

Meeting Notes  
2017/2018 Fair Housing Working Group  
September 20, 2017

**ATTENDEES:** **Commissioner Evonne Klein**, Co-Chairperson of the Fair Housing Working Group and Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Housing  
**Rep. Roland Lemar**, Co-Chairperson of the Fair Housing Working Group  
**Rep. Larry Butler**  
**Senator Tony Hwang**  
**Erin Kemple**, Connecticut Fair Housing Center  
**Bill Eithier**, Homebuilders and Remodelers Association of Connecticut  
**Betsy Crum**, Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development  
**Kelly Sinko**, Office of Policy and Management  
**Erin Boggs**, Open Communities Alliance  
**Rafie Podolsky**, Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut  
**Amanda Kennedy**, Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments  
**Sean Ghio**, Partnership for Strong Communities  
**Florence Villano**, Connecticut Housing Coalition

**Commissioner Evonne Klein** opened the meeting at 10:07am. She welcomed the present members of the working group, provided introductory remarks, and asked each member in attendance to go around the room and introduce themselves for the record.

The members of the Fair Housing Working Group introduced themselves.

Commissioner Evonne Klein turned the meeting over to Co-Chairperson Rep. Roland Lemar for introductory remarks.

**Rep. Roland Lemar** welcomed members of the working group and provided background information on racial disparity and fair housing issues in Connecticut. He gave specific examples and cited media reports that showcased the stigma of affordable housing in Connecticut. He turned the meeting back to Co-Chairperson Commissioner Evonne Klein.

Commissioner Evonne Klein, following the order of the agenda, opened the meeting to members of the working group to discuss their specific ideas and to formulate the direction that they wanted the working group to go.

**Senator Tony Hwang** thanked the co-chairpersons and also thanked the Governor and Commissioner for their efforts in ending homelessness in Connecticut. He thanked Rep. Lemar for his work on the Planning and Development Committee and also for his efforts to create a dialogue towards expanding access to fair housing opportunities in Connecticut. He acknowledged that as a state, "we still have a long, long way to go."

**Erin Kemple** urged the committee to talk clearly about race and national origin in framing a conversation about discrimination. She emphasized the big picture and that it is more than just affordable housing. She expressed that both issues are intertwined. Ms. Kemple exclaimed that when we don't talk about all of these issues together, it can "sweep some of the issues under the rug." She said that when we talk about affordable housing, we need to discuss integration. She cited specific examples such as people moving into communities where they would not be in the majority and framed a discussion around making every community a community of opportunity. Ms. Kemple also mentioned what the future of Connecticut's major cities would look like and what the outcome could be as the group talks about future efforts toward integration.

**Rep. Larry Butler** remarked about the current budget climate, and reference when he spoke to the full general assembly about how important the Department of Housing is to the State of Connecticut. He said that he wants to ensure the Department's good work continues. He acknowledged that the Governor has done a great job with housing in Connecticut. He also mentioned that he is proud of the job we've done in housing in Connecticut and exclaimed that the state is a national leader. Rep Butler said that we need housing opportunity for people of all backgrounds and mentioned that we don't currently make opportunities for affordable housing available in every part of the state and said that we're "missing the mark" in terms of expanding housing for people of lesser means. Rep. Butler drew a parallel between people who cannot live where they work. He said that steps to address "fair housing" in Connecticut "must be fair."

**Erin Boggs** acknowledged that the state is facing a difficult budget situation and that it's a tough time to have this discussion, but that the issues the group wants to address will contribute to a more economically vibrant Connecticut. Ms. Boggs exclaimed that "we are functionally living in a socially landscaped society of segregation." She made reference to her organization, the Open Communities Alliance's "Out of Balance" report that addresses issues like subsidized housing and maps where all the subsidized housing is in Connecticut, based on available data. She exclaimed that a lot can be done with how the government feeds into the issue of segregation.

**Betsy Crum** said that she hopes the working group will focus on, "on the ground" structural barriers to affordable housing" and work to address issues on the local level. Ms. Crum said that "changing people's hearts and minds is too big a policy, so I want to focus on how we can get the units built to advance our perspective." She said a major focus of the working group should be on building affordable housing for people with disabilities in the broader community. She cautioned the group about the dangers of solving today's problem, and creating a new problem in the process.

**Sean Ghio** thanked the co-chairpersons for including the Partnership for Strong Communities in this working group. He mentioned that his organization has been looking at the affordable housing crisis in Connecticut, specifically looking at those who are "rent burdened" and who face "excessive costs." Mr. Ghio stated that, in Connecticut, there are approximately 500,000 households who pay more than half of their income on housing and that this problem disproportionately affects minority populations. He noted that housing policy is set at state level, while housing decisions are made at local level. He also explained the structure of Connecticut, where there are 169 towns with varying degrees of expertise, willingness, and acceptance around affordable housing and that there may be an aversion in some communities to "anything different." Mr. Ghio said that we need policy to reinforce the state commitment to build affordable housing and reward towns that are already promoting affordable housing. He discussed a possible effort to educate people at the local level on the affordable housing laws.

