

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone
Mayor

Liaison

Bryant Gaspard

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman

Meeting Minutes

December 19, 2018
Cross Street Center
165 Broadway, Somerville MA
12:00 pm

The meeting began at: 12:15 pm.

Attending: FHC members, Claudia DeAndrade, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman;
City staff, Bryant Gaspard; Natasha Sierra

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 for the November 28th meeting that had been prepared by Bryant Gaspard and reviewed by Mike Feloney. Rona Fischman made a *motion* to amend the minutes from paragraph 1 on page three to read as follows, strike "...to certain demographics of people" and add "...families with children under the age of 6." The *motion* was seconded by Claudia DeAndrade and unanimously *approved*. Dennis Fischman made a motion to accept the minutes which was seconded by Rona and unanimously *approved*.
- Facebook page update: Dennis shared that the Facebook item that received the most interest was an article about the difficulty in finding affordable housing for people with disabilities, especially those who are disabled and homeless. The Facebook post that had the most interaction was a fair housing question related to a landlord refusing to fix a back stairway. The answer was that if the back stairway is a second means of egress in then the landlord is obligated to fix it.
- Review of Calls/Issues/Complaints: No fair housing complaints were received in December. Bryant shared that one of the issues he will work on for the upcoming year will be to try to reach out and work with community programs that help undocumented residents in Somerville. He noted that undocumented residents often experience housing discrimination because of various factors including speaking little to no English, lack of photo identification and national origin, which is a protected class under fair housing law.

Bryant expressed that in his experience, when undocumented residents do secure housing they are often doubled up, renting a room with more than two people in it or live in substandard conditions that go unreported because of fear of reprisal and deportation. Natasha shared her view that undocumented residents in Somerville should not be denied housing because they lack a social

security number, unless they are applying to federal public housing or some type of housing program that is federally funded. There is a high demand and low supply for housing in the greater Boston region and adding barriers to access housing only serves to exacerbate the problem.

II. Update on Specific Activities

- **AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing):** Bryant shared that the Suffolk University Housing Discrimination Testing Program (HDTP) is doing a study regarding housing discrimination against African-Americans and is seeking African-Americans to participate in their study. Bryant added that if any of the commissioners knew someone who wanted to participate in the study that they should contact him directly regarding their interest.

Dennis expressed that he is surprised that the Greater Fair Housing Center of Boston apparently has closed (based on information Bryant received) and that he believed that the closure will diminish the ability to carry out fair housing enforcement in the Greater Boston area. He added that he appreciates the work that the HDTP is doing, but that it may place them and other similar housing enforcement agencies in a vulnerable position because there are fewer agencies in the area performing this type of work with the Greater Fair Housing Center's closure.

Dennis asked whether it was appropriate to discuss a contingency plan with the Board of Aldermen (BOA), for the City to get involved directly in housing discrimination testing. Dennis's questions arose out of concern that HTDP is the only agency performing housing testing in the Greater Boston area.

Bryant responded to Dennis' inquiry by sharing that there had been discussion of a related nature at the most recent meeting of the BOA's Housing & Community Development Committee. The Committee considered a motion adopted by the BOA calling for the City to establish such a testing program. Bryant had represented the Housing Division at the meeting and commented that he saw the HDTP program as a sufficient alternative that was available at no cost to the City. If the HDTP were to cease operating or be unable to conduct testing in Somerville, then the Fair Housing Commission and the BOA can revisit the idea of the City conducting its own testing. Bryant added that he would double check with the City of Boston Fair Housing and Equity office to confirm that the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston has ceased operation.

- **Property owner workshop/Housing Fair in Spring 2019:** A challenge posed by holding a housing fair in April, as hoped for, is the lack of staff available to help plan the event. It had been suggested at the last FHC meeting that staff inquire with Office of Housing Stability (OHS) as to whether OHS staff could help Bryant plan the event. Bryant shared that he spoke with OHS Director Ellen Shachter about the projected timing of the event, about April and whether OHS staff could be involved.

Bryant reported that Ellen had indicated that she is in the midst of conducting interviews to begin staffing OHS. That process, for filling the Deputy Director position, will likely take till the end of January. Ellen went on to note that new staff will have to be trained once hired, and that she did not expect staff to be in position to help plan an event. They did discuss the possibility of holding the event later in the summer based on staff availability, but agreed that a property owner workshop may be a better alternative program for the spring.

Rona noted that holding a property owner workshop focusing on fair housing would be a good alternative to a housing fair, and that reaching out to landlords in late April and May is optimal because of the changeover in tenants that will occur throughout the summer. She added that it is important to try to get a date as soon as possible so advertising for the workshop can start early. Dennis shared his concern that he does not want the housing fair to be forgotten or get lost in the shuffle of other work or events because Housing Division staff may be busy with other responsibilities.

III. Announcements/Updates

- FHC Vacancies: Bryant provided a short breakdown on the appointment process and what stage Natasha and recent applicant Patrice Faulkner are in, respectively, in the process. Both applicants are waiting to meet with the Appointments committee of the Board of Aldermen. Bryant gave each commissioner a copy of Patrice's resume for their information. Dennis commented that in his view, Patrice would have strengths and experiences that no one else on the Commission has and if appointed would be a valued Commission member.

A motion to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Claudia and approved unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 12:58 pm.

Documents distributed at meeting:

- Patrice Faulkner resume