

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

July 30, 2020

Via GoTo Meeting Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:14 pm.

Attending: FHC members Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, and Rona Fischman;
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 June 25, 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 two 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 “If a person is a member of a protected class do I have to rent to them?” Dennis explained you do not have to rent to someone who is a member of a protected class, but you must treat the same as any other tenant or buyer. You should not reject an application because that person is a member of a protected class. The other Facebook post was about President Trump choosing to reverse the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule (AFFH) which seeks to promote fair housing and desegregation. The President argued that the AFFH rule would have a devastating impact on the suburbs and in 2018 sought to weaken the rule put in place by the Obama Administration.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no housing complaints received in July. He did add that he followed up with the households who submitted complaints in June. Bryant heard back from two out of three households. One household has filed a complaint with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the other household is waiting on next steps from Suffolk’s Housing Discrimination Testing Program

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant discussed the scripts for the fair housing videos each commissioner will be recording. Rona shared with Bryant the video she recorded and her script. She spoke about the role of a licensed real

estate agent and how they should conduct themselves when dealing with their clients (property owners) and prospective applicants to stay in compliance with fair housing law. Dennis shared that the content of his video recording was about his experience as an owner occupant of a multi-family house and renting to tenants with Section 8 Vouchers. He elaborated that he could always count on the rent being paid on time (portion paid by the government) when renting to a household with a voucher. In addition he explained that there are City programs that can help with lead abatement to ensure that families with children are not being discriminated against. Patrice shared that she would discuss her experience as a tenant in Somerville and what resources are available to residents if they feel they faced housing discrimination. The commissioners added that once the videos are finalized closed captioning should be added to assist viewers that may be hearing impaired.

Bryant discussed the contents of the Race and Source of Income housing discrimination report in the Greater Boston Area and the corresponding webinar that took place on July 1, 2020. The report is titled "Qualified Renters Need Not Apply." The report contained the results of a housing discrimination study conducted by Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program and the Analysis Group and was funded by the Boston Foundation. The report contained some startling data such as the large disparity between households without Section 8 Voucher who get the chance to view a unit compared to households with a Section 8 Voucher. The report also provides data that a much lower percentage of black households (no vouchers) were shown available units and/or incentivized to submit an application compared to white households (no voucher).

Patrice thought the webinar was eye-opening and that prospective white tenants were told not to visit certain neighborhoods. She added that black prospective tenants did not know that certain units were available unlike their white counterparts who were informed of a wider range of units. These sorts of obstacles present an uphill battle for black households to move out of their neighborhoods and keeps communities segregated. Rona shared that prospective tenants can double check if a link for an available unit is still posted online if they have been denied a unit and informed it was filled. She added that members of a protected class should not be steered to certain communities and inquired if Somerville Housing Authority had a policy about stopping the clock on tenants searching for a unit with a Section 8 Voucher if they have faced discrimination. Bryant shared an idea he heard that would allow one party consent recording only for housing discrimination tests, but unclear if the idea has been drafted into a proposal for consideration by the state legislature.

The commissioners discussed the recent news that President Trump and his administration wanted to reverse the AFFH rule for fear it would have a devastating impact on the suburbs. Bryant informed the commissioners that he had submitted comments to HUD in late 2018 on behalf of the City and the Fair Housing Commission that opposed the administration's attempt to weaken the AFFH rule and that Somerville submitted a 2017 Assessment of Fair Housing that was accepted by HUD. He added the City intended to carry out the goals in its AFH regardless of the actions of the current administration. Dennis added that the City has the opportunity to review ways how they can increase diversity and inclusion. He added that this may be an ideal time to create procedures and rules to effectuate meaningful change for vulnerable and minority residents and was pleased to see the re-direction of funds from the police department.

Dennis shared his recent experience participating in an online group about racism in Boston. The issue of the number of black real estate agents in the Greater Boston Area was discussed and the challenges they face. He stated that black realtors do not have the same far reaching professional network compared to white realtors and are not informed about the same number of vacancies. He cautioned that when companies have fewer people of color working there, professional networks will continue to be mostly compromised of white persons creating an impediment for a person of color who may join that particular profession. Rona could not find demographics of realtors who are members of the National Association of Realtor, but those national figures of membership strongly lean to white females. She added that the majority of residential real estate agents happen to be white females, while commercial real estate tend to be white males.

III. Announcements

Rona Shared that City Council member Jefferson Thomas Scott helped to amend and supported a domestic partnership ordinance that was approved by the council and signed by Mayor Curtatone that recognizes polyamorous relationships of more than two people. The intent of the ordinance was based on concerns of residents who could not visit their partners in the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic because they were not married. Rona shared that she will send a letter on behalf of the Fair Housing Commission to Councilor Scott thanking him for his efforts to pass the ordinance.

A motion to adjourn was introduced by Patrice Faulkner and seconded by Dennis Fischman and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:08 pm.