



City of Somerville
PLANNING BOARD
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

4 AUGUST 2022 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on GoToWebinar.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Erin Geno	Clerk	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Debbie Howitt Easton	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	

City staff present: Raisa Saniat (Planning, Preservation & Zoning), Emily Hutchings (Planning, Preservation & Zoning), Daniel Bartman (Planning, Preservation & Zoning), Andrew Graminski (Planning, Preservation & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 8:53pm.

PUBLIC HEARING: 50 Webster Avenue - Building (P&Z 21-060)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the applicant's request to continue the case to 18 August 2022.

PUBLIC HEARING: 50 Webster Avenue - Thoroughfare (P&Z 22-073)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the applicant's request to continue the case to 18 August 2022.

PUBLIC HEARING: 50 Webster Avenue/62 Prospect Street – Civic Space (P&Z 21-166)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the applicant's request to continue the case to 18 August 2022.

OTHER BUSINESS: Zoning Amendment Recommendations

City Councilor-At-Large Wilson proposing an amendment to the Zoning Ordinances, Section 3.1.6.d, Residence District, to permit the Backyard Cottage accessory building type by right.

The Board had no further discussion on the item.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend adoption of the zoning amendment to the City Council.

Vivaldo Meneses Sr. requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 82-84 Prospect Street from MR5 to UR.

The Board had no further discussion on the item.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend adoption of the zoning amendment to the City Council.

Three owners requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 129R Highland Ave from UR to NR.

The Board asked whether the adjacent parcel would face any nonconformities to the setbacks. Staff confirmed that from what they can tell by the estimates, it would not impact the reuse of the existing structure to be converted into an apartment building in its current form, as any nonconformities that the building currently has are inherent traits that the building will be allowed to keep and even expand in certain dimensions. Staff stated that they cannot give exact dimensions because they do not have any measurements.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend adoption of the zoning amendment to the City Council.

Mayor Ballantyne requesting a text amendment to the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to repeal all references to a Certificate of Zoning Compliance and replace with a requirement for the Building Official to conduct a zoning compliance review and maintain a public record of such reviews for all development.

The Board had no further discussion on the item.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend adoption of the zoning amendment to the City Council.

Thomas J. Cooke requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 14 White Street Place from NR to MR4

The Board had no further discussion on the item.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend adoption of the zoning amendment to the City Council.

The Chair informed the Board and the public that 10 Washington Street (P&Z 21-134) was advertised for tonight's meeting; however, it was advertised for the wrong Board. The project will be advertised for the Zoning Board of Appeals by Staff, which is the correct Board for that project.

PUBLIC HEARING: 16 & 20 Medford Street (P&Z 21-057)

(continued from 16 June 2022)

The applicant team addressed the questions and concerns the Board had at the last meeting; trash and recycling room location, short-term parking and loading zone locations, relocation of the garage door and ramp, traffic and turning movements on Bedford Street, and the updated proposed site plan and renderings.

The Board noted that the new submission material would need further time for Staff review, as they have not had time to make an appropriate recommendation to the Board. Staff stated that the new information is not a concern with Staff, and it has been fully reviewed.

The Board inquired whether the requirement to make the building look like two buildings applies in the rear of the building. Staff confirmed that it is not a requirement for the rear of the building, only the front façade.

The Board and applicant team discussed the rear of the building, the design process, and how the façade design seems flat and should be further explored. The Board asked the team to break up the building more to make it more interesting, possibly by extending the light material and providing more Evergreen trees to shield the massing in the rear. The applicant team noted that due to the transformer and emergency egress the number of trees that can be added in the rear are restricted. They also discussed the conversation that the applicant team had with the abutters regarding the landscaping plan.

The Board requested that the applicant team present a revised rendering of the rear of the building at the next meeting.

The Board and applicant team discussed the loading zone access system, how they plan to restrict double parking in the bicycle lane, and the possibility of including a condition regarding the loading zone in the approval.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Aaron Weber (32 Summit Ave) – was in support of the proposal. He stated that Somerville is in a housing crisis, and we should be responding with the urgency that a crisis requires. Delays drive up the prices of housing, which has caused several heartbreaking situations in the community, such as the displacement of people up and down the income scale. Mr. Weber asked the Board to approve the proposal as quickly as possible.

Tori Antonino (65 Boston St) – asked the applicant team to consider native plants, such as Virginia Creeper. She encouraged the team to install a green roof and thanked them for including outdoor amenity space in their plans, as we really underestimate our need to be outside. Ms. Antonino fears that we are planning for a transient population. She asked that everyone remember that we are in a family housing crisis, as well as an affordable housing crisis, and that families are the anchor of the community.

Chair Capuano closed public testimony; written testimony will be open until noon on 12 August 2022.

The Board and applicant team discussed bicycle parking, the challenges regarding burying the power lines, the affordable housing unit's amenities, and the parking plan.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue the case to 18 August 2022.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 50 Webster Avenue - Subdivision (P&Z 22-067)

Vice Chair Aboff recused herself.

The applicant team presented the master project context, approved master block and lot plan, and the subdivision proposal.

Chair Capuano noted that generally thoroughfares are handled administratively and usually fall under the purview of the Planning Director in the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Department. Since this one is part of a bigger project, it has come before the Planning Board for consideration.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony. No one indicated they wished to speak. Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (3-0) to approve the Subdivision Plan Approval.

RESULT:

APPROVED

Vice Chair Aboff rejoined the meeting.

The Board went into recess at 7:26pm and resumed at 7:31pm.

