

# ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY FAIR HOUSING TASK FORCE

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[stlawco.org/Departments/Planning/AdvisoryBoards/FairHousingTaskForce](http://stlawco.org/Departments/Planning/AdvisoryBoards/FairHousingTaskForce)



## Meeting Minutes

May 23, 2023

1. **Call to Order and Determination of a Quorum.** In the absence of the Chair, Matilda Larson called the meeting to order at 9:04 AM.  
**Members Present:** Katie Geidel; Mike McQuade; Andrea Montgomery; John Tenbusch; Courtney Toms; Mike Zagrobelny. Matilda Larson attended as staff. **There was not a quorum.**  
**Others Present:** P.J. Herne, Candi Merritt, Legal Aid; Pamela Weed-Nichols, NYS Attorney General's Office – Watertown;
2. **Adoption of the Agenda.** The agenda was accepted by consensus.
3. **Approval of Meeting Minutes, May 26, August 25, and November 17, 2022; February 28, 2023.** Due to lack of quorum, the Minutes of the May, August November and February meetings could not be approved.
4. **Old Business.** None.
5. **New Business.**
  - a. Review of "Fair Housing Matters: An Assessment of Fair Housing in New York"
    1. Matilda reported on the draft "Assessment" document.
      - i. She asked that all volunteers return comments on their assigned sections of the documents to the Planning Office by June XX.
    2. Mike McQuade suggested that NYS funds to address housing issues will not be made available as far upstate as St. Lawrence County.
      - i. McQuade also opined that the State is taking local land use control out of the hands of local governments.
        - 1) Several persons agreed that State take-over of land use controls will be controversial in many communities.
          - a) NYS is supposed to be a "home rule" state.
    3. Matilda reported that State resources will be prioritized for communities that are "well- resourced" to deal with FH issues.

- i. Mike Zagrobelny asked if we know what areas in St. Lawrence County are considered “well-resourced”. Staff were not sure.

[NOTE: For a map of “well-resourced areas in NYS, see

<https://nyshcr.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b0ca4a8432104bb4ac71fb576ee51175>

In St. Lawrence County, there are two “well-resourced areas”: CT 4920 (part of Canton), and CT 4923 (Town of Pierrepont). The St. Lawrence University campus and the SUNY Potsdam campus are also marked as “well-resourced”. ]



- ii. There was general discussion about how to increase housing availability in the County: new construction; expand opportunities to live on upper floors of buildings in commercial core area; rehab and re-sale of abandoned housing; rehab and re-sale of homes going through foreclosure / County tax-sale process; etc.
  - 1) Mike Zagrobelny suggested that houses to be sold at County tax sales have a minimum sales price established, to prevent speculators from buying as cheaply as possible, and then sitting on the property waiting for a higher offer.
- iii. P.J. Herne explained how low-income tax credits are being expanded to build more low-income housing. These help with construction; housing vouchers support rent. He reported that the entity in NYS that controls tax credits and housing vouchers is NYS Homes and Community Renewal (HCR).
- 4. Matilda requested that volunteers read their assigned portions of this draft document, and submit comments to her by May 26<sup>th</sup> at the close of business, she and John Tenbusch will compile comments into a letter that will be sent to NYS OCR.

## 6. Reports.

- a. Fair Housing Webinar, April 2023. Matilda reported that Sally Santangelo and staff from CNY Fair Housing conducted a training session on Fair Housing topics on April 5<sup>th</sup>.
  - 1. See attached article from ABC News – 50.
- b. Updates from FHTF members.
  - 1. Candi Merritt reported that Legal Aid will be doing outreach, including tabling at local events.
  - 2. Matilda reported that the Planning Office will welcome two new Planners at the end of May. CPO will also have the services of an intern for the summer.
  - 3. Matilda announced that John Tenbusch will retire from County service at the end of July.

- c. Matilda announced the next FHTF meeting date will be August 22<sup>nd</sup> at 9 am.
  1. Katie Geidel suggested that staff conduct a Doodle poll to see if most FHTF members can meet at 9 am, or if another day/time would work better.

7. **Adjourn.** The meeting adjourned by consensus at 9:55 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

*John Tenbusch*

Planner II

# St. Lawrence County landlords discuss fair housing amid nationwide crisis

*Isabella Colello*

OGDENSBURG, N.Y. (WWTI) — The housing shortage is pinching pockets across the nation and St. Lawrence County is no exception.

Despite housing assistance programs, many tenants are left with few options.

“There may be tenants now living in houses that are less desirable than ever before because that is all they can afford to purchase,” St. Lawrence County Planner Matilda Larson explained. “And when landlords don’t have the rents they used to collect, there’s no money to invest in making improvements in the housing stock.”

Many landlords have also faced their worst nightmare in the aftermath of pandemic eviction restrictions. Which in [New York State, ended just over a year ago](#).

“There is no use in being a landlord today, no use,” A St. Lawrence County Landlord expressed. “The inside of homes, [tenants] were not putting heat inside, they would leave it empty. Folks started bringing sledgehammers and folks left water on.”

But with hopes that the situation will improve, the [St. Lawrence County Fair Housing Task Force](#) has drawn attention to fair housing laws and potential housing discrimination.

The Task Force hosted a training for area landlords on April 5, where CNY Fair Housing Executive Director Sally Santangelo explained these laws.

CNY Fair Housing handles housing discrimination cases across 17 counties in New York, including Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence.

“We’re working to make sure people aren’t denied housing or treated differently because of their race, nationality, disability, source-of-income,” Santangelo explained. “So we want to make sure housing providers know what laws require.

Current federal fair housing laws known as the [Fair Housing Act](#) prohibits

discrimination against these factors, as well as religion, sex and familial status.

New York State [fair housing laws](#) also prohibit discrimination in housing based on one's domestic violence victim status, military status and marital status.

However, according to Santangelo, most housing discrimination cases involve people with disabilities. She said this is often due to a lack of accessibility in a unit or the landlord's inability to make what is considered "reasonable accommodations."

These can include accessible parking, pay adjustments, bathroom grab bars and service animals.

Larson explained that this is an issue St. Lawrence County is facing. But it may be due to a lack of financial resources.

"The hardest thing that tenants with disabilities are finding is that there isn't any money to make reasonable accommodations when they need help getting in an around unit," Larson shared.

But moving forward, the St. Lawrence County Fair Housing Task Force hopes that through education, landlords can help improve their practices for tenants.

"A lot of times there's just a lot of misunderstanding," Santangelo said. "We know that through education, we can avoid a lot more contentious, and understand fair housing laws."

More information can be found on the [St. Lawrence County website](#).