



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

February 16, 2022

REPORT OF THE HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Others present: Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Fred Berman - OSPCD, Sam LaTronica - SCC (Somerville Community Corporation), Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:32 pm and adjourned at 7:46 pm.

Approval of the January 19, 2022 Minutes

The minutes were accepted on a unanimous roll call vote.

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.

Mr. Berman said there have been many requests for assistance recently - an average of 100 requests a month, including multiple requests from the same concerned residents or providers. Rental assistance makes up 45% of the requests. Mr. Berman talked about how OHS applies for various sources of funding at the state and municipal levels, and about the status of different funds. ERAP is scheduled to run out of funds in April, and there is a coalition of statewide organizations looking for \$1.5-2 million to extend funding through the fiscal year. The Homeless Coalition uses federal funding from the Emergency Solutions Grant and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), but federal grants involve more documentation and have stricter requirements, so those applications have a longer processing time.

Mr. Berman said that there were 100 filings for eviction in the past 10 months - a small number compared to pre-COVID levels, but still significant. There is still a moratorium in Somerville, but it is set to end by May. Director Shachter will be meeting with Somerville Board of Health to

discuss what to do with the moratorium. Mr. Berman described events with Boston's moratorium and stressed that they need a medical, or COVID-based reason to extend the moratorium.

Councilor Burnley has been in touch with Director Shachter about a provision in the Housing Stability Notification Act: landlords sending a notice to quit to tenants must provide information in multiple languages. He is proposing that landlords should provide more information around tenant rights from day one, not just at the time of eviction or when a notice to quit is filed. Mr. Berman said there are questions around paper versus online distribution, how much information to provide to the public, and what is most useful to them. The questions brought about by Councilor Burnley's efforts might lead to an amendment of the HSNA.

Mr. Berman brought to attention that tenants at a residence on Walnut St are organizing because even though the new owner issued a notice to quit, they have not withdrawn their proposed rent increase. The OHS has asked the Ethics commission for a ruling on whether they can intervene. They have been planning tenants' rights workshops with translations provided, and they are almost fully staffed - hiring for two more rental assistance advocates.

Councilor Pineda-Neufeld asked how long it takes for tenants in need to be put in touch with rental assistance staff. Mr. Berman answered that the process is faster if someone has a notice to quit or has experienced landlord harassment. The actual time depends - sometimes one or two days, sometimes one or two weeks. He believes wait times will improve once they hire the remaining assistance advocates. As for how long it takes to receive rental assistance, it can easily take 6-8 weeks. There had been a streamlined renewal process, but it was discontinued at the start of 2022. Between the wait times for an application and funding ending soon, tenants potentially have one more chance to apply.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said he was interested in the idea to strengthen the Housing Stability Notification Act, and that its original goal was to get the Jim Brooks Act - just-cause eviction - as a home rule petition, while doing the most possible within the Council's own legal authority.

Chair Strezo commented that rental assistance is a short-term fix and asked about OHS's next steps. Mr. Berman replied that rental assistance will not go away entirely, but they will rely more on preexisting resources. Programs like the Community Preservation Act and RAFT will continue, but eligibility and reach may be restricted. Dir. Shachter is looking into the possibility of a municipal voucher program, looking at Boston's pilot project. Because vouchers are expensive and serve fewer people, they need to make sure it targets the people most in need. OHS mailed the general public about housing protections. Once the moratorium ends, they will update the website and put more resources together for the public.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

212863: That the Committee on Housing and Community Development discuss the 2021 Housing Needs Assessment.

Ms. Carrillo said that their consultants will be doing this presentation at the Council meeting.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

212953: That the Executive Director of Somerville Community Corporation discuss the

status of the 100 Homes Program.