OTHER BUSINESS: Davis Square Plan

The Board asked Staff to provide a brief update to the Davis Square Plan.

Staff explained that the original Davis Square Neighborhood Plan was written pre-pandemic and therefore its out-of-date, even if many of the goals and objectives of the neighborhood remain the same or similar. Staff continued by stating that they took this opportunity to write and re-organize the plan as a Commercial Area Plan that focuses on the business core based off the feedback received from the constituents that they would like to focus on the economy, public realm, and how things contribute to the character of Davis Square even if redevelopment is happening. The Economic Development Division has taken extreme care in taking a lot of time and energy addressing recovery from the pandemic and its impact on small businesses.

The Board can expect the plan to focus on the economic development future of Davis Square, as well as the improvement of the public realm. The Transportation Division, Engineering Division, and a consultant will be conducting a study on how traffic in the area may need to be re-routed and utilities may need to be moved, if and to what extent Elm Street is pedestrianized, as that is a possibility expressed in the plan.

Staff also noted that although there is not a published plan in place yet, the developers currently working in Davis Square have worked closely with every division in OSPCD to ensure that their projects are in line with the city's goals for Davis Square.

Staff confirmed that the goal is to have a public draft available by the end of Summer and to engage with the community again to ensure that they still feel that the plan reflects their wishes and to discuss if they would like anything else to be included.

PUBLIC HEARING: 231-249 Elm Street and 6-8 & 12 Grove Street (P&Z 21-068)

The applicant team started by saying that they have worked closely with the city Planning, Preservation, & Zoning (PPZ) Department to ensure that their proposal adheres to the city's goals for Davis Square. The team continued by presenting the site context, the general details of the project, community benefits, sustainability goals of the building, and how they plan to embrace the character of Davis Square which includes protecting *The Burren*. They explained how they conducted a Davis Square storefront study, which lead to their storefront design as well as their corner and sidewalk design. The applicant team shared building elevations, parking garage entrance and the loading zone area, their plan to save the existing street trees as well as add more trees, proposed street level improvements, and bike parking.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Tori Antonino (65 Boston St) – commended Staff for pivoting in terms of what Davis Square needs post-Covid. When a covenant is developed with the applicant team, she would like to see a community center.

Robert Gorin (255 Elm St) – is a direct abutter and spoke in support of the application.

Lee Auspitz (17 Chapel St) – is in support of the project; they worked within the spirit of Davis Square and the neighborhood context. Mr. Auspitz’s one major reservation is that the city makes no distinction between high-risk and low-risk labs and the developer’s lawyer expressed interest in putting a Level 3 lab in this location. He requested that the city limit the type of lab allowed at this location as part of the covenant, even though by-right they may be allowed.

Aaron Weber (32 Summit Ave) – impressed with the design and the safety improvements to the intersection, as well as the replacement of the unsightly surface parking lots on Grove Street. Mr. Weber stated that if there is going to be so much disruption in the heart of the square, the building should be taller to allow for more tax money and jobs.

Alex Giller (55 Forrest St, Medford) – felt that the detailing of the building is great except for the glass section above *The Burren*. He recognized that Somerville is trying to move away from being a car-centric city, but cars are still part of our society right now, so he voiced his concern with the amount of proposed parking spots as he feels there are not enough spots to handle the demand.

Ian Montgomery (97 Holland St) – liked the building plan and the additional street trees, however he is disappointed with no additional housing in Davis as a part of this project.

Kendra Gahagan (20 Grove St) – expressed concerns that the neighbors did not receive sufficient answers at the neighborhood meetings regarding the future tenants and the type of lab allowed in this building. She asked that the type of lab be limited to a low-risk lab. Ms. Gahagan also stated that the neighbors asked if the underground parking would be open to patrons visiting all the small businesses in Davis Square and the developers indicated that the majority of the parking spots would be for the tenants of the building, which was a great concern.

Chair Capuano closed public testimony; written testimony will be open until noon on 12 August 2022.

The applicant team responded that the proposed parking will be unpaired, as required by the city, and will be open to all members of the public visiting Davis Square.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue the case to 18 August 2022.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Submittal Requirements Manual

Staff provided a brief presentation to the Board on the updates made to the Submittal Requirements Manual, including substantive and minor changes made to the manual since the last presentation, future goals, and the process for future changes.

Chair Capuano inquired whether the Zoning Board of Appeals adopted the manual. Staff confirmed that the ZBA adopted the manual at the 3 August 2022 ZBA hearing.

Vice Chair Aboff asked Staff to edit the Neighborhood Meeting section of the manual to clarify what is mandatory versus what is best practices to alleviate confusion. She stated that she does not see a need to hold up the adoption of the manual over this revision, as Staff can handle this administratively.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to adopt the Submission Requirements Manual, with the edits discussed this evening.

OTHER BUSINESS: Ward Councilor Amendment

The Board provided some background on the amendment including the concern that has been raised regarding not having adequate representation from Ward Councilors and the possibility of designating another Councilor as a solution.

Staff explained that applicant teams are required to reach out and consult with a Ward Councilor when scheduling a Neighborhood Meeting and the anticipation is that they will have to seek out the President of the City Council, if they are having trouble getting in contact with their Ward Councilor or the Ward Councilor is unable to participate.

The Board and Staff discussed potential amendment language and whether it should be any other Councilor or specifically a Councilor-At-Large.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to propose this amendment to the City Council as a formal amendment, with the edits discussed this evening.

NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. To review a full recording, please contact the Planning & Zoning Division at planning@somervillema.gov.