



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, September 29, 2022

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:01 pm and adjourned at 7:05 pm. Councilor Ewen-Campen moved to adjourn, and the motion was approved by unanimous roll call vote.

Others present: Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Fred Berman - OHS, Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Kristen Strezo, Vice Chair Ben Ewen-Campen and Judy Pineda Neufeld

1. 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.

Taken together with item 22-1516. Dir. Berman gave an update on OHS business. OHS mailed all Somerville households about tenant rights and resources in the wake of the end of the eviction moratorium, as well as sending every property owner a letter informing them of the amendment to the Housing Stability Notification Act that went into effect July 13. Dir. Berman said that corporate landlords in Assembly and other areas, which constitute the majority of property owners for inclusionary housing in the city, are in compliance with distributing tenant notifications, though not every private landlord seems to be following suit.

In terms of rental assistance, OHS has more recently been putting protocols in place with the Community Action Agency of Somerville and the Somerville Homeless Coalition to put Flex ARPA into effect. Since January, there have been about 1160 requests for assistance coming in at a steady rate. Dir. Berman said that landlords are increasingly seeking to empty buildings or substantially raise rents, and that OHS has been partnering with CAS and legal services to ensure tenants will have protections from legal services if they organize and negotiate reduced rent or other arrangements. Lastly, Dir. Berman said OHS is in the process of hiring an additional case manager and an intake specialist.

Councilor Ewen-Campen shared an anecdote from Ward Three about tenants in a property slated for redevelopment that reached out to CAS, who stepped in and provided organization support and translated materials. He asked if there had been any responses to mailing. Dir. Berman said he could

not speak to the responses, but that more tenants are getting notices to quit now that the moratorium is over. As a result, OHS’s legal service partners are getting more referrals. Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked how the number of calls for assistance compared to last year. Dir. Berman thought there was a slight increase from 2021, but said earlier reports may be lower due to a change in how OHS organizes multiple referrals from the same client.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld also asked if the ARPA request for additional legal services has been approved. Dir. Berman said not yet, and explained that the funds are enough for an additional legal services position. Chair Strezo asked if tenants’ rights need to be sent in paper. Dir. Berman said he would double check that and send an email with the information requested at this meeting.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 2. Order (ID # [22-1516](#))

By Councilor Kelly
That the Director of the Office of Housing Stability discuss the response to the ending of the eviction moratorium, and any current unmet needs of residents who are experiencing housing instability.

Taken together with item 22-0085 (see other item for notes).

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

- 3. Order (ID # [22-1295](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Wilson and Councilor Scott
That the City Solicitor provide an opinion on the legality of landlords including non-disclosure agreements in leases.

Chair Strezo referenced an incident where tenants who wanted to stay in their building and were negotiating with the landlord were told they had to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). Ms. Carrillo said that she talked to the Law Office about it, and Assistant City Solicitor Shapiro had said he thought the question was whether the city could prevent landlords from requiring NDAs. His ruling was that it could be legal, but would require a Home Rule Petition to get the authority to do so.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked if signing an NDA can be a requirement as part of a lease or for renewing a lease, stressing his priority to give tenants accurate legal information. Councilor Pineda Neufeld cited concerns about the power differential between a landlord and a potential tenant in a market where choices can be slim, and asked how a scenario with an NDA would play out in practice. She also asked if there may be other pieces of lease agreements that are problematic and should be included in discussions. Councilor Ewen-Campen added a question over whether the legal outcome would change if evidence showed an NDA being used to break or punish tenant organizing.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 4. Order (ID # [22-1566](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.

That the Director of Human Resources update this Council on the hiring process and staffing numbers for crossing guards for the 2022-2023 school year.

Taken together with items 22-1567, 22-1568, 22-0084, and 22-0310. Chair Strezo said that parents are concerned about the scarcity of safe crossing areas. She stated that many people drive through Somerville to get somewhere else, and highlighted problem areas for speeding. Ms. Carrillo said that there was not enough time for HR or SPD to join, but shared an update from HR. There are 21 crossing guard vacancies (35 of 56 positions filled). Many communities are experiencing the same challenges and Somerville is interested in working with them on solutions.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld cited an accident at Powder House Blvd and Curtis St earlier in the day and added her interest in bringing staff together for brainstorming. She asked if the Administration could organize a conversation with SPD, the School Department and others. Ms. Carrillo said that they have been continuing to meet while acknowledging that the meetings have not resulted in guards on streets. Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if crossing guards are being invited to the conversations. Ms. Carrillo said that she did not know, but would bring that idea back to the Administration.

Councilor Ewen-Campen noted that the crossing guard positions are housed in SPD and asked if they are ultimately responsible for hiring and staffing. He said his intent was to find a department that has time and resources to fill the roles if SPD is struggling to accomplish the staffing; unless the problem was at a larger economic scale. Ms. Carrillo replied that hiring is done through SPD, but was not sure of when or to what extent HR gets involved. She agreed that the problem is probably macroeconomic.

Chair Strezo shared changes that parents had suggested to improve accessibility to the crossing guard positions, including allowing more limited hours (one day a week or only mornings), making a full-time position that combines crossing guard duties with related work in the middle of the day, or putting flyers on paths taken by guardians and children to school. She asked when contracts are renewed, to which Ms. Carrillo said she was not sure.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 5. Order
(ID # [22-1567](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Director of Human Resources discuss the possibility of modernizing crossing guard positions to attract candidates and increase hiring.

Taken together with items 22-1566, 22-1568, 22-0084, and 22-0310. See item 22-1566 for notes.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
- 6. Order
(ID # [22-1568](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Chief of Police inform this Council which intersections are prioritized with crossing guards.

Taken together with items 22-1567, 22-1566, 22-0084, and 22-0310. See item 22-1566 for notes.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
- 7. Order
(ID # [22-0084](#))

By Councilor Strezo
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.

Taken together with items 22-1567, 22-1568, 22-1566, and 22-0310. See item 22-1566 for notes.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
- 8. Officer's
Communication
(ID # [22-0310](#))

Chief of Police responding to Item #212860, providing an update on the staffing of crossing guards

Taken together with items 22-1567, 22-1568, 22-0084, and 22-1566. See item 22-1566 for notes.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE