

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

May 28, 2020

Via GoTo Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:25 pm.

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

Minute 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 April 30, 2020 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Patrice Faulkner 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 was a question that read “How can I ensure that I get my full security deposit back when I move out?” Dennis explained that the security deposit can be used by the landlord to pay for damages beyond wear and tear that are caused by the tenant. The tenant and landlord would likely have to mutually agree to use the security deposit for any other matter.

The other Facebook post was about the U.S. Department of Justice working to combat sexual harassment in housing during the public health pandemic. Due to the public health emergency many tenants have lost their jobs, are behind on their rent, and facing housing insecurity. As a result some housing providers are trying to exploit the health emergency by sexually harassing tenants. Bryant added that landlords may be harassing their tenants in other ways by constantly asking them to leave if they cannot pay their rent or changing the locks. Due to the uncertainty of the job market because of the pandemic, Rona shared that there may be an increase in landlords who would be willing to participate in the SomerVIP program (Voucher Incentive Program), because the majority of the rent is guaranteed by the federal government. Rona added that she heard there may be legislation proposed in the state legislature that would allow a landlord to use a tenant’s security deposit to pay critical

bills (i.e. water bills, property taxes) and reimburse them later if that tenant was furloughed or lost their job because of the pandemic.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no fair housing complaints received in May.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant discussed the virtual brown bag conference call he was on with Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program (HDTP) and various staff members in state and local agencies who work on fair housing issues. One of the items discussed during the call was an educational outreach grant that the HDTP received from HUD. Staff from the HDTP asked everyone on the call for ideas or topics they could present at an educational training. Bryant shared an idea about conducting a presentation around disparate impact especially in regard to credit scores. He added that even though the use of credit scores to screen rental applicants is not intentionally discriminatory, minorities tend to have lower scores and are often denied the opportunity to rent an apartment. The HDTP staff shared that one idea they were considering to discuss was neighbor on neighbor harassment as conflicts among tenants may result in a loss or inability to access housing (i.e. order of protections, evictions for breach of lease). The staff also mentioned that because so many people are working from home they wanted to reach out to community organizations and non-profits to conduct these educational trainings rather than try to get individuals to attend a virtual meeting because many of these employees are working from home.

Rona shared that in her experience as a licensed real estate agent courses such as the one Suffolk may present would be beneficial to many groups of people. Bryant expressed that there may be households who will be unable to access these trainings for work or towards getting a license due to the digital divide that has been further highlighted because of the pandemic. He added that he was surprised to hear about this digital divide, specifically in regard to the ability to access internet because most people can get internet through their phone, tablet or computer. Dennis added that the digital divide also impacts households who are low income and disabled such as a blind person or deaf person who may not be able to see or hear a training. He explained that older households also experience the digital divide as they tend to read print media and have cable instead of internet. Rona inquired if subtitles are being used in these sort of presentations to provide further access to these sort of households or if Somerville Community Access Television could air these presentations for older adults to view.

Another item discussed was a memo (displayed through screen share) from Andrew E. Lelling, the U.S. Attorney General for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The memo was about landlords, property managers and certain staff with power over housing engaging in sexual harassment. Lelling reiterated in the memo that sexual harassment in housing is illegal and that his office would aggressively investigate these cases. Bryant shared that based on information from the last Census, households that have the highest poverty rates include single female seniors and single mothers. As a result these women are most susceptible to being taken advantage of and sexually harassed in order to maintain their housing.

III. Announcements

Bryant announced the deadline to submit an application for the Cedar Place affordable homeownership opportunity took place today (5/28/2020).

Dennis announced that the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) has chosen Gonzolo Puigbo as their new Chief Executive Officer replacing Daniel LeBlanc.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Natasha and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:13 pm.