Mr. LaTronica said that the SCC has not acquired new properties in a year, instead opting to stabilize their current portfolio. One of their properties was damaged in a fire last year, and they intend to bid the renovation contract within a week or two. That property will be available in June or July. In memos created with the OSPCD, the SCC outlined qualitative strengths and growth areas in the 100 Houses portfolio. Their next step is to collect quantitative data for each of the points outlined in the memos. A pro-bono team from Harvard is helping with the analysis. The SCC is looking to improve their portfolio, including converting 100% AMI units to 50 or 60% AMI.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked for the memos mentioned above to be shared with the Council. He said that buying down the affordability of 100% AMI units makes sense, and asked Mr. LaTronica to estimate what it costs to convert to a lower AMI. Mr. LaTronica explained that the funds required for each income tier in subsidy were agreed on years ago: for every 100% AMI, they would get \$130,000; for 80%, \$200,000; and for 50%, \$307,000. Existing loans are based on AMI, and the SCC would need external funds to pay the loans if they reduced the income gained from AMI.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said his opinion was that politicians like to ask what gives them “the most bang for their buck”. The gut feeling is to maximize units, but it is also important to properly manage units and make sure they are safe and accessible. He urged the SCC to continue with maintenance and investing in existing units for the benefit of long-term affordable housing.

Councilor Pineda-Neufeld also expressed support for the program. She expressed the importance of stabilization and calculating long-term operational costs, and asked what it would take to get from stabilization to growth. Mr. LaTronica answered that first, they would need a complete analysis and a revised set of procedures to acquire property. Next, they should determine the ideal outcome and how to achieve it. Then would come putting in the work and funding to stabilize the current portfolio. Achieving growth would require collaboration with and support from the city.

Councilor Pineda-Neufeld asked about communication with the tenants through this process, and what level of trust is there. Mr. LaTronica answered that they are doing what they can, but they are stretched in capacity and funding. The SCC takes an open and empathetic approach - he said their newest maintenance technician has made a great impact towards building trust - but the relationship will not improve if they do not deliver results. He said that the situation is improving over time, though.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

212860: That the Director of Human Resources and the Chief of Police update this Council on the staffing of crossing guards, including how many of the vacant positions have been filled and the process to determine which school crossing locations get staffed first.

Chair Strezo said that there are multiple reports of children crossing busy streets without any guards, and because Somerville is such a thoroughfare, traffic can be more dangerous - trucks rolling through stop signs, for example.

Councilor Ewen-Campen expressed his appreciation for Chief Femino's letter. He said that it acknowledges these shortcomings, but does not provide a solution for them. He hopes to communicate to the Administration that this is urgent, and wants an action plan.

Chair Strezo commented on the low pay and dangerous working conditions for crossing guards.

Councilor Pineda-Neufeld asked about the decision making process for where crossing guards are assigned. She suggested that this committee could brainstorm ideas around recruitment, potentially inviting Chief Femino and others for discussion.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

212859: That the Director of the Council on Aging and representatives of the administration appear before the Housing and Community Development Committee to discuss the transportation needs of seniors who utilized the Senior Taxi Grant Program, including immediate funding sources and steps that may be taken to respond to the December 2021 grant expiration.

Ms. Carrillo explained that the program will be up and running in March using ARPA funds. Rides for medical services and food are still being covered.

Chair Strezo said that Director Speliotis mentioned before that 4000 rides had been given with this program. She commented that former recipients may not have internet or social media access, and said she would be happy to help the city get the word out on this program.

Councilor Pineda-Neufeld said she is excited for the return of the program, but suggested thinking about how to maintain its longevity since ARPA will be ending in a few years. Chair Strezo invited her to collaborate on a resolution for the Administration's consideration.

Resolution: that the Administration consider plans for the Senior Taxi Grant program funding that has been carried over from ARPA funds with the goal to keep the program in existence after ARPA funds expire in 2024.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

213105: That the Administration provide a mid-year appropriation to fund continued operation of the Senior Ride-Share Access program recently discontinued after the lapsing of its MAPC funding.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED