



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

CLERK OF COMMITTEES

April 20, 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	

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:00 pm and adjourned at 7:09 pm. Chair Strezo moved to adjourn, and the motion was approved by unanimous roll call vote.

Others present: Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Ellen Shachter - OSPCD, Mike Feloney - OSPCD, George Proakis - OSPCD, Judi Barrett - Barrett Planning Group, Vithal Deshpande - OSE, Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

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.

Taken together with item 213056. Dir. Shachter gave a thorough update on eviction statistics, housing services, and local and state initiatives. Between April 2021 and January 2022, there was an average of 10 evictions per month between housing and district courts. In the last 2.5 months, though, the average decreased to 6.8 per month. This is unexpected, given the upcoming projected end of the moratorium. She said that a recent report showed a strong correlation between the existence of city housing resources and low eviction filing rates, but that there has been no dramatic increase of evictions after the end of moratoriums across the state.

Dir. Shachter said that demand for OHS services has increased from an average of 119 new requests a month in 2021 to an average of 138 new requests this month. She speculated that the spike could be due to the state ERAP program ending, and because people can only qualify for expansive benefits by applying before April 15. She said that there were also nearly 30 cases from the Somerville Housing Authority that largely involve retroactive changes to rent calculations. The pandemic caused a lot of changing incomes and government payments that would affect rent calculations, and it also has made reporting more complicated because of the timelines of various benefits. She said that five rental assistance advocates have been hired through ARPA funds, and they should have funding to retain them through September. If demand for rental assistance stays high, OHS will submit an additional request at that time.

Dir. Shachter estimated that just under \$4 million has been brought in through rental and mortgage assistance on behalf of Somerville tenants, though some homeowners benefitted as well. Payments averaged about \$8,000 per person, but Dir. Shachter believed that many of those families were likely to be vulnerable without the assistance of local and state funding.

At the state level, an extra \$100,000 was added to RAFT through the supplemental budget process. However, there is now a \$7,000 annual cap on rental assistance for each tenant. It will also be difficult for a tenant to tell if they received ERAP or RAFT assistance because they appear the same to the tenant; this can make it difficult to determine eligibility for extra assistance. The supplemental budget did extend statewide eviction protections until March 31, 2023. This means that there will be no eviction cases for non-payment of rent (with a COVID-related basis for non-payment), and there needs to be a two-tier process for eviction cases in housing court. Tenants will be able to talk to a lawyer before deciding to settle their case or go to trial. Somerville has two sets of legal contracts: De Novo Center for Justice and Healing, and Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services. OHS also negotiated agreements with most large housing providers that would file evictions; and most landlords have been working with OHS proactively to prevent eviction filings. All of those factors contribute to a low eviction filing rate. The unknown is what will happen once the moratorium ends.

Dir. Shachter said that the Mayor has recommended an additional 60-day “sunset” period for the moratorium with an end date of June 30. The Housing Stability Notification Act has been amended, so OHS will use the sunset period to communicate changes to tenants and negotiate with property owners. They are also trying to get \$1 million in flex ARPA funds during this time. There will be a chance to request more funding, but Dir. Shachter wants to see how quickly the funds are used. She also called attention to the U.S. Supreme Court declining to hear a case on Los Angeles’ moratorium.

The municipal voucher program is waiting for connections between the purchasing, accounting, and legal offices of Somerville and Boston because concerns have been raised about anti-aid amendment issues. OHS is eager to begin the process of evaluating which local agencies are interested and able to find creative funding solutions for long-term housing, with the goal that this program serve the most vulnerable and those not eligible for mainstream housing benefits.

Finally, Dir. Shachter gave updates on bills at the state level. The eviction ceiling bill is likely to go to the State floor soon, but the transfer fee and right to counsel bills will be in committee until May. She stressed the need for a strategy for the home rule petition on the real estate transfer fee.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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213056: That the Director of Housing Stability appear to discuss how to prevent evictions, support residents facing eviction, and the ability to extend the eviction moratorium.

RESULT:	WORK COMPLETED
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213322: Director of Housing conveying the 2021 Housing Needs Assessment.

Chair Strezo asked what unique needs to Somerville Ms. Barrett found in her research on the Housing Needs Assessment (HNA). Ms. Barrett replied that the share rate of housing cost escalation in Somerville is dramatic, and that it is easy to understand the concern about

