

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

September 24, 2020

Via GoTo Meeting Webinar

Online Video Platform

04:00 pm

The meeting began at 4:12 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 August 27, 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 an article about Ben Carson, the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development changing his mind about single family zoning restrictions. Secretary Carson previously supported eliminating single family zoning because it made housing too expensive and exacerbated the homelessness crisis. He changed his mind and agrees with the President that the government must defend single family zoning in the suburbs otherwise it would lead to an increase in crime.

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

II. Update on Specific Activities

Bryant discussed the federal order to halt evictions through December 31, 2020. The order is publicized through the Office of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Tenants must complete a declarant form and provide it to their landlord. Bryant explained that the federal order was issued because evictions threaten to increase the spread of COVID-19. During a pandemic, calling a temporary halt to evictions can be an effective public health measure to prevent the spread of disease. A temporary halt of evictions can also help people who get sick or who are at risk for severe illness from COVID-19 protect themselves and others by staying in

one place to quarantine. These orders allow state and local authorities to implement stay-at-home and social distancing measures to decrease the community spread of COVID-19. Housing stability helps protect public health because homelessness increases the likelihood that people may move into close quarters in homeless shelters or other settings.

Dennis inquired if the City was planning to do a press release about the federal order or use other forms of media to disseminate information about the federal order. Bryant responded that he would follow up about that. Patrice shared that these protections are needed because the \$1,200 stimulus fund many households received from the federal government was not sufficient to pay rent and other bills. Households that live in Boston and other local cities/towns have a high cost of living and further protections and aid is needed. Rona shared that the extra unemployment households were receiving ended in July and that many more people may now owe rent.

Bryant shared an article titled “Eviction moratorium could deepen Mass. housing crisis” written by the Boston University News Service. The article was in regard to the Massachusetts eviction moratorium and that tenants could not be evicted for non-payment of rent. The moratorium is set to expire on October 17, 2020, but many landlords have said the situation has been unsustainable as they have lost thousands of dollars in rent. Additionally, some shared that the act of evicting a tenant may be costly and take a long time. As a result landlords who were once willing to take on financially riskier tenants, like those with poor credit, will be hesitant to rent to those sorts of tenants in the future.

Rona shared that at this time she has not heard anything anecdotally that property owners are less willing to take on riskier tenants. She mentioned that property owners do not have as many tenants to choose from as there are less students living off campus and more of them in the dorms. She added that developers of luxury rental units have had to decrease their rental prices for various reasons including, but not limited to prospective tenants not wanting to live in a densely populated area during a pandemic. Patrice agreed adding that rental prices were being reduced in Boston and some people have gotten good deals for luxury units. Dennis shared that from a public policy perspective he does not know if there has been much relief for landlords during this public health crisis. Owner-occupants do not have as much cash reserves to withstand multiple months of not receiving rent compared to larger property owners who own several multi-unit developments.

Bryant discussed the remaining fair housing videos that the commissioners are completing. He stated that he will try to find out if a video could be done in Portuguese and Haitian Creole. Patrice modified her video that is based on tenant rights and protected classes in fair housing. She will send the video file to Bryant so that it can be edited to add some other content.

III. Announcements

Bryant discussed the current affordable rental opportunity at 1060 Broadway named CALA/Powderhouse. He shared that there will be eight affordable rental units available and that interested households can apply at this time. The lottery for these units will take place on October 21, 2020.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Dennis Fischman and seconded by Rona Fischman and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:12 pm.