

MINUTES OF A REGULAR MEETING
- OPEN SESSION -
OF THE SPRINGFIELD HOUSING AUTHORITY
HELD ON JANUARY 20, 2015

The members of the Springfield Housing Authority met in Open Session at the Conference Room of the Springfield Housing Authority at 60 Congress St., Springfield, Massachusetts at 4:30 PM on January 20, 2015.

A copy of the Notice of Meeting, pursuant to Section 23B of Chapter 39 of the Massachusetts General Laws, as amended, with the Certificate as to Service of the Notice, was ordered spread upon the minutes of the meeting and filed for records.

NOTICE OF MEETING

Notice is hereby given in accordance with Section 23B of Chapter 39 of the Massachusetts Laws, as amended, that a Regular Meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Springfield Housing Authority will be held at 4:30 PM on Tuesday, January 20, 2015 in the Conference Room of the Springfield Housing Authority at 60 Congress Street, Springfield, MA 01104.

SPRINGFIELD HOUSING AUTHORITY
/s/William H. Abrashkin, Executive Director
January 15, 2015

CERTIFICATE AS TO SERVICE OF THE NOTICE OF MEETING

I, William H. Abrashkin, the duly appointed and qualified Secretary of the Springfield Housing Authority, do hereby certify that on January 15, 2015 I filed in the manner provided by Section 23B, Chapter 39 of the Massachusetts General Laws, as amended, with the Clerk of the City of Springfield, Massachusetts, a Notice of Meeting of which the foregoing is a true and correct copy.

Attest:



William H. Abrashkin/Executive Director/
Secretary to the Board

Chairman Warren called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM, and those present upon roll call were as follows:

PRESENT

Raymond Warren
Willie Thomas
Thomas Labonte
Angela Robles
Jessica Quinonez

ABSENT

ALSO PRESENT

William Abrashkin
Michelle Booth
Loleta Collins

Nicole Contois
Mary Ellen Lowney
Fidan Gousseynoff

The Board reviewed the Minutes of December 16, 2014. Upon a motion made by Commissioner Thomas, seconded by Commissioner Labonte, it was by a majority vote (Commissioner Warren abstained)

VOTED: To approve the Minutes of December 16, 2014.

Chairman Warren invited Loleta Collins to make a presentation on the Section 8 Homebuyers Program. Ms. Collins started her presentation by stating that the SHA surpassed the Lynn Housing Authority which had been for a long time a leader in the number of program participants. Currently there are 57 participants at the SHA's Homeownership Program versus 54 at the Lynn Housing Authority. She explained what are the eligibility requirements for those Section 8 tenants who are employed and for the elderly and persons with disabilities. She stated that even though the majority of applicants meet the eligibility requirements there are some challenges that the participants meet, namely - most people have problems with the bad credit and budgeting. In order to assist the participants to meet these challenges the SHA refers them to financial literacy classes through the Springfield Partners for Community Action and provides counseling and guidance on improving their credit score. Ms. Collins explained that all applicants must go through the First Time Homeowner Course and told that the SHA provides both pre- and after-purchase counseling services to the program participants. The Springfield Housing Authority also assists the participants with getting mortgage and banking services. Loleta Collins said that the applicants can choose any bank they want but since many participants have bad or no credit and not enough savings it is hard for them to get a mortgage from a financial institution they want to use so the agency assists them getting approved for mortgage from Hampden Bank - the only Bank that works with the SHA to support its Homebuyer Program. The Springfield Housing Authority is looking for opportunities to involve other banks into the Homeownership Program.

The agency also refers the participants to MassHousing which offers different programs for homebuyers with limited income to assist them to get help with insurance, taxes and other payments.

Ms. Collins explained that another problem that all program participants face is lack of savings. The program requires all participants to contribute at least 1% of their own money as a down payment and the agency assists them with getting an access to different resources and programs that would assist them with receiving a matching contribution, including the employers' programs (offered by BayState or MassMutual) or the program through the City of Springfield that offers financial assistance for the first time home buyers if they buy a house in Springfield.

Loleta Collins explained how she guides the Section 8 residents through the process from applying to the program through getting approved for a

mortgage. She emphasized the importance of working with the families to make sure they are economically self-sufficient and can afford their house. She stated that for most of those who applied the mortgage payments will be less than the rent they had been paying so the program is very beneficial to the participants however it is still hard for some of them to make a decision to quit the Section 8 program and buy a house. Some participants are ready to become homebuyers but their credit score is not high enough so Ms. Collins works with them in order to get their credit history and general financial situation improved.

