



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

To: Board of Aldermen
From: Mayor Joseph Curtatone
Subject: Funding request to establish an Office of Housing Stability
Date: January 22nd, 2018

Executive Summary

The Boston Metro Region is facing a housing crisis. Our cities and towns are experiencing a region-wide housing shortage amid a national demographic shift to back to the urban core. As a result of these and other pressures, housing costs are soaring, and Greater Boston has catapulted onto the list of the most expensive areas in the country. Somerville is not immune this challenge, but as a community we are committed to using every available tool to address it.

While our community is on pace to meet our housing goals as established in SomerVision, we must also provide immediate interventions and supports for those facing housing instability now. To build on and expand upon services historically offered by OSPCD's Housing Division, the City seeks to establish the Office of Housing Stability to assist residents navigating the challenges of the current housing market.

The specific goal of the Office is to create a one-stop shop for residents, offering a combination of preventive, protective, and proactive services ranging from eviction prevention to tenant rights and housing acquisition. Focus areas will include *but are not limited to*:

- Providing an open door to answer questions and provide information and support for a wide range of housing needs and concerns
- Providing information on tenant rights and the housing complaint process
- Connecting residents to tenant supports and providing referrals to tenant legal services
- Helping residents understand, access, and navigate the various services and housing opportunities provided by the full range of providers: City of Somerville's Housing Division, the Somerville Housing Authority and area authorities, the Somerville Community Corporation, CAAS, the Somerville Homeless Coalition, and others
- Maintaining a clearinghouse of current housing opportunities and promoting these housing opportunities
- Helping residents access financial housing assistance programs
- Connecting residents to financial planning opportunities
- Referring residents to fair housing and housing improvement programs maintained by the housing division

- Coordinating with community partners to help homeless and near-homeless residents access programs that provide support services, case management, and housing -- including emergency, transitional, and permanent supportive housing
- Assisting households with the completion of housing applications as needed.

With these actions in mind, I am submitting a mid-year request to establish an Office of Housing Stability within the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development.

Background and Context

Complex affordable housing ecosystem

Families seeking an affordable place to live confront a complicated landscape. Even for the savviest consumer, understanding different rental voucher types, assistance programs, and affordable housing agencies is, at best, extremely time consuming. For others, it can be a confusing and overwhelming process to navigate. Affordable housing applications can be difficult for households to understand and complete. This helps explain why Housing division staff have counseled 1,359 households on inclusionary opportunities in just over the past year. The newly created Office of Housing Stability would expand application assistance and search services as well as the capacity for individualized assistance.

Rising cost of rent

According to the 2016 Census estimate, approximately 38% of Somerville renters, or about 7,652 households, were rent-burdened. Indicators also show that housing cost pressures on personal and family budgets are continuing to trend upward. As the City explores strategies to increase the supply of affordable rentals, we must also aid those currently facing displacement. The Office of Housing Stability will assist residents in accessing reasonable rental units and affordable units, as well as rental support programs such as Section 8 or nonprofit assistance, while assisting those facing sudden rent hikes to access rent stabilization services.

Removal of rentals from the market

Related to the rising cost of rent is the low availability of units, which in turn may be contributing to pressure on landlords to raise rents or convert to condos. According to the Condominium Review Board, 1,235 units were converted over the last 8 years. Approximately 15.5% of the total housing units in the City are condominiums, and 78.6% (4,006) of those units are condos that were converted from rental apartments.¹ Although tenants in housing units undergoing condominium conversion do receive a right of refusal under the Condo Conversion Ordinance, not all households are ready or able to purchase a home.

It is a difficult and time consuming process for tenants to find comparable housing accommodations within Somerville, especially with the high demand for housing. What is more, this pressure may lead to difficult relations between landlords and tenants. ISD received as much as 50% more complaints from tenants in 2017 compared to 2015. Meanwhile, OSPCD Housing Division staff have handled several inquiries on unfair practices and concerns regarding discrimination. The City has a responsibility to ensure that all residents are treated fairly and fully understand the options before them. No Somerville

¹ This calculation is based on the assumption that all condominiums that are in housing units built before 1979 (the year the first Condominium Conversion Ordinance was enacted) are conversion condominiums and all condominiums built after 1980 are new construction.

resident should be deprived their rights or discriminated against for any reason. The Office of Housing Stability will offer personalized services to ensure tenants are aware of their rights and all paths to potential remedies and will also work to enforce and inform tenants about condo conversion and first right of refusal ordinances.

The Request

We have identified five new positions to staff a new Office of Housing Stability that would focus on helping residents stay in Somerville.