**Florence Villanno** stressed that the working group needs to work on the local level issues and help communities overcome their "fear of new and other" to bring forward some kind of mutual understanding.

**Bill Ethier** said that he is looking forward to getting out some good proposals that we can present to legislature next session. He also echoed the references to media reports and accounts that Rep. Roland Lemar shared at the beginning of the meeting. Mr. Ethier stated that we are living “in a regulatory system that promotes fear of affordable housing,” and stated that regulation creates barriers to affordable housing. He said that he views educating people on the local level as being more of a “carrot” approach and that we really need to take a “stick” approach. Mr. Ethier further went on to state that the problem of affordable housing lies in the state’s regulatory structure. He dismissed the notion that Connecticut truly has the ability of “home rule” as it concerns land use; because the state—through the Zoning Enabling Act—empowers municipalities with their zoning authority. He further stated that municipalities only have the zoning authority that is granted to them by the state legislature.

**Amanda Kennedy** said that from a planning perspective, she views this working group as the “affordable housing” group and stated that affordable housing is an issue in Connecticut. She cited a specific example and said that the Fairfield county housing stock is worse than the NYC metro area. As a result, Ms. Kennedy exclaimed that people don’t have a reason to live here and noted that Connecticut cannot compete with neighboring housing costs. She said that she doesn’t want to think about housing targets narrowly and would like to think of it globally.

**Rafie Podolsky** said that when we talk about issues of fair housing; we need to be aware there is two different approaches. One is the housing construction approach, which includes “building more housing in broader ranges of places.” He said that the other approach is how the state can take advantage of existing housing markets and give people a greater degree of choice.

Amanda Kennedy continued, saying that the people who are struggling to find housing are those who are earning too little. She acknowledged that a portion of those people do need a housing subsidy but also said that many people earning a moderate incomes don’t have access to affordable housing opportunities. She said that the working group needs to acknowledge both of those realities and work to find a middle ground.

Sean Ghio alerted the working group that his organization would be putting out a report next week on the state of housing in Connecticut. He stated that there is more pressure for multifamily rental housing—more market pressure. And further went on to say that people are choosing to rent more. He touched on the issue of local zoning and that many communities do not allow affordable/multifamily housing in the zoning regulations and that some other towns do allow it; but it’s a restrictive process. He noted the current fiscal climate and said that the larger fiscal issues of the state can be tied to “where you sleep,” and that a lot of people don’t want to live in Connecticut’s older housing stock.

Bill Ethier expressed his reservations about making market assumptions. He cited an example of certain realtors who are abandoning their plans for apartments and, instead, turning towards single family homes. Mr. Ethier also stated that in many communities, the rental market is over built and said that this working group needs to be careful about creating policies that address markets that it “thinks exist” versus what “actually exists.” He also clarified his earlier comments and said that he is not putting blame on local zoning commissions. He clarified that all towns have different land use policies; and it only takes one “no” to stop a project from going forward, which could be from a fire marshal, zoning board, town planner, etc. for a number of different reasons.

Erin Boggs cited specific examples of housing policy from other states. She noted the Fair Share model in New Jersey and also said that both New Jersey and Texas have innovative ways of addressing the Low Income

Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. Ms. Boggs noted that these states experienced real changes in the kinds of applications they received when they changed the point configuration for the LIHTC program and also made reference to Baltimore and Chicago when it comes to the area's housing choice voucher program.

Erin Kemple stated that one of the biggest issues in Connecticut when it comes to affordable housing development is the issue of enforcing the state's existing housing laws. She cited examples of landlords who choose not to rent based on segregation, section 8, etc. Ms. Kemple stated that the state's ability to enforce existing laws is thin and that Connecticut has a lot of good laws, but they're not well known.

Senator Tony Hwang stated that he looks at affordable housing in the context of not just income, but that he also looks at housing for people with intellectual disabilities, the handicapped, second chance society, seniors, and workforce housing. He said the working group needs to look at a much broader context. And that so far the focus has mostly just been on income and segregation. Senator Hwang stated that working group needs to look at the "Inclusionary" aspect and whether or not "every community has that." He said that the bottom line is that we need more housing, more than anything else and that there is a backlog of need. He applauded the Commissioner and used an example of affordable housing in the Town of Fairfield. Citing the "Pine Tree" housing development as an example, he asked if the Commissioner could provide an explanation of how that development was structured.

