

ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY FAIR HOUSING TASK FORCE

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Meeting Minutes

February 25, 2021
Via Zoom

- 1. Call to Order and Determination of a Quorum.** At the request of Chair Fred Hanss, John Tenbusch called the meeting to order at 9:05 AM. Tenbusch said a quorum of active members was established.

Members Present: Diana Dufresne; Fred Hanss; Lashawanda Ingram; Connie Jenkins; Mike McQuade; Andrea Montgomery; Chris Nyman; Jim O'Neill; Amy Plumadore; John Tenbusch; Courtnie Toms. Matilda Larson attended as staff.

Guests included: Larry Denesha, SLC Board of Legislators; Christiana DeForge, SLC Office for the Aging; Bruce Green, SLC Real Property; P. J. Herne, Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York; Klaus Proemm; Sally Santangelo, CNY Fair Housing; Rick Wood, SLC Board of Realtors.

- 2. Adoption of the Agenda.** *The agenda was adopted* (Dufresne / Montgomery).
- 3. Approval of December 10, 2020 Meeting Minutes.** *The meeting minutes were unanimously adopted* (O'Neill / Montgomery). F. Hanss abstained, since he had not attended that meeting.
- 4. New Business.**
 - a. Update re: Evictions, by Diana Dufresne and John Tenbusch.** Tenbusch reported that he had been contacted by the Social Justice Coordinator for the Canton U-U Church for information about evictions. He was referred to D. Dufresne by James Phillips, President of the SLC Magistrate's Association.

Dufresne reported that the situation is chaotic. She stated that tenants are often unable to pay rent, on time or in full; landlords are then unable or unwilling to make needed repairs. There seems to be no way to break the stalemate.

P.J. Herne reported that the repairs issue is problematic. Code Enforcement Officers can be dragged into these situations. Tenants and landlords can become entrenched in positions of antagonism toward each other. There had been some assistance offered by Community Development Program and others. Herne hoped that a systematic assistance program can be in place before the end of the eviction moratorium, currently set at April 30th.

J. Tenbusch noted that most landlords in the County are smaller-scale; they do not have a corporate presence, they do not have reserves to cover missed rent payments

Dufresne and Tenbusch reported that evictions can still occur based on four criteria: tenant damage to the unit; illegal activity; code violations; interference with the quiet enjoyment of the premises by other residents.

Dufresne provided information about eviction applications: in the last four months, she estimated that there have been over 260 applications filed in St. Law. Co.; another 96 applications were filed in Franklin Co. In 2021, 120 additional eviction applications have been filed, an average of four per day. All have been stayed, pending the end of the moratorium on April 30th.

M. Larson asked whether landlords have been declaring bankruptcy. Dufresne reported that she gets one or two complaints from landlords each day, that they cannot afford taxes, or utilities, etc. J. O'Neill noted that most landlords in the County are small-scale. R. Woods and others reported that some persons are using the moratorium to not pay rent. C. Toms reported that MILC has had an assistance program, but it was limited to 30% LMI; this disqualified households that received CARES funding; more recently, the income limit has been raised to 50% LMI.

Conversely, L. Denesha reported that property tax collections seem to have not been adversely affected. He reported that the BOL has approved a resolution at their February Board meeting, calling on NYS to assist landlords who have been adversely affected.

S. Santangelo of CNY Fair Housing reported that tenants have to show how they have been impacted by COVID; in addition to losing a job, or a reduction in hours, other effects might include lack of childcare; rising cost of food and other staples/cleaning supplies; transportation problems, etc.

After discussion, it was proposed that staff might draft a short (1- or 2-page) report to the BOL about the eviction issue; this report might be ready to be considered at the Operations Committee pre-meeting (Wednesday March 3rd) or Services Committee pre-meeting (March 10th). This report would briefly outline the issues; appeal to the BOL and to NYS for assistance. This report might be incorporated into the BOL's legislative agenda as they talk with their NYS representatives. ***J. Tenbusch made a motion (Dufresne seconded) to prepare this report for the BOL; approved.***

- b. Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing. Tenbusch provided some background on the relationship between the Fair Housing Task Force and the Community Development Block Grant program. In preparation for Annual Program Reports in January 2021, he found that the reporting requirements have changed, become more detailed, including an activity checklist. Tenbusch reported that the County would need to report on whether, and how, it pursued the listed activities.

Fred Hanss made a motion (J. O'Neill seconded) that a subcommittee be formed to plan the FH Task Force's activities for 2021. Approved. F. Hanss, Tenbusch/Larson, C. Jenkins volunteered to work on this subcommittee. S. Santangelo mentioned that CNY Fair Housing is involved with similar planning activities across NYS.

- c. Raising income thresholds for very low/low income households to receive Real Property tax exemptions. M. Larson provided some background on the topic; she presented a table showing those communities that offer a 50% tax exemption, and what their age and income thresholds (i.e., RP 467 program). B. Green described how senior households can qualify and what exemption they might receive, on a town, village and school district basis. Larson made the point that, in order to qualify for these exemptions, senior citizens had to have very-low incomes.

Bruce Green and P.J. Herne noted that senior exemptions have been adjusted by individual communities only when someone raises the issue at a local government meeting. Herne also reported that there is a March 1st deadline to apply for these exemptions for next year's taxes. Herne reported that these exemptions may be offered to disabled persons; however, only Canton, Hermon, Massena, Morristown, and Potsdam offer these exemptions. Herne noted that these exemptions must be renewed every year. Green reported that a total of eight towns in the County offer a tax exemption to disabled persons.

Larson showed several maps that indicated the distribution by town of senior households in the County, with various income limits. Gouverneur, Madrid, Rossie and Waddington were among communities with high proportions (over 40%) of seniors with incomes under 25% County Median Income.

Larson suggested that this data might be shared with communities to see if there is interest in raising income levels to qualify for these exemptions.

5. Old Business. None.

6. Reports.

a. Updates from FHTF members

- Hanss reported that the Quarry project (adaptive re-use of Snell Hall) for affordable housing in Potsdam is proceeding. He expects that it will come on-line by September, 2021.
- Larson reported that a Notice of Funding Affordability has been issued for Community Development Block Grants for housing programs. The deadline for submission is April 9th.
- A. Montgomery reported that Office for the Aging is working to ensure that seniors get access to the reservation system for vaccination appointments.

7. Announcements.

- a. Next Meeting date: Thursday, May 27, 2021 at 9:00 am via ZOOM. Access credentials will be sent separately.

8. Adjourn. Motion to adjourn at 10:15 AM (Hanss / O'Neill) was approved.

Respectfully submitted,

John Tenbusch

Planner II