

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**

December 19, 2019

Auditorium room-Central Library

79 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA

4:00 pm

The meeting began at: 4:33 pm.

Attending: FHC members, Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, and Rona Fischman; 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 November 21, 2019 meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard. Rona Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes which was seconded by Patrice Faulkner and unanimously *approved*.

Facebook page update: Dennis discussed two particular Facebook posts in the month of December that were the most popular and had the most engagement (shares). One of the Facebook posts was the question of the week about a scenario where a landlord refuses to fix the back stairway. The answer is dependent on if the back stairway is considered the second exit/entryway. If it is a second exit/entryway then the landlord must fix it and keep it in good condition. The second article provided readers insight in how significant the Muslim-non-Muslim disparities are in neighborhood characteristics using the City of Philadelphia as an example. Black and non-black Muslims live in neighborhoods with fewer white residents than non-Muslims, even after making equal their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics — for example income, education and family status. Among blacks, Muslims are 30 percent less likely than non-Muslims to live in suburban neighborhoods. Patrice shared that steering is not always obvious and that you cannot assume someone of a certain demographic wants to live in a neighborhood with similar demographics.

Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: Bryant informed the commissioners about a recent fair housing complaint that was submitted via email stating the person was discriminated against based on Source of income. The tenant cited that her having a section 8 voucher, low credit score and an emotional support animal as the reasons she keeps getting denied housing and being discriminated against. She provided one clear example when applying for a unit in Somerville where the owner of the building says they will not accept section 8 in their corresponding email. It was not clear if the tenant wanted

to pursue a complaint through the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) or Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program. She informed Bryant that she just wanted to find an apartment before her voucher expired.

## *II. Update on Specific Activities*

AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing)-Bryant shared the results of the testing Suffolk University conducted at a property owned by a Somerville housing provider. The test was conducted based on information on the provider's website that indicated they did not accept rental subsidies such as section 8 vouchers. One of the testers was a member of a protected class under Massachusetts law because they received public assistance (section 8 voucher) and another tester did not have a voucher. Each tester visited one of the properties owned by the housing provider and expressed interest in renting a unit. No evidence of discrimination was found because the tester with a voucher was told she could rent out the unit with her voucher by an employee of the housing provider and was treated the same during her tour of the unit as the tester without a voucher. Patrice remarked that it was important these sort of housing discrimination tests take place because families in the Davis square area are moving out because of the cost of living and possibly due to housing discrimination related to households with children and/or those who receive public assistance.

April 2020 Fair Housing Event-The commissioners agreed that holding a fair housing fair would be a daunting task that likely would not be feasible based on time and staffing constraints. Bryant offered an idea for a smaller scale fair housing event such as a testing presentation/informational by staff from Suffolk University's Housing Discrimination Testing Program (HDTP). He added that the Commission held a fair housing tenant's right workshop two years ago and a property owner workshop last year and a testing presentation/informational may be appropriate this time around. Bryant will follow up with Suffolk regarding the possibility of their staff presenting at April's event. Rona added that it may be beneficial to do the presentation at an inclusionary housing information session. Dennis shared that for marketing purposes the commission should reach out to as many local groups as possible such as non-profits, faith based groups, and neighborhood coalitions.

Rona suggested that the date for the event be put together in January and list of people and groups to contact by February. She also noted that a certain type of flyers and posters may be necessary to advertise the event. Patrice mentioned that one of our target audiences in terms of advertising could be new people moving into Somerville. Dennis added that Temple B'nai Brith may be considered as a site to hold the event because of availability and it is handicap accessible.

## *III. Announcements/Updates*

No announcements/updates.

A *motion* to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Dennis and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 5:37 pm.