



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Gomez Mouakad at 6:02 p.m. and adjourned at 8:14 p.m. on a Roll Call Vote: 3 in favor (Councilors Strezo, Pineda Neufeld, Clingan), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

Others present: Dennis Fischman – Commissioner, Somerville Fair Housing Commission; Hannah Carrillo – Legislative Liaison, Mayor’s Office; Hanalei Steinhart – Fair Housing Program Specialist; Ellen Shachter – Director of the Office of Housing Stability; Michael Feloney – Director of Housing; Luis Fernandez – Somerville Bike Kitchen; Ben Baldwin – Executive Director of the Community Land Trust; Morena Zelaya – Housing Policy Coordinator; Michael Potere – Assistant Clerk of Committees

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Kristen Strezo, Vice Chair Judy Pineda Neufeld and Jesse Clingan

Committee
Minutes
(ID # [23-0202](#))

Approval of the Housing and Community Development Committee Minutes of February 2, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Chairperson Strezo, Vice Chair Pineda Neufeld and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan

Order
(ID # [22-0085](#))

By Councilor Strezo

That the Director of the Office of Housing Stability appear before the Housing and Community Development Committee to discuss the current status of Somerville residents facing displacement and the number of households seeking rental assistance.

Director Shachter stated that the number of intakes for the Office of Housing Stability receives per month is about 133, and that there were 125 in February. Director Schacter also stated that the Office received \$3.4 million from the Flex ARPA, which will be used to assist renters pay arrears and make future rent payments. Director Schacter indicated that there have been 59 executions of eviction notices in Somerville since October of 2020, and that instances have increased since the city’s moratorium ended. Director Schacter also stated that the office is working on a municipal voucher program for very low-income households who do not qualify for federal housing resources, and that the office is receiving Request for Proposals (RFPs) to run the program.

Director Schacter addressed the fire that occurred at 34 Highland Ave,

noting that 52 people were displaced as a result, the city placed people in hotels using \$15,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and \$25,000 from private donations, and that all but 6 are back in their residences.

Councilor Clingan asked about the ways that ongoing housing displacement takes place, and Director Schacter responded that the largest factor is building sales and across the board rent increases. Councilor Clingan asked about the difficulties in increasing the number of affordable units, and Director Shachter stated that there is a challenge in finding organizations to manage those units.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld commented that the ARPA funds will not be available in the future and asked about transitional and emergency housing opportunities at that time. Director Shachter responded that there is very little in emergency housing to place people, and that the city needs to begin thinking about how it will handle that in the future, and that that is going to be particularly important for immigrants and senior citizens.

Councilor Clingan asked about who displaced residents should contact when necessary, and Director Shachter said that the Inspectional Services Department is going to be the point of contact in the future.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Order
(ID # [23-0064](#))

By Councilor Strezio, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Gomez Mouakad and Councilor Scott
That this City Council's Committee on Housing and Community Development discuss the attached letter from the Somerville Fair Housing Commission regarding the current Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination backlog.

Commissioner Fischman began the discussion by stating that Somerville's Fair Housing Commission has limited authority to address housing discrimination in the city, and that that authority primarily resides with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination ("MCAD").
Commissioner Fischman continued that the backlog at MCAD makes it easier for landlords and mortgage brokers to illegally discriminate against people in the Somerville housing market, and stated that the two most viable solutions would be for the city to advocate for additional funding from the state to address the MCAD backlog, or else to have the city could take on additional enforcement authority at the local level, which would require a larger commitment from the city. Director Feloney added that the Commission has initiated discussions with the Mayor's Office regarding the issue.

Chair Strezio praised Legislative Liaison Carrillo's dedication to the issue of fair housing in Somerville, and invited her to speak on the matter.

Legislative Liaison Carrillo stated that the Mayor's Office is strongly interested in investigating this issue and exploring what resources can be made available, as well as looking into what authority the administration has to address the matter.

Director Shachter mentioned that one of the main ways to rectify housing discrimination is with injunctive relief from a court, and that the Commission is working with De Novo Legal Services and Counseling to see what role that organization could have in addressing the issue. Director Shachter continued that quick action is critical with housing issues, and that absent effective litigation, it would be worthwhile to explore what additional options Somerville has to enforce fair housing at the local level.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the open position for the Fair Housing Inclusionary Program Specialist had been filled, and Director Feloney responded that it was recently filled by Hanalei Steinhart, a Somerville resident, who was also present during the meeting.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if there had been an increase in the number of complaints lodged with the Commission, and Commissioner Fischman stated that the number of complaints received was fairly small, in part because many residents are unaware of their rights under the law. Director Feloney stated that there were 5 complaints in 2018, 10 complaints in 2019, 13 complaints in 2020, and 19 complaints in 2022, and reiterated that the low number is likely due to a general lack of knowledge of the law.

Chair Strezo asked how Somerville residents can locate the Fair Housing Commission and how many people are not even aware that it exists. Director Feloney responded that many people do an internet search and are directed to the Commission's Facebook page that encourages interaction from the public, and added that Program Specialist Steinhart would be working to increase the public's awareness of the Commission. Commissioner Fischman added that the Commission places posters for the public and holds events at locations like the Somerville Public Library.

