

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**

March 28, 2019

Conference room-Somerville Library  
79 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA  
4:00 pm

The meeting began at: 4:35pm.

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

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 February 28th meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard and reviewed by Mike Feloney. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: Dennis shared that the Facebook post that was the most popular in terms of views was an article about former U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah having proposed legislation that would prohibit discrimination in accessing housing based on source of income (i.e. welfare or SSI) and veteran status. The Fair Housing Improvement Act of 2018 would prohibit housing discrimination based on source of income or veteran status, giving more families access to affordable housing.

The post that had the most interaction in terms of shares and likes was the question of the week, which asked if it is illegal for an owner to refuse to rent to prospective renters under the age of 25. The answer was 'No' – it is not illegal under the Fair Housing Act. However, in Massachusetts it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on his or her age, which is a protected category under Massachusetts fair housing law. There are some exceptions, for circumstances when it is not illegal. Minors are not protected, and the protections do not extend to residency in state or federally-aided housing for the elderly, or to housing intended for use as housing for persons 55 years of age and over, or to housing for individuals age 62 or over.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant shared with the commissioners that he recently received three housing complaints. He promised to go in-depth with the commissioners on each complaint

when they meet again on April 25, 2019. There was not enough time to explain complaints during the March 28<sup>th</sup> meeting due to time constraints.

*II. Updates on Specific Activities*

AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing): Bryant disseminated a copy of the Property Owner Workshop flyer to commissioners and informed them of different methods he planned to use to advertise the event. Some examples shared included writing a press release for the event to be sent to print publications, mailing out flyers to property owners, and posting the flyer on the City website and the Fair Housing Commission's Facebook page.

*III. 2018 Housing Needs Assessment*

Housing Needs Assessment discussion: Daphne Politis, a member of the consultant team (Barrett Planning Group) hired by the City to conduct the Housing Needs Assessment required under the City's zoning ordinance, joined the meeting to solicit commissioners' feedback and input on housing issues and needs in Somerville.

**Most Pressing Housing Issues.** Rona shared that in her experience as a realtor there has been drastic change in the Somerville housing market, as prospective homeowners can no longer afford two and three family homes and are now settling for two and three bedroom condominiums. She added that some of the two bedroom condos are selling for around \$800,000 or more, depending on factors such size, location and the year it was built. Households that can afford to purchase a multi-family home must charge higher rents (if they choose to have tenants) compared to owners who purchased homes at much lower prices 15 to 20 years ago and can afford to charge their tenants below market rent and still pay their mortgage.

Patrice shared that many of her friends have been priced out Somerville and have had to relocate to cities such as Woburn and Malden. She added that the friends she was referring to are working professionals, but still cannot afford to rent or purchase a home in Somerville.

Dennis shared that some of his friends who are seniors and on fixed incomes cannot afford to rent market rate units and a couple of them were lucky enough to get into elderly public housing. However, seniors who cannot move into elderly public housing or a subsidized unit may be displaced from Somerville. He added that there was a widespread jump in the price of housing after rent control was eliminated in 1994, and another recent period of broad increases that has ballooned into a crisis. Those who want to continue residing in Somerville may only be able to rent a room and may need to pay upwards of \$1,200 to do so, depending on the location.

All the commissioners agreed that the increases to the cost of housing has resulted in changing demographics in Somerville such as, but not limited to: age, average household income, race/ethnicity and even family composition.

**Most Promising Housing Initiatives.** Commissioners all agreed that the transfer tax and increase of the Inclusionary Ordinance to 20% have been some of the best housing initiatives the City has passed. Patrice added that the renovation of Clarendon Hill and the proposed addition of mixed use housing in that area is a great initiative that will positively impact many people. Dennis shared that in his opinion the 100 Homes initiative through Somerville Community Corp. (SCC)

and the Community Land Trust were both great short and long term housing initiatives housing initiatives that may help increase the amount of affordable housing in the City.

**Ideas/Improvements to increase Housing.** Rona suggested building micro units and allowing for greater height limits on buildings to increase the amount of housing units in the City. She added that green space would need to be incorporated near new developments and that more family units (3 bedrooms and more) also needed to be built. Rona expressed that the City cannot build its way out of the housing crises, but we should still try.

Patrice shared that in her work at a women's shelter in Boston that she may occasionally help her clients with housing search. She noted that she does not even bother to look for housing in Somerville with her clients because the cost of housing is so high. Patrice added that an increase in one bedroom units may alleviate some of the housing issues in the City, as it could reduce the number of students and young professionals renting out rooms in three and four bedroom apartments meant for families.

Dennis shared that it is important for the City to have a mix of demographics and different household types. He noted that it may be worthwhile to increase First Time Home Buyer education courses so residents can be empowered and have the ability to stay in the City by purchasing a home.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Claudia and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:40 pm.

Documents distributed at meeting:

- Property Workshop Flyer