



**TOWN OF WEST HARTFORD FAIR RENT COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
April 3, 2025 at 6:30 pm
West Hartford Town Hall Room 314**

I. Meeting Opening

- A. Call to Order: Chair Nastajha Ortiz calls the meeting to order at 6:30 pm.
- B. Roll Call: Chair Nastajha Ortiz conducts roll call.
Present: Commissioners Nichole Berklas, Venica Blythe, Kate Martin, Nastajha Ortiz, Alexis Safo-Agyeman, John Souza, and Bruce Wittchen.
A quorum of members present.
- C. Approval of Minutes from October 22, 2024 Meeting
Motion to approve minutes is made by Chair Ortiz.
Motion is seconded by: Venica Blythe
Vote: Motion passes unanimously

II. New Business

- A. Discussion of Procedure for Meeting
Chair Ortiz discusses the procedure for this evening's meeting.
- B. Explanation of Administrative Hearing Guidelines
Chair Ortiz explains the administrative hearing guidelines.
- C. Case # 2025-01, Russell v. Thomas
At 6:35 pm, Chair Ortiz calls for the parties in the matter of *Russell v. Thomas*. Both parties are present. Both parties are sworn in at 6:37 pm. Complainant testifies and presents evidence. The Commission takes a recess to make additional copies of exhibits at 7:05pm. The Commission reconvenes at 7:22 pm. The commission gives the Respondent the opportunity to ask questions of the Complainant through the Chair. The commissioners then have the opportunity to

ask questions of the Complainant. The respondent is then given the opportunity to testify at 7:28 pm. The Commission gives the Complainant the opportunity to ask questions of the Respondent through the Chair. The Commissioners then have the opportunity to ask questions of the Respondent. Both parties are then afforded the opportunity to provide a closing statement. Commission deliberates at 7:44 pm. Commissioner Safo-Agyeman opens deliberations. Commissioner Wittchen recommends the Commission continue the complaint for final disposition pending mediation. Commissioner Berklas concurs with Commissioner Wittchen and recommends that the Parties review the lease. Commissioner Souza makes a recommendation to reduce rent. Commissioner Blythe concurs with Commissioner Souza. Commissioner Martin concurs with Commissioner Souza. Commissioner Wittchen makes a motion to continue the complaint for final disposition pending mediation. Commissioner Safo-Agyeman seconds, and the motion passes by unanimous vote. The Commission finds that the matter be continued in order to allow the parties to resolve the matter through mediation. If the parties are unable to resolve the matter, it will be set for a hearing the first week of May 2025. The Commission takes a recess at 7:56 pm.

D. Case #2025-02, Valentine v. Highland Creativity, LLC, et al.

At 8:04 pm, Chair Ortiz calls for the parties in the matter of *Valentine v. Highland Creativity, LLC, et al.* Complainant is present. Chair Ortiz reviews the hearing guidelines. Complainant is sworn in at 8:07 pm. Complainant presents evidence. At 8:19 pm the Complainant testifies. At 8:22 pm the Complainant's witness provides testimony. At 8:23 pm, the Commissioners ask questions of the Complainant and the witness. Commission deliberates at 8:36 pm. Commissioner Wittchen opens deliberations. Commissioner Safo-Agyeman and Commissioner Berklas suggest that the proposed rent increase is harsh and unconscionable. At 8:43 pm Chair Ortiz makes a motion that the rental increase is harsh and unconscionable. Commissioner Safo-Agyeman seconds the motion. Commissioner Souza denies the motion. Commissioner Martin makes a motion to stay the rent until the smoke alarm is fixed. Commissioner Blythe seconds the motion. The motion is put to a vote, 2 ayes and 5 nays. Commissioner Ortiz makes a motion to reduce the monthly rent to \$1670. Deliberations are opened to ask the Complainant a question at 8:50 pm. Commissioner Wittchen makes a motion to set the Complainant's rent to \$1675. Commissioner Safo-Agyeman seconds. Commissioners Martin and Souza deny the motion. Commissioner Wittchen makes a motion for rent to be paid in an escrow account until Respondent comes to Commission. Chair Ortiz tables the motion and makes a motion to reduce rent to \$1810. Motion is denied. Commissioner Martin makes a motion to order the suspension of rent payments, as the housing in question fails to comply with

ordinances or state statutes relating to health and safety, until such time as the landlord makes necessary changes. Motion is denied. Chair Ortiz makes a motion to set rent to \$1675, to be paid in escrow until the Respondent presents themselves to the Commission and resolves safety concerns to the satisfaction of the Fire Marshal's Office. Commissioner Wittchen seconds the motion, and the motion is approved by unanimous vote. Commissioner Souza adds that rent should stay at \$1675 for 6 months after issues are resolved. The Commission votes and unanimously approves the motion. The Commission finds that the Respondent's proposed rent increase is so excessive as to be harsh and unconscionable and reduces the rent to \$1675 to be provided to the Town of West Hartford until a future hearing date at which point Respondent will appear and provide testimony/evidence that the safety issues identified by the Fire Marshal's Office have been addressed. After the issues have been resolved and Respondent has provided notice of the repairs, Complainant's rent remains at \$1675 for six months after.

E. Discussion of Dates for Training

Commissioners provide input on when they are available for training, to be scheduled.

F. Discussion of any Action Items

III. Adjournment

A. Meeting adjourned at 9:07 pm.