



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

June 28, 2022

REPORT OF THE HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Kristen Strezo	Chair	Present	
Ben Ewen-Campen	Vice Chair	Absent	
Judy PinedaNeufeld	Ward Seven City Councilor	Present	

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:02 pm and adjourned at 7:15 pm. Chair Strezo moved to adjourn, and the motion was approved by unanimous roll call vote.

Councilor Ewen-Campen was absent due to a Legislative Matters committee meeting.

Others present: Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Ellen Shachter - Housing, Alan Inacio - OSPCD, Joseph Macaluso - Somerville Housing Authority, Shannon Bennett - Somerville Housing Authority, Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

Approval of the March 31, 2022 Minutes

RESULT:	ACCEPTED
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Approval of the April 20, 2022 Minutes

RESULT:	ACCEPTED
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212861: 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 gave an update on work in OHS. To prepare for the eviction moratorium ending at the end of the month, OHS mailed all property owners encouraging them to reach out to OHS if their tenants are struggling with rent. They also sent mail to all residents informing them of changes to the Housing Stability Notification Act (HSNA) and resources to contact if they need help. Dir. Shachter talked about amendments to HSNA that were passed. The new requirements will be in place and online as of July 13.

OHS was also approved for \$1 million in Flex ARPA funding that should be available in a few weeks. Dir. Shachter described advantages to using Flex ARPA funds and also listed funds that OHS had brought in from other sources, including a cumulative \$4.5 million for rental assistance, mostly from state funds.

She also talked about the RAFT program to replace ERAP, which ended. The limit for each tenant on RAFT is \$7,000 in a 12-month period; OHS is advocating for \$10,000.

Dir. Shachter also talked about the status of bills in state legislation. The real estate transfer fee bill was discharged from the Housing Committee to the Revenue Committee. Dir. Shachter said the best chance for success on that bill is to get the language in a “moving vehicle”. The right to counsel bill was put to study. The TOPA bill and Eviction Ceiling Act need to come out of committee by June 30.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked for a sense of expected outcomes to the moratorium ending. Dir. Shachter said that the hope is for larger landlords to continue to work with OHS to avoid evictions, but they do expect more filings after June 30. In the last two months, there were 18 new eviction cases.

Chair Strezo asked if there is enough support to override if the governor vetoes the TOPA bill. Dir. Shachter said that there is a good chance of being able to override, but the issue is timing. Last time, the bills did not get to the governor soon enough to allow for a veto override.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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213064: That the Executive Director of the Housing Authority discuss the possibility of providing wireless internet in communal areas.

Chair Strezo said that she advocated for this item because of the technology divide in access that became clear during COVID. Dir. Macaluso said that this divide has been ongoing for many years, and this divide informed the creation of the Mystic Community Center and computer centers that have seen use over the years. He said that the passage of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) last year allows residents to receive free internet service. SHA has been utilizing the Internet Essentials program from Comcast, which gives unlimited internet for \$10 a month, but IIJA now allows for the government to pay the monthly rate for residents.

Dir. Macaluso said that SHA has not wired community rooms for WiFi yet. He described obstacles to installing and operating communal WiFi, including the competition for broadband with SHA’s security cameras. However, they are looking for ways to partner with other groups to achieve communal WiFi, and they have looked into pricing. Initial startup could cost between \$1,000 and \$5,000, and monthly costs would be around \$250. Dir. Bennett said that they sent out information on Internet Essentials and affordable connectivity opportunities in multiple ways.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the information posted on their website is available in multiple languages. Dir. Bennett said that the information is available in English and Spanish; internal SHA information is provided in four languages - Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Spanish and English - but any information given to them is posted how SHA receives it. Councilor Pineda Neufeld suggested working with SomerViva to get translations for the other primary languages. Dir. Bennett said that was feasible, and SHA also has internal translators as well. Councilor Pineda Neufeld also asked for the percentage of residents who use the Internet Essentials bundle, and the possibility of providing WiFi in outdoor spaces around buildings. Dir. Macaluso said they have not looked into expanding WiFi outdoors, and internet providers have been reluctant to provide those kind of services. Some cities are trying to make the entire municipality WiFi-accessible, and federal legislation may enable that in Somerville, but Dir. Macaluso said that they have not looked into that yet.

RESULT:	WORK COMPLETED
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213065: That the Executive Director of the Housing Authority discuss the establishment of an on-site resident food pantry within each Housing Authority property to address the food

insecurity needs of residents.

Chair Strezo stated that inflation has driven up the price of food, but SNAP has not reflected that. She asked if food pantries had been established on two properties, including Bryant Manor. Dir. Bennett said that SHA has its own staff to pilot food pantries for emergency dry goods, but would involve securing space and getting advising for the project. There was discussion on how best to implement solutions to food insecurity in Somerville. Chair Strezo advocated for storage areas for dry food stocked by residents with excess items, much like the existing food boxes across the city. She said this would allow people to access food when the office is closed and allow residents to stretch food further. Directors Macaluso and Bennett described advantages to having staffed sites where residents in need can get food. They also cited concerns regarding the resident-run dry pantries - SHA does not want residents to feel obligated to restock them, and donated food items may not always be fresh. Their priority is to make sure food is sustainable and good quality.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld said that she wanted to make sure the committee was not reinventing the wheel and recommended that the directors and the head of the Community Fridges program meet for a conversation on food access in buildings. She moved to make a resolution: *That the Executive Director of the Housing Authority, Director of the Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, and a representative from the Somerville Community Fridges discuss how to address food insecurity of residents at Housing Authority buildings and how to provide greater resources to them.*

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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213756: Requesting approval of the 2022-2023 Housing and Urban Development One Year Action Plan, for Community Development Block Grant, Home Investment Partnership, and Emergency Solutions Grant Programs.

Dir. Inacio said that the city submits a status report every year on its action plan; this is the fifth year of the 5-year plan. The only major change in the program budget is an increase in the rehabilitation program budget to support the green Housing Rehabilitation Program that will be launched in conjunction with the budget PIR passed this year.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the city is reapplying for the grant. Dir. Inacio explained that the three programs are covered by something called entitlement grants and are funded every year unless Congress decides otherwise. There are three requirements to the funding, however: to enact a 5-year plan, to submit an annual plan for each year of the five, and to submit an annual performance and evaluation report.

RESULT:	APPROVED. [UNANIMOUS]
AYES:	Strezo, PinedaNeufeld
ABSENT:	Ewen-Campen

Reference Material:

- SHA response to City council resolution (with 213064, 213065)