

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

*Joseph A. Curtatone*

*Mayor*

Liaison

Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade

Dennis Fischman

Rona Fischman

**Meeting Minutes**

November 28, 2018

Somerville Library-Central Branch

1<sup>st</sup> Floor Conference Room

79 Highland Avenue

12:00 pm

The meeting began at: 12:26 pm.

Attending: FHC members, Claudia DeAndrade, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman;  
City staff, Michael Feloney and Bryant Gaspard; Natasha Sierra

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 for the October 26th 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 Dennis Fischman and unanimously *approved*.
- Facebook page update: Dennis shared that the Facebook item that received the most interest was the Housing Discrimination Tester Training at Suffolk University. Dennis expressed that the post was likely the most seen and commented post they have had since the Fair Housing Commission Facebook page was created. He also shared that the article with the second most interest was about a town in New Jersey whose planning board turned down a proposal for veterans housing with no explanation. Rona noted her understanding that there has been an increase in discrimination against veterans, perhaps due to media coverage that focuses on issues like mass shootings, opioid use, and other negative events tied to individuals who previously served in the military.
- Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant shared that there were no new Fair Housing complaints, but did give an update on one discussed at the Commission's October meeting. A tenant had filed a fair housing complaint based on her belief that she was discriminated against because of a disability. The tenant's belief is based on her experience of having requested a modification of her bathtub to a standup shower as a reasonable accommodation request. The tenant reported that a door to the shower was not installed as requested; instead a curtain was. The tenant expressed that she continues to prefer a door because she says the curtain is not effective and her bathroom floor tends to get wet when she uses it. Bryant spoke with the

Attorney representing the owner of the building where the tenant resides about the installation of a shower door. The Attorney shared with Bryant that in his communications with maintenance staff, he was informed that the size and dimensions of the shower do not allow for a shower door to be installed at a reasonable cost.

- **Affordable Housing Opportunities:** Mike Feloney noted that based on his recollection, Bryant and Mona typically shared information on affordable housing opportunities and mentioned a current opportunity under the 100 Homes Initiative managed by Somerville Community Corporation. Claudia DeAndrade inquired about the eligibility criteria for 100 Homes units. Mike stated it was based on income, local preference and priority status for people in Somerville at risk of displacement. Some units are affordable to households at 50% AMI (\$37,750 for a 1 person household), with some affordable to households with incomes up to 100% AMI (\$75,460 for a household of 1).

## *II. Update on Specific Activities*

- **AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing):** Bryant shared that he continues to have ongoing communication with administrators of the Housing Discrimination Testing Program at Suffolk University. He recently discussed with them their monthly trainings and that Suffolk is trying to attract potential testers of varying demographics and background. Rona inquired whether or not the commissioners should attend one of the trainings at Suffolk University and if it would be beneficial. Bryant shared that he wasn't sure if it would be beneficial, but that he would follow up with one of the administrators of the testing program.
- **Discussion of Board of Aldermen Motion on establishing a fair housing enforcement program:** Bryant shared that on November 26, 2018, he attended a Housing and Community Development Committee meeting, chaired by Alderman Ben Ewen-Campen. Alderman Ewen-Campen discussed a motion passed by the Board of Aldermen (BOA) and included as a committee agenda item recommending "that the Administration establish a widely-advertised Fair Housing enforcement program that proactively tests for illegal housing discrimination." Bryant conveyed to Alderman Ewen-Campen and others at the meeting his sense that the existing program at Suffolk University serves the same purpose as what the BOA program calls for. He explained that Suffolk's program is funded by HUD at no cost to the City, and that it provides paid opportunities to people who want to be testers. Bryant added that Alderman Ewen-Campen asked for him to contact Suffolk and get any publicly available data that they may have regarding outcomes, number of tests they have done, etc. and to follow up with him.

Mike explained that the impetus for Alderman Ewen-Campen recommending a citywide enforcement program related to revisions to the City's Condo Conversion Ordinance under consideration. The proposed amendments are intended to strengthen the current law by adding increased protections for tenants, especially those who are seniors, low to moderate income, disabled and of a different race. However, at least one BOA member had expressed concern over potential for unintended consequences – based on the possibility that landlords/owners may not be willing to rent to certain households because they could trigger such increased protections. Rona expressed in her view that there is an economic incentive to do the wrong thing and not rent

to certain demographics of people, especially in this high demand and low supply housing market.

- Discussion of Housing Fair or other Event for Spring 2019: Bryant shared that he spoke to staff in the Housing Division and to non-Housing Division staff that had experience planning and setting up events. Based on these conversations, Bryant's opinion was that the adequate planning and preparation for such an event is not feasible for it to be held in April. The group discussed an event like a property owner workshop as an option. Rona suggested considering a movie night for Fair Housing Month in April and used the movie "A Gentleman's Agreement" as an example, but that we should choose a modern film/documentary about housing discrimination.

Mike expanded on Bryant's comments to note that while there was staff who expressed reservations of doing a housing fair, other staff referenced the event's inclusion as a goal in the City's 2017 Assessment of Fair Housing report. He suggested speaking with Ellen Shachter, Director of OSPCD's Office of Housing Stability (OHS) about potential help to plan the event (Ellen's office is new and she is in the midst of hiring several people). Dennis offered his assistance if we needed help for the event or any related matter.

### *III. Announcements/Updates*

- Fair Housing Commission Vacancies: Bryant shared that he submitted Natasha Sierra's name to the City's MinuteTraq system (a legislative tracking software) and that he is waiting to see when the next BOA Appointment's Committee will take place. Dennis noted that it is important to go through a formal process, but that it may take time and there could be a possibility that if a current commissioner became ill, there would be no quorum and meetings could not take place.

Bryant shared that there is potential interest from a Somerville resident to fill the last vacant and fifth seat on the commission. Mike explained that OSPCD Executive Director George Proakis knows the person, Patrice Faulkner, through her work at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and connected her to Mike via email.

*A motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis and seconded by Claudia and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 1:16 pm.