they put it in a lease unless the tenant has their own separate entrance they use aside from the main entrance. The Facebook post that was the second most popular was about fair housing testing.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant shared a current issue he is working on that involves two brothers who submitted an application to move into an apartment together. One of the brothers' application was approved, but the other was denied because he has no credit history and therefore, no credit score. The brother who was denied is disabled, collects SSI from the federal government and has never had a credit card.

The management company shared that they could work with an applicant who has a low credit score, but not with an applicant with no credit. The brothers have shared with Bryant that they depend on each other and need to live together. Bryant is working with another staff member in the Housing Division to submit a reasonable accommodation request letter on their behalf. He is asking the management company to waive its credit policy because the tenant is disabled, on a fixed income and cannot establish any credit. The letter also will inform the management company that the brothers have paid the rent at their current residence on time for the past couple of years, and will include a letter from the physician of the disabled brother stating that his health would be adversely affected if he were not able to live in the unit, with his brother.

Dennis noted that in his experience tenants with no credit are likely to be a member of a protected class, such as someone who is disabled, or a recent immigrant to the country who uses only cash. Rona shared that from her perspective, functionally, it is not bad to have no credit, but it depends on the policy of the management company you may be working with and whether they believe if no credit is acceptable as compared to low credit.

Dennis and Rona shared that they have rented to tenants with low credit scores and even a few that went through bankruptcy. They added that in these types of situations they may ask for a bigger security deposit that would then be returned when the tenant vacated the unit. Claudia referred to her time living in Brazil, explaining that there is no issue of credit cards and credit score. Instead businesses owners look at the individual's reliability in paying for an item over time (similar to a lay-away plan). One's reliability, or lack of it, tends to spread by word of mouth in the local community — which in effect establishes one's creditworthiness.

II. Update on Specific Activities

AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing): Fair Housing Fact Sheet for Property Owners -- Bryant shared that he is almost finished working on a fair housing fact sheet for property owners, but wanted to get the opinion of the commissioners if anything else should be added to the fact sheet. Bryant added that once the fact sheet is completed, he will add it to the City website and display it on the 1st floor of City Hall. Rona and Dennis agreed to review it and provide comments they have to Bryant.

- **Housing Discrimination Tester Training:** Bryant informed the commissioners that Suffolk University is conducting another training in February, which will likely take place during the second or third week. Dennis shared that based on public feedback many people are interested in the tester training and Bryant responded by telling him he was going to continue to publicize the training opportunities.
- **Property Owner Workshop-**Bryant explained that he was considering holding the workshop on either April 18th or 25th and asked commissioners for feedback or thoughts on the schedule. Dennis informed everyone that Passover will take place on April 19th-27th and that he and Rona would not be available if the event took place on April 18th because they will be traveling. He said they likely would be available if the event took place on April 25th. Bryant added that besides a Fair Housing presentation, there would be a presentation and discussion about the new Office of Housing Stability (OHS) and possible information on the City's Lead Paint Safe Somerville program. Bryant informed the commissioners that he researched various groups and websites that may have a membership base of property owners. He wanted to reach out to one of the groups about advertising and informing their membership about the workshop.

Rona offered her view that focused outreach and communication to some of the property owner groups should be conducted and that the commissioners should not be surprised if there is a lack of response from some of the groups. Claudia and Dennis agreed that it may be useful to perform focused outreach for the workshop event and mentioned the possibility of contacting Vicki Wairi, a former housing division staff member who may know some property owners to contact for the workshop.

Dennis expressed that in his opinion, the high cost of housing in Somerville (and Greater Boston area), has resulted in various policies being re-examined that may affect property owners such as the elimination of rent control in Cambridge. He added that when rent control was in place in Cambridge it helped to keep rents low in Somerville, because tenants had the option to seek lower rent units in Cambridge.

III. Announcements/Updates

FHC Vacancies: Bryant informed the commissioners that there is a tentative Appointments committee meeting scheduled for January 28, 2019. He expressed that he is hopeful that the appointments for Natasha Sierra and Patrice Faulkner will be approved.

A motion to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Claudia and approved unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 12:58 pm.