Commissioner Evonne Klein acknowledged the Senator's request and, citing his question, asked the entire working group what kind of information that would like to see from the Department of Housing, going forward. She acknowledged that the Department of Housing does have data, which may just not be held in one specific format or another. She then provided background on the Pine Tree housing development in Fairfield.

Rep. Larry Butler applauded the working group for the discussion thus far and said that the working group seems a bit more all-encompassing than he originally thought. He stated that he was happy about that and that he was glad the working group has people who care about housing policy. Rep. Butler said that "we've created clusters over time" of affordable housing and that we need to providing access to housing in areas of opportunity. He referenced Ms. Kemple's earlier comments about enforcement and provided an anecdote about inadvertent violations of fair housing laws.

Erin Kemple also expressed additional concerns about lending/insurance of housing in certain areas. She stated that her organization had conducted research showing significant redlining in communities of color and cited examples of lending that occurs "in white neighborhoods," but not "in black neighborhoods" in Hartford and how some people are denied insurance because they choose to rent to Section 8 tenants.

Erin Boggs again cited her organization's report. She mentioned that it was becoming clear that the resources don't seem to be available within the Department of Housing to produce adequate data on the location of subsidized housing in Connecticut. She stated that she would like to see more resources within the Department of Housing and stated that the specific focus of his group could be on: 1.) Data availability, 2.) Zoning, 3.) Subsidized housing, 4.) and Housing discrimination.

Commissioner Evonne Klein invited the working group to email her any further suggestions they may have for the direction of the working group. She noted that, originally, what was not on this agenda, is for the Department of Housing to give specific information to the working group. Commissioner Klein asked if additional information would be helpful. She cited examples of how the Department sets housing policy and how the state has progressed. She noted that, between both the Department of Housing and the Connecticut

Housing Finance Authority, a \$1 billion state investment in affordable housing has occurred since 2011. She also noted that another \$2.5 billion investment in housing from private/other sources has occurred in that same timeframe.

**Kelly Sinko** noted that she has been listening closely to the conversation around the table and that it's good that we have such a diverse group. She cited Rep. Roland Lemar and the examples he brought up at the beginning of the meeting. She also focused on two suggested points for the direction of the working group. Those were, the educational approach for local municipalities and what the state can do to enforce existing laws. Ms. Sinko noted that it would be important to see what we've already done to educate municipalities and whether the true need is in more education or to take a specific action that could create more affordable housing. She went on to say that the state needs to decide whether some communities, "just don't agree" when it comes to affordable housing needs.

Betsy Crum said that having a snapshot in time of where we are with our current affordable housing would be helpful. She said the working group could spend a lot of time on data, but noted that she would rather focus on what's working and where we've seen movement. Ms. Crum said that the working group should focus on what we see that works, and what we see that does not work and stressed that she does not want this working group "to become a data exercise."

Senator Tony Hwang deferred to the co-chairpersons to come up with a list of priorities so that the working group can "get something accomplished." He noted that housing policy is pervasive and that the focus of this working group should be on three or four tasks that can produce a tangible result. Senator Hwang said that a few specific priorities would keep the working group focused.

Commissioner Evonne Klein noted that "being in government we have the opportunity for outcomes" and that "our work needs to add up to an outcome and final product so we can move Connecticut forward."

Sean Ghio informed the working group that the Urban Land Institute just put out a new report in the past couple days that featured some of Connecticut's housing policy successes.

Commissioner Evonne Klein noted that, before the Malloy administration, Connecticut experienced thirty years of disinvestment in affordable housing. She cited that, in many cases, the state budget would include little if any funding for affordable housing and that, oftentimes, the state only had its limited federal resources available to build affordable housing.

Erin Boggs stated that she views this working group as a self-examination of Connecticut and to think about how state government can behave differently.

Rep. Roland Lemar made note of the zoning enabling act, which requires all communities to allow for the development of multifamily housing. He also said that no one in state government has enacted a "stick" on those communities who do not comply. He noted that it is hard for legislators to impose such a requirement as withholding all state funding if they don't comply with that law but said that we do have an obligation as a state to identify what the obstacles are and how the state could reverse certain policies and practices. Rep. Lemar said that the intent of this working group is to meet at least once a month going forward and requested that if we need more people on this group in the future, to please identify them.

Commissioner Evonne Klein said that the Fair Housing Working Group will meet once per month and to check your emails for the announcement of the date and time of the next meeting. She said that the co-chairpersons will work on a future agenda and ensure the member's ideas are included.

Rep. Larry Butler added that some ideas that the working group could work on could be establishing clear priorities for this group, and identifying proposals that the legislature could take action on in the next legislative session. He noted that the final products from this working group could be introduced in both the Housing and the Planning & Development committees.

Commissioner Evonne Klein closed the meeting at 11:23am.