Deputy Executive Director Michelle Booth explained that only residents of the Section 8 program who have a voucher through the Springfield Housing Authority are eligible for the program and Ms. Collins added that in order to qualify for the program the person must be a Section 8 tenant for at least a year. Answering Chairman Warren's question she told that waiting list for the Section 8 is at least 10 years and that HAP Housing does not have its own Homeownership Program.

Ms. Collins provided information on how the SHA works with families once they become homeowners, for example providing counseling and assisting on how to file insurance claims, how to prevent becoming a victim of fraud or how to deal with solicitation from numerous contractors or banks offering re-financing etc.

Executive Director Abrashkin stated that the Springfield Housing Authority is expanding its Section 8 self-sufficiency program and due to a recent change in HUD regulations the agency will be looking into combining self-sufficiency programs for public housing and Section 8.

The Board reviewed the materials on renewing SHA sponsorship package for the 4th Annual Develop Springfield Gala and Dinner. Upon a motion made by Commissioner Labonte, seconded by Commissioner Thomas, it was unanimously

VOTED: to approve spending \$1500 from the COCC to purchase a Bronze Sponsorship Package to support the 4th Annual Celebrate Springfield Dinner fundraiser to take place on March 12, 2015 at the MassMutual Center.

The Board reviewed the materials and a recommendation to approve revised utility allowance for 2015. Michelle Booth explained how new allowance, which represents a 29% increase, was calculated and why it was decided to divide all types of allowance into 4 categories (for cooking, other electricity consumption, refrigerators and air conditioners, now prorated for three months instead of previous 12). Deputy Executive Director Nicole Contois stated that the SHA will be reimbursed for the utility allowance but not for the next two years. Ms. Booth provided information on the plans of the agency in the future to review some other options rather than paying utility allowance, like paying the bills directly or calculating actual electric energy consumption.

Chairman Warren expressed his concern about such a big increase and inquired how it will impact the budget. Ms. Contois responded that she does not have a number readily available but will be able to calculate

it. She explained that the SHA pays electrical bills for all elderly developments and for all units with electric heating and the rest tenants pay to the electric company directly. Answering Chairman Warren's question on how the residents actually receive the utility allowance she explained that a check is being issued to those tenants who pay minimum rent or whose rent is lower than the allowance, and for the rest the amount of allowance is being deducted from their monthly rent.

Ms. Contois provided an approximate actual cost of utility allowance - \$34800 however Chairman Warren emphasized a need to get exact numbers on how the allowance will affect the budget. In response to Judge Abrashkin's suggestion to change the language of the motion to state that the increase of utility allowance will be not at 29% but not more than 29%, Michelle Booth explained the SHA has to establish a schedule with specific numbers for each type of units. Commissioner Labonte inquired if it is possible to postpone the decision until more exact numbers are presented to the Board. Chairman Warren suggested making a motion to table this matter until the next meeting. In response to Commissioner Robles's question whether the Springfield Housing Authority will be still in compliance with HUD's requirement that no more than 30% of residents' income is paid towards their rent and utility expenses, Ms. Booth stated that if approved, the 29% increase will be effective January 1st, 2015 so the allowance will be calculated retro-active.

Upon a motion made by Commissioner Labonte, seconded by Commissioner Thomas it was unanimously

VOTED: to table the matter of approving revised Utility Allowance schedule until the next meeting.

The Board reviewed a recommendation to approve revised Smoke-Free Policy, amended to include banning e-cigarettes on all SHA properties. Executive Director Abrashkin explained that the SHA had been considering banning e-cigarettes in the past and the issue has become a subject of discussion recently again after the management received a complaint from a group of employees regarding an employee using e-cigarettes in the office. Michelle Booth has conducted a research and numerous studies show that smoking e-cigarettes do affect negatively the environment and may pose a threat to the health of non-smokers. Commissioner Quinonez commented there are still violations of the Smoke-Free Policy with some residents and visitors continue smoking regular cigarettes and it will be hard to implement this ban on e-cigarettes as well. Judge Abrashkin responded that even though there might be some violators, most residents do comply and the managers deal with this issue on a daily basis. Michelle Booth commented that implementing the SHA Smoke-Free Policy has been pretty successful and brought a big change to the community, a good example of that is a big difference between the SHA units and Section 8 units.

Upon a motion made by Commissioner Thomas, seconded by Commissioner Labonte it was unanimously

VOTED: to adopt Resolution # 9627 to approve the new Smoke-Free Policy, amended to include a prohibition on e-cigarettes and similar devices.

