

CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION

Joseph A. Curtatone

Mayor

Liaison

Bryant Gaspard
Program Specialist

Commissioners

Claudia DeAndrade
Jose Filho
Dennis Fischman
Rona Fischman

Meeting Minutes

March 1, 2018

Somerville Library-Central Branch

1st Floor Auditorium

79 Highland Avenue

1:00 pm

The meeting began at: 1:06 pm.

Attending: FHC members Claudia DeAndrade, Jose Filho, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman;
City staff, Mona Al-Abadi, Michael Feloney, and Bryant Gaspard

Minutes distribution to: FHC members; staff attending

I. Standing Agenda Items

- Introduction: Mike Feloney introduced new Housing Division staff member Bryant Gaspard, who started in the position of Program Specialist-Fair Housing/Operations on February 26th. Bryant introduced himself as well as offered background on his prior experience, which includes working at the Community Action Agency of Somerville.
- Meeting Minutes: Members reviewed draft minutes that had been prepared by Mona Al-Abadi and reviewed by Mike Feloney. Dennis Fischman made a *motion* to accept the minutes, which was seconded by Claudia DeAndrade and unanimously *approved*.
- Facebook page update: Prior to reporting on Facebook page activity since the last meeting Dennis noted that Jose Filho has been translating the Fair Housing questions in to Portuguese. Dennis went on to report on the most popular Fair Housing question, which was “Do I have a right to have my dog live with me? He’s essential to my health.” The answer was “It depends on whether he’s a service dog (specifically trained to assist you), a therapy dog, or an emotional support dog.” Dennis stated that the question about the dog received the most feedback.

Dennis also discussed an article that was posted on the Fair Housing Commission Facebook page, about Wells Fargo Bank trying to end a lawsuit based on allegations of predatory lending. The lawsuit alleges violations of Fair Housing Law where banks try to steer minority borrowers into higher cost, higher risk loans.

- Review of calls/issues/complaints: Mona reported on a complaint from an elderly couple who are tenants at 383 Broadway, have a Section 8 voucher and are being evicted by the property owner. Mona had spoken with the couple's daughter who lives in the same building, but in a market rate unit. Based on her parents' experience and another household with a Section 8 voucher, the daughter is concerned that only tenants with vouchers were being evicted.

Mona reached out to Barbara Chandler, Senior Advisor on Civil Rights and Fair Housing at Metro Housing Boston, who provided useful information about potential steps the couple could take. One of those steps is to file a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) and seek legal representation through Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services (CASLS).

The couple is being represented by Deb Filler, an Attorney at CASLS. Bryant spoke with Attorney Filler who shared that the couple's court case had been continued. Deb also noted that the couple has gone forward with a complaint they have filed with the MCAD. She stated that her colleague, Susan Hegel, was representing another tenant in the building who is a single mother with a Section 8 voucher as well. Attorney Filler stated that CASLS would welcome any involvement from the city. Possible follow ups that were discussed included reaching out to Susan Hegel regarding her client and the Attorney General's Civil Rights Division.

Rona asked if the other families that also have moved out of the building and had vouchers could be found in an effort to provide affidavits or statements to corroborate other information.

Commissioners expressed that they are very glad to see Fair Housing staff following up on this, with the support of the Housing Division.

Mona Al-Abadi left the meeting at 1:28.

- Revision of the Fair Housing Commission Ordinance: Dennis discussed a proposal to change the Somerville Fair Housing ordinance by adding that a Commissioner could live or work in Somerville. He also mentioned that the specific criteria needed for each Commissioner was not necessary except for having a moderate to low income tenant on the Commission. Mike mentioned that he had shared this proposal with the Mayor's office; Mayor's office staff will explore with relevant BOA committee chairs whether such a change can be considered now.

II. Update on specific activities

- AFFH (Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing):
 - Bryant described some of the public comments on the Assessment of Fair Housing he had reviewed; he also reported that he would be drafting responses to questions Mike hadn't had a chance to consider. He also discussed helpful comments that Barbara Chandler had provided on the draft AFH. One particular comment was about the FHC to collaborating with agencies such as Metro Housing Boston on Fair Housing issues.

- Bryant further updated Commission members that he had spoken with Crystal Rosa from the City of Cambridge, who coordinated the Housing Fair event held last year in Cambridge. Ms. Rosa provided a timeline of when she started working on the fair and time frame for securing speakers and other activities. Based on the information provided, Bryant offered the view that there would not be enough time to do a Housing Fair this year, but that it should be a great option for 2019.
- AFFH-related items-Commissioner updates
 - Tenant Handbook revisions: Rona said she was about 75% through the tenant handbook guide. She offered the view that it didn't make sense for the print issue to be similar to the web issue because there are web links in the print issue.
 - Rona also mentioned that there was too much "legalese" in some parts of the handbook. She plans to reach out to Hannah Carrillo, to get further information from the city website.
 - Potential outreach opportunity with Naveo Credit Union: Joe mentioned that he has scheduled March 8th at 10:00 a.m. for Dennis and Bryant to join him at Naveo Credit Union for their First time homebuyer's class and to discuss Fair Housing.

III. Event at Mystic Activity Center

Commissioners reported that they had tentatively reserved a space at the Mystic Activity center for the purpose of an event to be confirmed for Tuesday, April 24th at 7p.m. The agenda for the event is to be further 'flushed out' at FHC's next meeting. Initial discussions included introducing Bryant to the residents and having him describe his role as Program Specialist on Fair Housing (along with other division activities). Additional, comments and feedback included having someone present information about financial resources and affordable housing options. All the Commissioners plan to attend the event except Rona, who has to teach that same night. It was agreed that the April event will be held in lieu of a poster contest this year.

Claudia shared concerns she has heard from select residents at the Mystic properties regarding interactions with the at large community. There may be a need for further discussions at an upcoming event.

IV. Commissioner Reappointments/filing of current vacancy

Mike updated the reappointment requests for Dennis and Rona and current status. He stated that the requests have been submitted to MinuteTraq and to the Alderman Confirmation of Appointments Committee.

Bryant has drafted a press release for the vacancy on the Commission and once it is finalized a copy will be sent to Dennis and Rona to put on the FHC Facebook page.

Bryant will also inquire with contacts he has in Somerville to see to see if he can help identify someone who works at a Not profit agency, lives in Somerville, and would be interested in serving on the Commission.

A motion to adjourn was introduced by Rona and seconded by Claudia and *approved* unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 2:08pm.

Documents distributed at meeting:

- Planning documents related to the Housing Fair held by the City of Cambridge.