

## **I. Call to Order**

Members Present: Robert Millar, Anna Wageling, Jack Commo

City Staff Present: Heather Carrington, Fire Chief John Audy, Fire Marshall Bruce Palmer

Guests Present: Councilor Jim Duncan, Langley Smurthwaite, Hillary Gombar, Elizabeth Wood

Call to Order by: Robert Millar

Meeting Start Time: 6:04 PM

Minutes Recorded by: Jack Commo

## **II. Public Comment**

None

## **III. Approve Previous Meeting Minutes**

Meeting minutes from 11/22/21 were approved.

## **IV. Council Update**

City Council Liaison Jim Duncan updated the Housing Commission on the following:

- The Council has been focused on budget discussions.
- The December 6th Council meeting included an update on housing in Winooski that Councilor Duncan and the Mayor created with support from Katherine Deacarreau.
- There were some potential updates to form based code. These updates focused specifically on density bonuses for construction that met certain soundproofing and energy efficiency standards. Council will have another discussion and a public hearing in the coming months.
- The search for a city manager will reopen in the coming months as well and include public comment.

## **V. City Updates**

Staff liaison Heather Carrington provided the following update:

The City of Winooski has been awarded a Municipal Planning Grant to hire a consultant for the development of an Equitable Housing Plan for the city. This work will build on the housing findings of the Equity Audit, which will be delivered in early 2022.

## **VI. Working Session with John Audy, Fire Chief and Director of Code Enforcement – Housing Quality**

The Housing Commission work plan for this year calls for the Commission to “Evaluate housing quality in Winooski.” Fire Chief and Director of Code Enforcement, John Audy, and Fire Marshall Bruce Palmer joined the Commission to discuss the rental inspection and code enforcement practices in Winooski. Familiarity with the existing practices will assist the Housing Commission in making recommendations for policy changes to improve housing quality in Winooski. Chief Audy addressed the following topics:

- Standard procedures for the inspection process
- Actions taken when there are code violations
- Approach to landlords with repeat violations
- Alignment between Winooski Code and State regulations
- Priority revisions under consideration for the Housing and Public Building chapters of the Code
- High level budgetary implications of changing inspection frequency or expanding the units inspected
- What areas of the code/process do you see as most in need of improvement?
- What advocacy/recommendations/support from Housing Commission would best support the necessary changes

Code enforcement is responsible for all residential inspections as well construction inspections for both new construction and renovations. Once violations are identified, property owners have a certain amount of time to remedy those violations based on the type of work that needs to be accomplished. The City follows the building codes put forth by the state. Although there are some conflicts between federal housing codes through HUD and the state/local housing codes. There have been some issues with inspections run by federal agencies in Winooski. The City is working on bridging these issues and building better relationships with these properties. The City will use ordinances to compel property owners to make fixes.

Robert Millar asked how problematic situations happen and how certain properties are missed. Chief Audy explained that work is challenging and the stress on staff is high. The Chief also expressed that the city staff are always learning new best practices on how to communicate with residents and learn their needs. It is not always wise to take the most aggressive stand dealing with problematic landlords as it may negatively impact the resident themselves. Staff have learned a lot from partners and points of contact on how to respond quickly and effectively.

Anna Wageling asked about how residents can bring up issues without fear of retribution from landlords. The Chief encourages residents to use both online and phone reporting. The Chief encourages residents not to wait to report violations and expresses that most often landlords will make necessary repairs. The City makes clear to landlords that they must not retaliate against residents. Disputes between landlords and tenants are a civil matter and the City does not have a role in those disputes.

The code enforcement office shares some staff with planning and zoning, and DPW. The resources within the department are limited and with new housing developments, there is an expanding work load for the department. The city's code enforcement department is structured differently than other communities and features staff work across departments. The Chief expressed that code enforcement staffing is "lean" in Winooski compared with other communities. The Chief also expressed that the demographic makeup of the department does not match the community's and would like to see that change in the future as it would make the department more effective.

A community member asked about interpretation services and what access Code Enforcement has. Code Enforcement does not have a line item budget or direct interpretation resources, but works with partner organizations to communicate effectively. One of the lessons that was

learned from the situation at 300 main street is that sometimes residents are not connected to partner organization services, which makes accessing resources more difficult. Heather Carrington added that data from the equity audit will inform future discussions on the need for translation services as part of the greater need for improved equity in housing.

Community members asked what barriers are preventing more frequent (annual) inspections, rather than the four year inspection cycle. The staffing level of the department does not currently support an annual cycle, but Chief Audy feels that more frequent inspections would be valuable for some selected owners. He mentioned that Burlington grades property owners based on the results of previous inspections.

A community member asked if residents could communicate with the Chief through an interpreter of their own choosing. They responded that absolutely, residents should feel free to reach out to his through any translator in any medium they are able to utilize.

Commission members and the Chief discussed security deposits and renter recourse to appeal landlords' decisions. Winooski renters must go through civil courts which puts renters at a disadvantage. These are some policy areas that the Housing Commission may be asked to weigh in on in future discussions.

## **VII. Adjourn**

Meeting End Time: 7:51 PM

Motion: Jack

Second: Anna