

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

August 27, 2020

Via GoTo Meeting Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:13 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 July 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 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 “How long after moving out should I expect to get my security deposit back.” Dennis explained that the landlord will inspect your unit after you move out and if there are no damages beyond normal wear and tear then the landlord should send your deposit back to you 30 days after you move or out or when your lease ends. The other Facebook post was about the levels of homeownership among black households. The post detailed that there is large gap between the homeownership levels of black and white families in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. It further detailed the trend that black homeownership levels nationwide have returned to 1960s levels before the Fair Housing Act was passed.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners that there were no housing complaints received in August. He did follow up about a complaint that was filed earlier in the year. The household had been discriminated based on familial status, but were reconsidering moving forward with a complaint they filed with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD). They were considering not moving forward with the complaint because they thought the landlord may try to pursue one month’s of unpaid rent from them. Bryant shared that the household

should confer with the investigator they worked with at MCAD regarding the prospects of their complaint and that he hoped they continue with complaint, but it was ultimately their decision.

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant discussed the recent fair housing violations and fines levied against several south shore real estate agents by the Attorney General of Massachusetts. Some of the violations included not renting to a household with a Section 8 Voucher and households with a minor child and publishing discriminatory advertisements. The evidence of the violations was uncovered by Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program and then referred to the Attorney General's Office. Thousands of dollars in fines were levied against the real estate brokers along with mandated fair housing training.

Rona shared that the rental real estate market is very different compared to the sales market (selling homes). The pace and work in the sales market is much slower as you can be working with a buyer for a long time. The rental market is fast paced, there are more units available, much more people who call or email about vacancies and the advertisements are different. However, just because the rental market is different from sales, realtors must still abide by fair housing law and must provide equal treatment to every prospective renter and buyer.

Dennis shared that COVID-19 has impacted the ability for tenants to get roommates and the search has been more difficult compared to other years. Patrice agreed with Dennis and shared that she has seen fewer moving trucks in her neighborhood for Tufts University students which has exacerbated the difficulty of tenants to find roommates.

Bryant discussed the remaining fair housing videos that the commissioners are working on. Dennis shared that the videos should have closed captioning to assist viewers who have hearing difficulty and provided suggestions on edits to the video he made. Natasha added that she would speak in Spanish in her video from a fact sheet about immigration and fair housing issues. Patrice said her video would be based on tenant rights and protected classes in fair housing.

Bryant discussed an important article from the Boston Globe titled "Housing will test white support for Black lives." The article discusses the "Not In My Backyard, or NIMBY" attitude residents in suburban and affluent areas have when it comes to affordable housing being built in their neighborhood (backyards). A black resident interviewed in the article noticed that liberal residents were hostile to multi-family apartment buildings being built in their communities which would lead to increased integration and affordable housing in those areas. Yet, those same liberal minded residents supported the Black Lives Matter movement and the systemic racism faced by black Americans in various parts of American society. It was conflicting to see and hear the support and involvement in social justice issues among liberal whites who also seemed to be against affordable housing being created in their neighborhood that would benefit minorities.

Patrice shared that the narrative surrounding affordable housing needs to be changed and how it would benefit a community. There always seems to be criticism of an affordable housing project and push back on the number of units in the project, traffic congestions and parking issues. Dennis

discussed the redevelopment project at Clarendon Hill that would add market rate and affordable units in West Somerville. He agreed with the decision to tear down the old buildings which were dilapidated and to add new market rate units to make the project feasible. He added that it seemed that the local residents were not as concerned with the construction of the replacement buildings for the existing public housing residents, but the new market rate and affordable units that would be created. Rona shared that there may be legitimate concerns that a neighborhood may have if density is already bad and new units are being created. However, those concerns don't seem to be expressed when million dollar condominiums are built in those neighborhoods that may further add to density problems. Natasha shared that she did have a concern about access to resources for residents when the Clarendon Hill buildings are torn down and residents having to relocate until construction is finished. She added that a similar issue happened at Orient Heights in East Boston where public housing units were torn down and replaced with newly constructed buildings.

III. Announcements

Rona shared that she would be sending out a letter on behalf of the Fair Housing Commission to Councilor J.T. Scott thanking him for his efforts in the recently passed ordinance that recognizes polyamorous relationships of more than two people.

Bryant shared that there are eight affordable units available at 1060 Broadway and interested households could now apply.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Patrice Faulkner and seconded by Dennis Fischman and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:15 pm.