The Administration believes that creating this office is a critical part of our mission. However, given that this is a brand new office, we have separated its creation into two phases that will allow a new Director to play a strategic role in the establishment of the office and the onboarding of new staff:

- Phase I: Necessary to establish office, complete a strategic plan, and begin hiring staff.
- Phase II: Necessary for executing strategic plan and implementing goals of office.

Department	Position Title	Main Duties and Responsibilities	Priority
Office of Housing Stability	Director	Set strategic direction; develop programming, create and cultivate partnerships; manage day-to-day operations.	Phase I
Office of Housing Stability	Deputy Director of the Office of Housing Stability/Program Development	Ensure effective criteria and tracking of case management; maintain database of housing opportunities; assist in the development of programming, cultivate relationships and manage contracts with legal service providers, homeless providers, and other provider agencies within the community.	Phase II
Office of Housing Stability	Housing counselor/case manager	Provide assistance filling out housing applications; providing information on tenant rights; resolving landlord/tenant disputes or referring to mediation.	Phase II
Office of Housing Stability	Housing counselor/case manager	Provide assistance filling out housing applications; providing information on tenant rights; resolving landlord/tenant disputes or referring to mediation.	Phase II
Office of Housing Stability	Intake Specialist	Serves as first point of contact for all residents seeking assistance from the office; assigns cases, makes connections to other departments or outside agencies as needed.	Phase II

Budget

The Administration is requesting an appropriation of \$144,834 from free cash for the anticipated salary and benefits associated with these positions for a portion of the remaining fiscal year. We are requesting four months of funding for the Director of Housing Stability and up to three months of funding for the remaining positions. In addition to staff, we have identified a need for some ordinary maintenance funds to get the office up and running. This will include support for office equipment and supplies as well as the expansion of existing case management software that enables the tracking of services provided across the City – be it with the Council on Aging, Health and Human Services, or the SomerViva Office of Immigrant Outreach and Services.

Relationship to OSPCD Housing Division

The creation of the Office of Housing Stability would allow the administration to continue to build on existing efforts to provide responsive, high-quality service to address the needs of residents for various housing supports while at the same time enabling the Housing Division and other OSPCD staff to work on the creation of new housing units and administer existing programs.

The existing Housing Division will continue to seek and identify opportunities for housing production, for example, administering the 100 Homes program; implementing recently passed policies (such as the increased housing linkage fee); and advocating for new production related policies, such as a real estate transfer fee or the zoning overhaul. In addition, the Division would continue to administer the rehab and lead paint abatement programs, energy efficiency initiative, and administer the inclusionary housing program and staff and track funding from the Affordable Housing Trust (both Trust and CPA housing funds)

In addition, the Housing Division currently handles all fair housing complaints and investigations. We anticipate that the Housing Division's Program Specialist focused on fair housing would work in close coordination with the Director of the Office of Housing Stability. Once the Office of Housing Stability is in full operation, staff from both offices will explore opportunities to coordinate and improve these critical service areas.

Conclusion

Housing affordability and preserving long-term tenancies are critical to strong stable neighborhoods. The Office of Housing Stability would provide assistance for those residents navigating potential housing opportunities, help residents complete housing applications, provide connections to financial housing assistance to tenants, and ensure tenants are connected with resources and services when facing eviction.

FY2018 - Establishing an Office of Housing Stability
 FY2018 Midyear Budget Detail
 January 22, 2018

Department	FTE	Type	Position Title	Classification	Salary Range	Annualized Salary	Benefits (Estimated)	FY18 mid-year request	Priority
EMPLOYEES - PS BUDGET - HOUSING STABILITY									
OSPCD Housing Stability	1	RFT	Director of Housing Stability	NU05	\$100,000-\$134,586.83	\$100,000.00	\$18,000.00	\$39,333.33	Critical
OSPCD Housing Stability	1	RFT	Deputy Director of Housing Stability/Program Development	NU08	\$80,000-\$107,669.47	\$80,000.00	\$18,000.00	\$24,500.00	High
OSPCD Housing Stability	1	RFT	Housing Counselor/Case Manager	NU11	\$60,000-\$80,752.10	\$60,000.00	\$18,000.00	\$19,500.00	High
OSPCD Housing Stability	1	RFT	Housing Counselor /Case Manager	NU11	\$60,000-\$80,752.10	\$60,000.00	\$18,000.00	\$19,500.00	High
OSPCD Housing Stability	1	RFT	Housing Intake Specialist	NU12	\$50,000-\$67,293.42	\$50,000.00	\$18,000.00	\$17,000.00	High
SUBTOTAL	5					\$350,000.00	\$90,000.00	\$119,833.33	
OM BUDGET - HOUSING STABILITY									
OSPCD Housing Stability								\$25,000.00	High
TOTAL						\$350,000.00	\$90,000.00	\$144,833.33	