



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, February 2, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:01 pm and adjourned at 7:56 pm by a roll call vote of all in favor (Councilor Clingan, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Chair Strezo), none opposed, none absent.

Others present: Hannah Carrillo – Mayor’s Office, Ellen Shachter – OHS, Kelly Donato – OSPCD, Lisa Davidson – OSPCD, Michael Feloney – Housing, Stephanie Widzowski – Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

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

- Committee Minutes (ID # [22-1783](#)) Approval of the Housing and Community Development Committee Minutes of October 19, 2022.

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.

Dir. Shachter said that there has been a slight increase in evictions and in monthly applications for assistance alike, and talked about the status of rental assistance programs like RAFT, which has a new application portal but is having trouble matching tenant applications with landlords. Flex ARPA funds from last year went quickly, but additional funding for rental assistance should be available soon. Dir. Shachter also spoke about the recent success of a workshop held in Spanish and Portuguese to help those looking to apply to CHAMP and said that workshops like this could be an efficient way to aid immigrant households seeking affordable housing. This month, OHS anticipates launching grant applications for its municipal voucher program that provides long-term rental assistance for those with deep subsidy needs. Dir. Shachter talked about three legislative campaigns OHS is involved with, and ended with news of new ARPA contracts and expanded OHS legal service capacity.

Councilor Clingan asked about the scope of need for Somerville residents facing displacement or who are currently without a home. Dir. Shachter said that the only count OHS has of informally homeless residents is through the public schools, and that she feels the city has done well preventing formal eviction, but it is hard to tell how many are in overcrowded or doubled-up living situations. She said she could bring back some statistics from CAS. This led to a conversation about the capacity of Somerville shelters and what happens to those who are forced to go farther from their communities to find lodging.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about successes with preventing evictions. Dir. Shachter said that OHS can sometimes delay levies, but evictions can not be undone once executed. She talked about tools for eviction prevention. Councilor Pineda Neufeld also asked about rent increases with the completion of GLX, which led to a discussion of how to combat rent increases.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

3. Order
(ID # [22-1793](#))

By Councilor Strezo

That the Director of the Office of Housing Stability discuss the potential impact of the anticipated January 2023 Social Security cost of living increase on affordable housing.

Dir. Shachter explained that 2023 saw an 8.7% increase in Social Security she thought it extremely unlikely this causes someone to lose their eligibility for affordable housing, except in a rare case where a family member's increased benefits could raise their family's income above the threshold. She said that there is nuance generally to how income is counted in affordable housing, but there is no specific discount for disability or Social Security income.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Order
(ID # [22-1683](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Clingan, Councilor Davis, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Kelly, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Scott and Councilor Wilson

That the Director of Housing discuss how anticipated increases in utility, heating and water bills will affect affordable housing tenants.

Dir. Donato shared information from the attached memo and walked the committee through an example of a utility deduction calculated from base rent. Councilor Clingan had concerns about 20% affordable units, but Dir. Donato said that the Somerville Housing Authority does not track utility usage per unit; only allowances based on average usage. Ms. Davidson

added that there has been an increase in total utility deductions from 2022 to 2023.

Chair Strezo asked if staff had heard anyone in affordable housing talking about utility increases. Dir. Shachter listed resources that are available to help tenants with utilities, including Flex ARPA funds. She also said that the Community Action Agency in Somerville and the Health and Human Services department do utility advocacy.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

- 5. Order (ID # [22-1408](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Ewen-Campen That the Housing and Community Development Committee discuss the Democracy Collaborative’s report on Advancing Community Wealth Building in the City of Somerville.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 6. Order (ID # [22-0273](#))

By Councilor Gomez Mouakad and Councilor Kelly That the Director of Housing provide the data requested within for inclusionary homes built after 2016, to better understand how the program is addressing housing needs.

Dir. Feloney noted that the data presented here has not been updated since 2022 and said that his department could provide a more current snapshot in March. He reviewed the data presented in the attached chart.

Chair Strezo noted the lack of 3-bedroom units built after 2016 and asked if that number is expected to increase in the updated data. Dir. Donato said that an ordinance passed in 2019 requires projects with 30 or more units to have at least 20% of its affordable units be 3-bedroom. As a result, she thinks more 3-bedroom units will come online as those projects finish construction. Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the 100 Homes program is included, to which the answer was no, and asked how to close the gap between 4+ bedroom units and studio/1-bedroom units. Dir. Donato suggested reviewing the language in the ordinance.

Councilor Clingan asked about the demand for new units and whether reasons are given if potential tenants decline. He also requested data on turnover rates.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

7. Order (ID # [22-0290](#)) By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Health and Human Services discuss the recruitment and retention of Teen Snow Shoveling Program participants.

Liaison Carrillo said that 44 seniors and/or persons with disabilities enrolled in the program, with 42 teens to match with them. A few of those teenagers will be doubled up, but there is no further need for recruitment this year. Chair Strezo asked if there is an outgoing survey for those enrolled and about the cost per visit. Ms. Carrillo said she would find those answers. Councilor Clingan commented that it would be better to get crews to help those who are most vulnerable without charging them, however that could be achieved.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

8. 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.

Liaison Carrillo said that she spoke with a mechanic teacher that works on bikes in their spare time, but there is not yet a dedicated program. The committee discussed businesses and/or organizations that could feasibly host a bike repair program as well as the complications with each option. One concern is making sure anyone in the program gets clearance to work with youth. Two suggestions to explore from this discussion include a club or a teen center. Ms. Carrillo suggested OSPCD could be a good collaborator.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Referenced Documents:

Housing - 2023-2-2 Utility Allowance Memo (with 22-1683)

Housing - 2023-2-2 Inclusionary Housing - selected data 2016-March 2022 (with 22-0273)