



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

CLERK OF COMMITTEES

March 31, 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, Anne Gill - Personnel, Waleska Alves - Personnel, Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

Councilor Ewen-Campen moved to adjourn at 6:16 pm. The meeting was adjourned by unanimous roll call vote.

Approval of the February 16, 2022 Minutes

The minutes were accepted by 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.

Dir. Berman explained that the eviction moratorium is likely winding down, and state protections and funding are reduced. Courts are still offering joint meetings before summary process cases are heard to try to reach agreement between landlords and tenants. Rental assistance applications are still pending. Dir. Berman said this is a good time to apply for assistance to safeguard against eviction. Eviction levels have increased slightly this year - nine cases per month over the last three months - but still below pre-pandemic levels. Of those evictions, 11 were non-payment, 15 were cause cases (either a violation of the lease or criminal behavior), and 1 was no-fault. Dir. Berman described the lifespan of various state programs and who is eligible for assistance, including ERAP and RAFT. ERAP (Emergency Rental Assistance) is winding down in April, and the state is deliberating on funding for RAFT, which will receive a budget between \$100 million and \$200 million for the rest of the fiscal year. Anyone who has not exhausted 18 months of ERAP assistance can apply for RAFT funding. The amount that OHS can apply for on behalf of tenants through RAFT is still under deliberation as well, but is estimated to be around \$10,000. Dir. Berman also discussed where OHS is getting its funding, including ARPA.

Councilor Ewen-Campen mentioned that there had been conversations between OHS and the Administration in past years to talk with landlords and ensure a safety net for tenants. He asked for the status on those agreements. Dir. Berman said they have not had a specific conversation with landlords of what to do when the moratorium ends, but that large landlords like the Housing Authority have honored their agreement so far, allowing tenants seeking assistance to avoid receiving a notice to quit. Sometimes a notice to quit is a necessary record to allow access to funds, though, in which case OHS would work with the landlord and tenants. The Health Commission will soon review if the eviction moratorium should be extended, but they are unlikely to find a solid basis. Somerville's moratorium is the only one remaining.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about post-moratorium predictions, and what kind of support OHS might need from the Council and the Administration. Dir. Berman answered that more evictions are anticipated, at least with small landlords. There will also likely be more referrals to Somerville and Cambridge legal services, including a subcontract of the city, De Novo. Dir. Berman said that contract has been valuable. He said that OHS should get ARPA funds to address evictions related to non-payment, but it is also likely that many landlords will raise rent or encourage no-fault evictions. The City Council, Mayor Ballantyne, and the state delegations have all expressed support for rent stabilization at the state level, but that is not currently an option due to policy. Dir. Berman commented that across the country, many evictions happen without legal process because tenants do not know their rights. He hopes to eliminate those through providing information to tenants.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

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.

Dir. Gill praised Ms. Alves' effort to recruit crossing guards, and added that the best method of recruitment so far has been personal referrals. Ms. Alves said that Personnel had filled eight crossing guard positions as of July 2021. This month, they recruited three more, and two are pending for early April. To be fully staffed, 15 more positions need to be filled. Their strategy has largely been word-of-mouth and relying on community partners, of which there are 49, including nonprofits and community colleges. Ms. Alves said she would make that list available to the Committee. She also has distributed flyers to local religious centers, and reached out to groups that cater to elder services, such as the Somerville Housing Authority and the SCALE program. Another part of her strategy is highlighting the benefits of the position. Dir. Gill added that the job is structured such that before COVID, it was an attractive job for people seeking part-time work; many elderly who quit in fear of becoming sick.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the profile of applicants is different post-COVID, to which Ms. Alves answered that not much had changed. Guardians like the role because it is convenient when they are bringing their children to school. Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if Personnel had worked with the Council on Aging or Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services. Ms. Alves said she had reached out to the former, and was unsure of the latter.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked if Somerville crossing guards' salary had been compared to that of neighboring municipalities. Dir. Gill said that would have been done during negotiations, which was before her time as Director. The salary is not negotiable once in a contract, however.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked which bargaining unit crossing guards belong to, to which Ms. Alves answered SEIU.

Chair Strezo asked if benefits can be adjusted outside of the contract, for example, the \$50 referral program. Dir. Gill said that it depends on the definition of "benefit". The union would argue that most examples fall under wages and conditions, which would be included in the contract.

Chair Strezo asked what holdovers are available if crossing guards are absent - knowing that volunteers are not allowed to cover the shifts in the contract. Dir. Gill said that they just need to wait, and that SPD is trying to make sure critical locations are covered. However, they are short-staffed, and sometimes need to leave their posts to answer emergencies. The staffing issue creates a domino effect, she said.

Chair Strezo said that she sees the worst of drivers daily across Somerville and sees incredibly risky behavior from small children crossing streets alone.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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212863: That the Committee on Housing and Community Development discuss the 2021 Housing Needs Assessment.

Ms. Carrillo said that the consultant for this item is not available tonight, but is available for the next meeting.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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212829: That the Administration investigate the possibility of creating one or more designated "sledding streets" during snow emergencies, based on abutter support, similar to the Neighborways Process.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said that one problem with snow-related items is there is very seasonal interest. He was told by residents that this has been done in other communities and that he wants to know the possibilities. Ms. Carrillo said she will follow up on this separately.

RESULT:	WORK COMPLETED
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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.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the list and agreements could be provided to the Committee. Ms. Carrillo said she would need to check first, but it should be fine to share the agreements.

RESULT:	KEPT IN COMMITTEE
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