

Hudson Housing Authority Board of Commissioners
Minutes of Regular Meeting
April 18, 2022

In attendance: Revonda Smith, Chairperson; Claire Cousin, Vice Chairperson; Rebecca Borrer, Secretary; Anthony Bennett; Nick Zachos, Interim Executive Director; Brian Lawlor, Counsel
Absent: Rebecca Wolff, Treasurer

Ms. Borrer called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m. It was conducted in person and via Zoom.

Minutes

Ms. Smith made a motion to approve the minutes of the March 21, 2022 meeting, which was seconded by Ms. Cousin and approved by all members in attendance.

Accounts Payable

Ms. Cousin made a motion to approve accounts payable for March 2022. Ms. Smith offered a second and the motion was approved by all members in attendance.

Interim Director's Report Community Room Hours

Based on community input, Mr. Zachos announced that the community room would be open during all business hours of the main office and that efforts were being made to have evening hours in the room as well, when the new security guard was on duty.

Security Position

Mr. Zachos also announced that the HHA had a new security guard, Damian Owens, who was known and liked by many in the building. "We've had incredible feedback so far. Just having somebody here every night has been something that folks haven't experienced for possibly over a decade. Folks seem to trust and enjoy having Damian here."

Mr. Zachos said many potential trespassers were kept out and many tenants helped on different issues. Mr. Owens was working toward his state security guard certification.

Asbestos Update

Ambient Environmental completed formal inspections of Bliss Towers housing units. The firm's report indicated that seven of the 12 units in question had potential exposure that qualified for containment and five units will need full abatement. With that report in hand, the agency was in a position to decide how to proceed in terms of getting cost estimates. Ambient Environmental will apply to the Department of Labor for a variance and once received, the board can solicit bids for contractors. The work would be supervised and monitored by Ambient.

Executive Director Search

Ms. Smith reported that she had been worked with Simone Gans Barefield, CEO of Gans, Gans and Associates, on a portfolio to solicit executive director candidates. A list of candidates was drafted and additions were forthcoming. Interviews will be set up with the entire board. Ms. Smith said Ms. Barefield wanted the HHA "to have the best of the best because after all the

research and history she looked up on Hudson she actually fell in love with Hudson herself and she was like, ‘I would take this job just because of the city.’”

Tenant Election Reform

Mr. Lawlor researched the HHA’s bylaws, past and present, and state laws in regard to election of tenant commissioners. He drew up a draft policy, but it had not been circulated amongst members prior to the meeting.

During his research, Mr. Lawlor found that the terms of the tenant commissioners had become concurrent rather than staggered. To return to staggered terms, the board would have to decide on holding another election, when to do so and how to conduct it.

His discussions with Ms. Smith and Mr. Zachos revolved around making sure that the election was one that attracted good candidates to serve as tenant commissioner and generated greater voter participation by the residents—“the best candidates that we can get and have a really robust election process.”

Procedures used by other housing authorities were looked at as well. It was clear who was eligible to vote. Under state law, people who live in the housing authority who are age 18 or older are eligible to vote. Ninety days before an election the Authority will announce and post a roll of eligible voters. There will be a time period for those who felt that their name should be on the list or for someone to challenge someone’s eligibility to be on the list. Anyone eligible to vote also is eligible to run for a tenant commissioner seat.

“We also wanted to encourage people to get involved,” Mr. Lawlor said, and it was realized that state law allowed the opportunity to provide a stipend to tenant commissioners, \$2,000 a year paid monthly, that counts as income, but doesn’t count toward eligibility to be in an apartment. The board could authorize stipends at any point in time.

The law requires housing authorities to have two tenant commissioners and each should have a two-year term, he said. It’s recommended, but not required that those terms be staggered, meaning they don’t start and end at the same time.

Candidates would still have to gather 20 signatures on nominating petitions from eligible voters. As mentioned by Mr. Bennett, it could be difficult to get signatures so making the community room available to candidates on certain days of the week might help with that process. People can sign only one nominating petition per commissioner per election (for example, if two candidates were running, one person could sign both candidates’ petitions once).

“We also thought it would be a good idea to have a candidate forum, maybe a night before a board meeting and before the election...and have people meet them and have the candidates make a statement as to why they want to run for office and have them answer questions from the tenants as to why they might do,” Mr. Lawlor said.

Mr. Lawlor said that of equal importance was to make sure that people voted. “It shouldn’t be a difficult task to vote.” Currently people go to the office on the day of the election to place their ballots in a box. “There’s really no reason to limit it to that. There’s a certain date and time when the election occurs, meaning your ballot has to be received before then.”

Mr. Lawlor proposed that ballots be distributed prior to the election to each apartment, filled out by eligible voters in each unit and to return ballots in one of three ways—drop them off in a box in the office any day up until the day of the election, by email to the office or by U.S. mail to the office. “It’s one ballot, one person; it has to be the official ballot that we’ll hand out as a means of control. The idea is to make sure that people have the opportunity to vote, that the

right people vote and that we get the best candidates to run and treat them with the respect that they deserve for doing that.”

He suggested the board discuss when it wanted to conduct another elect to adjust the terms so they were staggered, leave them the way they are or do something within 90 days or at the end of the year.

“I think having a clear written policy and procedure surround elections is going to be great for us,” Mr. Zachos said. “...It’s very exciting to imagine this being a much more robust process and one that kind of incentivizes participation.”

The board decided to have a special meeting on April 25 at 5 p.m. to review the ongoing investigation of a tenant commissioner who had been temporarily removed pending such, to extend a contract with counsel and other items that came up too late to appear on the evening’s agenda.

Ms. Cousin suggested a type of community day be organized where people were invited to come and help refurbish the playgrounds, such as painting and small repairs “so kids have somewhere safe and fun to play this summer.”. While waiting on that decision, she thought about reaching out to the Youth Center regarding manpower and supplies.

Mr. Zachos said a written proposal for a mural project had been received and would further that goal of playground improvements. It will be discussed at the special meeting. A tenant debt repayment offer that was being reviewed by lawyers from both sides will be discussed as well.

There being no public comment, Ms. Smith made a motion to adjourn at 6:30 p.m., which was seconded by Ms. Cousin and approved unanimously.