displacement of longtime community members due to a shrinking of housing options. She said that Somerville has extraordinary staff and that it is a rarity to work with people so knowledgeable. She went on to talk about common ground Somerville shares with other municipalities. Households that are struggling the most to find secure, affordable living situations are in the 31-50% range of the Area Median Income (AMI). There also seems to be a decline in the number of households that are “housing cost burdened”, but Ms. Barrett thought that was not because of ample supply, but because people have no choice but to stay where they are. She said she believes the market response to the growth of household incomes has created a crisis for lower income families. Somerville also has a large student population, which affects housing. She said that Somerville’s housing stock is interesting in that it consists of smaller, individual structures rather than large, densely-packed buildings or complexes. She said that while this may add to charm, it poses a challenge for integrating affordable housing.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about a point in Ms. Barrett’s presentation that suggested Harvard’s most recent accountability report is from 2000. Ms. Barrett thought that was a typo. Councilor Pineda Neufeld added that she felt that most students in Somerville are undergraduates, pointed out that their needs may vary from those of graduate students, and asked whether the data confirmed that. Ms. Barrett said that she focused more on the implications of student presence in the housing market on other kinds of households rather than age, and cited Amherst as an example of a town whose housing market is drastically changed. She said that student age would be a good topic of research for the next HNA.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld said that Tufts has committed to building a new dorm, and with enrollment increasing, the tension between different groups seeking housing is real. She noted from the presentation takeaways that undergrad students often group together to take up larger units with 3 or more beds - places that would be better suited for families. She said that the market seems to be catering to those students by installing attached bathrooms in 3-4 bed units. She asked how to make sense of the tension and balance needs between groups. Ms. Barrett answered that demand is demand, and that she would never suggest that the city prevent developers from providing appropriate housing for students. But she said that the need for families is real and suggested steering the city into a larger investor role through its housing trust. As a lender, the city would have more control over management and marketing of property. She added that the student market will not go away.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld called attention to the point in the presentation that said older adults are having difficulty aging in place. She confirmed that Ward 7 is highly multi-generational, but that older residents are increasingly getting priced out, and asked if Ms. Barrett’s point was about cost or styling. Ms. Barrett replied that it is both affordability and structure - aging residents need certain types of features in a home. She said that universal design is ideal, but many neighborhoods are not built to accommodate everyone. She suggested thinking about how universal design can be a larger part of the process and to consider site review standards.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said that in the last HNA, a striking statistic for him was the percentage of residents who could afford to rent or buy in the current market if they lost their current housing. He said that number was around 75% for renters and higher for homebuyers, but talked about how prices shift quickly and people lose their window of affordability. He asked if that calculation was made in this HNA. Ms. Barrett responded that she did not replicate that table because of concerns with the methods. She said that it is challenging to get that data because the Census Bureau does not provide the level of detail of household income, household size, and

duration of residency to be comfortable with that calculation. Other platforms that share this data all use the Census Bureau as their source. An approximation can probably be made by comparing existing levels of incomes with age groups, though. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked if the missing granularity in data was in the income level of residents. Ms. Barrett said that the time factor is the limiting variable. She suggested a survey, which is what Barrett Planning Group does for other housing projects. Councilor Ewen-Campen agreed with the suggestion.

Chair Strezo asked how to prompt the market to expand the stock of 3-4 bed housing. Ms. Barrett said that there is a zoning issue here - they can offer incentives to provide larger units with a density bonus, but that is not consistent with Somerville's current zoning practices. She said that one municipality offered home funds for family units restricted for families.

RESULT:	WORK COMPLETED
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213277: That the Director of Economic Development update this Council on the efforts to hire a consultant regarding the Armory.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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212945: That the Director of Economic Development discuss the city's maintenance plan for tenants and occupants of the Arts at the Armory.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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212948: That the Director of Public Works and the Director of the Office Sustainability and Environment discuss the possibility of installing Cigarette Bin Voting Boxes throughout the community.

Chair Strezo said that she resubmitted this order from last term and stressed the damage cigarette litter causes in oceans and waterways. She explained that cigarette boxes are receptacles that communities can create polls with (such as "which is better: cats or dogs?"), and smokers can drop their cigarette butts in the receptacle to vote. Mr. Deshpande called the item a great suggestion. He said he would need to discuss it with OSE and DPW and would like councilors' input in that process.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if data was available on where cigarette litter is worst in the city, to which Mr. Deshpande replied not yet, but he can confirm that and also seek community input. Chair Strezo said that she hears from constituents in wards 2 and 3 about cigarette litter. She said she was interested to know what kind of budget could be given to this item.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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212947: That the Chief Assessor provide a list of all non-profits with Community Benefit Agreements and/or Payment in Lieu of Taxes agreements.

Chair Strezo said she introduced this item because she wants to explore how CBAs can help Somerville sustain residents. Councilor Ewen-Campen said that many years ago, there was a broad-based community and city effort to renegotiate a pilot agreement with Tufts, and asked for

the status of that. Ms. Carrillo said that she could get an update for another meeting. Councilor Pineda Neufeld said she would like to keep this item in committee.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

212862: That the Director of Somerville Cares About Prevention appear before the Housing and Community Development Committee to discuss the increased constituent reports of teens vaping in the high school during school hours and what is being done to address this.

Chair Strezo said that she will put forward another item about this if no action is taken, because it is a large concern; and that item will include the middle school because she has heard reports of vaping there as well.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

Reference Material:

- OVERVIEW PILOT AGREEMENTS CITY
- OVERVIEW PAYMENTS PILOT AGREEMENTS CITY FY 21 & FY 22 UP TO 041422