Judge Abrashkin requested to make a change in the text of the New Policy by adding a word "e-cigarettes" to the last sentence of the Item number four of the Policy. Upon a motion made by Commissioner Thomas, seconded by Commissioner Labonte it was unanimously

VOTED: to approve amending the last sentence of Item #4 of the New Smoke-Free Policy.

Executive Director Abrashkin requested the Deputies to ask the Managers to distribute the new Policy among the residents and to notify the employees.

Executive Director's report started with providing a review on the situation with Marble Street. By Judge Abrashkin's request Michelle Booth informed the Board that an environmental review and fiscal needs assessment has been conducted and that the SHA has also done an assessment on the financial impact from demolishing the Marble Street apartments. Calculations done by Nicole Contois and Mike Petro show that the net loss will be at \$297000. Ms. Contois added that the actual loss may be more since demolishing the development may need eliminating one full-time maintenance position.

Mary Ellen Lowney left the Conference Room at 5:23 pm.

Ms. Booth and Judge Abrashkin informed that the SHA has submitted all the numbers to the City and that this issue will be discussed at the forthcoming meeting with TJ Plante, the City's Financial Director.

Mary Ellen Lowney returned to the Conference Room at 5:25 pm.

In response to Commissioner Thomas's question on how displacing the Marble Street residents if the demolition is approved by HUD would affect a general situation with the homeless in the City, William Abrashkin explained that the 44 families will be offered tenancy protection vouchers. Answering Commissioner Labonte's question Executive Director Abrashkin confirmed that the final decision will have to be made not by the City but by the Board and HUD. Commissioner Thomas inquired if the City will be able to take the property by eminent domain. Michelle Booth explained that this option will be too costly to the City because they will have to take care of the demolition costs and the tenants' relocation.

Michelle Booth provided information to the Board about three problems identified by HUD while auditing the Section 8 program, including findings about the database management, some inspections data missing and not entering applications from some programs like CHES and Chronically Homeless into the state waiting list. Ms. Booth described

the plan of the agency to deal with all the findings and correcting the issues.

Nicole Contois left the Conference Room at 5:40 pm.

Chairman Warren suggested sharing the letter received from HUD with the audit findings with the Board and to keep the Board posted in the future.

Michelle Booth left the Conference Room at 5:42 PM.

Judge Abrashkin continued the Executive Director's report by stating that the Springfield Housing Authority is back to looking into real estate opportunities, specifically for a new office for the Section 8. He explained that not many details can be disclosed at the Open session but the agency is working with Develop Springfield and will be inspecting a property of interest soon. He stressed the importance of finding a better space for the Section 8 employees, tenants and applicants as well as the importance of having the Section 8 and Public Housing Applications Department located close to each other. He also indicated that the agency is also looking into renting some space of a new office to other organizations to generate income the same way as it is being done at 60 Congress Street.

Michelle Booth returned to the Conference Room at 5:47 PM.

Judge Abrashkin provided an update on the Public Housing Reform, stating that this project has not been moving and more time is needed to see the future of the reform under a new management. He informed that Chrystal Kornegay, a former CEO of Urban Edge, has replaced Aaron Gornstein as a new DHCD Undersecretary. Executive Director Abrashkin said that if the reform is will be pushed by the new administration the SHA will be looking into opportunities for participating in the Capital Assessment Teams as many small local housing authorities need assistance with capital planning and the agency will be able to provide its expertise to them.

Michelle Booth distributed a copy of the letter with the Section 8 audit findings.

The Board accepted the Public Relations/ Communications Report presented by Mary Ellen Lowney.

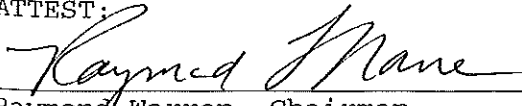
The Board accepted the Accounts Payable report and Financial Statements for the month of November, 2014.

The Board accepted the Public Safety, Waiting List and occupancy reports. Commissioner Labonte provided his feedback on his experience when he joined the SHA public safety team patrolling some SHA public housing properties.

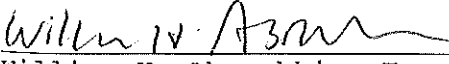
There being no further business to come before the members of the Springfield Housing Authority, upon a motion made by Commissioner Labonte, seconded by Commissioner Thomas, it was unanimously

VOTED: To adjourn the Open Session of a Regular Meeting of the
Springfield Housing Authority at 6:08 PM.

ATTEST:



Raymond Warren, Chairman



William H. Abrashkin, Executive Director

