

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 27, 2020

Conference room-Somerville Library
79 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA
04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:10 pm.

Attending: FHC members Claudia DeAndrade, Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman and Natasha Sierra; 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 January 31, 2020 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard and reviewed by Michael Feloney. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona Fischman and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: Dennis discussed a couple of Facebook posts that were the most popular and had the most engagement (i.e., shares). One of the Facebook posts discussed why the Somerville Fair Housing Commission exists. Dennis explained in the post that the Fair Housing Act was federal legislation enacted in 1968 to stop discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. The law contained protections for members of “protected classes” groups who historically faced discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. The City of Somerville created its Fair Housing Commission in 1985 to combat discrimination in housing and uses the Commonwealth’s “protected classes” list which is more expansive than the federal list.

The most popular Facebook question of the week was, “Do I have a right to have my dog live with me?” The post explained that the answer depends on terms of the lease or rental agreement the tenant has with a landlord and if dogs are allowed on the premises. Additionally, if the tenant has a verified disability, they can submit a reasonable accommodation to their landlord, a provision of the Americans with Disabilities Act requesting the waiver of the landlord’s policy to allow a service dog or emotional support animal to assist the tenant.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that he did not receive any fair housing complaints this month.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant informed the commissioners of a conference call he had with Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program (HDTP) regarding the housing discrimination faced by Spanish speaking communities. He invited two staff members from the Office of Housing Stability to join the call due to their current experience working with households who speak Spanish and limited English. Claudia inquired why the call was only in regard to Spanish speakers and did not incorporate those communities who speak other languages. Bryant shared that Spanish was chosen because it is the most commonly spoken language in the Commonwealth and the purpose of the call was for staff from Suffolk's HDTP program to hear feedback about what certain types of discrimination Spanish-speaking communities face in their search for housing. Based on the feedback they receive, they may try to tailor their testing in regard to the common scenarios they may face.

Among the issues discussed was the language barrier between a prospective tenant and landlord/broker, lack of social security number, fear of retaliation and selected other issues. An in-depth part of the discussion involved a scenario in which a Spanish speaking household views an apartment alone and the treatment they receive compared to when an English speaking housing advocate goes with them. The landlord or broker sometimes will not provide as much information about the apartment and may be dismissive of the Spanish speaker. Dennis noted that housing advocates that speak the most common languages in Somerville are crucial and that the Community Action Agency of Somerville previously has hired advocates with this capacity. Rona added that Spanish, Portuguese and Haitian Creole are the three most common foreign languages spoken in Somerville; a fair amount of Haitian families have left Somerville so there are fewer than in the past.

Bryant shared that he had narrowed dates for a housing search/discrimination testing workshop to either April 16, 23 or 30, taking into account the Passover and Easter holidays. He added that the workshop would last from 6:00 to 7:30pm and that he was looking at potential locations to hold the event such as the East Somerville Community School, the Auditorium room at the Central Library, and the community room at the public safety building in Union Square. Natasha provided a reminder that the Mystic Activity Center was probably available as well during those dates and time. Rona inquired if interpreters would be available at the meeting; Bryant noted he would reach out to staff at SomerViva to find out their availability.

Rona shared that households with Section 8 vouchers sometimes have to deal with landlords' bias against them and the program because they are wary of the inspection process which can be seen as excessively bureaucratic. Dennis added that households without Section 8 vouchers can pay rent late, commit lease violations and exhibit other problematic behaviors. He noted his view as a landlord that some owners' biases against voucher holders are in many cases without merit and unfounded. Claudia shared that the housing search process becomes even more difficult for voucher holders who need a 3-bedroom apartment in Somerville. She noted that newly built apartments and condominiums rarely have such units and when they do they're minimal in number, so demand, exceeds supply.

III. Announcements

There were no announcements.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Claudia and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:20 pm.