Councilor Clingan asked about providing the Somerville Fair Housing Commission with the authority to police violations of the fair housing law. Director Feloney responded that the Commission frequently works with the Suffolk University Law School's clinic to initiate actions to enforce the law. However, Director Feloney said that for reasons of confidentiality, the Commission does not often learn of the outcomes of those actions. Councilor Clingan asked if there is a record of the results of actions initiated by MCAD, and Director Feloney said that the Commission has been working to collect that data, and that Program Specialist Steinhart would be working on that initiative as well. Councilor Clingan asked how the public could get in touch with the Commission, and Commissioner Fischman stated that they would call the Commission's office, but that community outreach

and public education would go a long way to increasing that level of connection. Director Feloney added that Somerville residents can file complaints on the Commission's webpage.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [22-0174](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of the Office of Housing Stability discuss proactive measures to inform tenants in inclusionary housing units of the rights and resources available to them.

Chair Strezo stated many steps have been taken towards this item, and therefore it should be closed.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [22-0051](#))

By Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Strezo, Councilor Davis and Councilor Kelly
That the Administration collaborate with the Bicycle Committee, the School Department, the Somerville Bike Kitchen and other local organizations to develop a program to help Somerville youth and other residents learn to repair bicycles donated by the City of Somerville.

Luis Fernandez of the Somerville Bike Kitchen gave a presentation regarding the organization and its goals and accomplishments. Fernandez stated that the organization provides a free bicycle repair service to low- and moderate-income Somerville residents. Fernandez also stated that the organization is itself comprised of diverse people, and that its mission is aligned with the environmental and sustainability goals outlined in SomerVision 2040. Councilor Clingan expressed support for the Bike Kitchen and added that the city is consistently investing in increasing bicycle access and improving and adding bicycle paths. Fernandez stated that the Bike Kitchen is losing its current location, and Legislative Liaison Carrillo stated that she met with Fernandez and is hopeful that they can find a space that matches the Bike Kitchen's needs.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Order
(ID # [22-0170](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Housing, the Director of the Office of Housing Stability, and the Director of Planning and Zoning discuss the challenges associated with and potential modifications to the Tier 3 Rental ADUs multiplier at 110% AMI for inclusionary units.

Chair Strezo stated that this item was on the agenda to close it out.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [22-0173](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That the Executive Director of the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development work with the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to consider combining the affordable housing linkage payments for commercial development as a funding source for a development that will result in the creation of affordable units.

Chair Strezo stated that this item was on the agenda to close it.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Resolution
(ID # [22-0090](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That representatives of the Community Land Trust update this Council’s Housing and Community Development Committee on its progress and how the Council can help implement the Trust’s goals.

Director Baldwin explained that the Community Land Trust (“CLT”) started in 2018 and buys or owns land that it then sells or leases at affordable rates using affordable housing subsidies. Director Baldwin stated the CLT’s current focus has been on 7 Summer Street, which the CLT purchased last year and has five units of affordable housing, with three affordable to under 80% of the area median income and two affordable to under 110% of the area median income, all five of which are currently under contract to be sold. Director Baldwin stated that the CLT will continue seeking out such properties, including those donated to the city by private partners. Director Baldwin also stated that the CLT will have resident board members beginning this year. Director Baldwin added that one of the challenges the CLT faces is recruiting management companies to run its properties.

Chair Strezo stated support for an apprenticeship program with city schools to help save costs on building repairs and maintenance for CLT properties.

Councilor Clingan expressed support for the CLT.

Chair Strezo asked about what support was in place for the 7 Summer Street residents and if there was a plan moving forward to check on their progress. Director Baldwin responded that although there is not a firm plan currently in place, the CLT will continue to support its residents, in part because although the residents own the units, the CLT still owns the land. Director Baldwin added that the CLT will add staff as the number of residents grows.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [23-0281](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Human Resources provide a written demographic breakdown, including the age, gender, and race/ethnicity of Customer Service Representatives in the Constituent Services Department (311).

Legislative Liaison Carrillo reported, via email, that there are 10 Customer Service Representatives in 311. Of those, 3 are aged 25-39, and 7 are 40 and above; 9 report their gender as Female, and 1 as Male; and 4 report their Race/Ethnicity as Black, 3 as Caucasian, and 3 as Hispanic. Please also see page 4 of the attached PDF for the full list of survey questions asked at the time of hire, where the above information was gathered.

Chair Strezo recited the demographic breakdown of the Constituent Services Department as follows: 77% female; 66% white; 22% Hispanic/Latino; and age range of 30-59 years. Chair Strezo stated that the employees are calling for unionization, and that the data was important to understand that process.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld expressed surprise that the number of employees in that department is only ten because of the large amount of work they are responsible for completing, and expressed support for the diversity of the staff.

Chair Strezo stated in conclusion that the purpose of this agenda item was so the committee could be aware of how the city supports diversity.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Officer's
Communication
(ID # [23-0036](#))

Fair Housing Commission Staff Liaison conveying the Fiscal Year 2021 Fair Housing Commission Annual Report.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- Housing - 2023-03-01 Employment Application REV 2022 (with 23-0281)