



City of Somerville  
**PLANNING BOARD**  
City Hall 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

**MARCH 2, 2023 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>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Debbie Howitt Easton	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	

City staff present: Raisa Saniat (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division), Charlotte Leis (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division), Emily Hutchings (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division), Victor Nascimento (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division); Justin Schreiber (Mobility Division)

The meeting was called to order at 6:04pm and adjourned at 8:15pm.

**PUBLIC HEARING: 200 McGrath Hwy (P&Z 22-097)**  
*(continued from 16 February 2023)*

Vice Chair Aboff recused herself from this item. Member Howitt Easton and Clerk Geno both noted that they missed the 16 February 2023 meeting but have reviewed the recording and submitted an affidavit.

Chair Capuano stated that a development covenant is being worked on by the city and the applicant team but has not yet been fully executed; the Planning Board will not vote on this application until the covenant has been signed by both parties.

The applicant team stated that they do not have an additional presentation but are available to discuss and answer questions.

Chair Capuano noted that they received communication from City Councilor Ewen-Campen regarding this project and summarized that the Councilor requested that the Board not vote until the applicant team addressed certain concerns that the neighborhood has. Chair Capuano stated that the concerns are primarily regarding mobility issues, and asked if Mobility Staff was present; Mobility Staff confirmed that they were available for questions.

Chair Capuano noted that the primary concerns seemed to be about “scary way’s” intersection with Linwood Street, the sidewalk shared between pedestrians and bicycles, and general traffic impacts. Mobility Staff stated that the applicant team proposed very robust traffic mitigation, and the Staff Memo includes additional above and beyond conditions. It is understood that trucks will exit through the Brickbottom neighborhood, and the goal is to get those vehicles back onto the main streets as quickly as possible; the infrastructure improvements proposed by the additional conditions are intended to achieve that by encouraging vehicles to go down Linwood Street rather than Fitchburg Street. Another proposed condition would widen the sidewalks in the area to allow for a better pedestrian experience. The Board asked about the city’s plan for the Linwood Street intersection. Mobility Staff stated that they are asking that improvements be made to that intersection, specifically to discourage vehicles from turning onto Fitchburg Street; the intent is to change the curb lines and to T off the intersection. They may want to go further than that, but it is still in the works; they are discussing a complete intersection redesign.

The Board and Mobility Staff discussed to what extent the Mobility Division considers the long-term plans the city has for the neighborhood when reviewing applications and how the Transportation Impact Study (TIS) evaluates existing intersections, existing conditions, and future conditions which account for other developments in the area. Staff noted that the TIS for this project reflects the old scale of the project, but the project has since been reduced in scale. The Board reiterated that the TIS is a conservative estimate based on the current intersection plans and the proposed building, and road/intersection redesigns may be an addendum but are not necessarily included in any calculations. Mobility Staff confirmed and noted that there is not a good way to account for theoretical intersection redesigns. They also stated that they have tried to protect against any concerns about precluding city work in the future through the conditions list.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Clerk Geno, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue the case to 16 March 2023.

Clerk Geno encouraged the applicant team to review the public comments received and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

Vice Chair Aboff rejoined the meeting at 6:34pm.

### **OTHER BUSINESS: Davis Square Neighborhood Plan**

Staff stated that they are actively working on producing an internal draft of the Davis Square Neighborhood Plan that will first be reviewed by city leadership. The Neighborhood Plan will reflect information gathered from the previous planning process, but the strategy is to basically start from scratch given the amount of time that has passed. Staff will focus on the public realm and commercial aspects, but they should have a better idea of how to move forward once they get feedback from the public.

The Board recalled that they recommended adoption of the Davis Square Neighborhood Plan previously and asked why it was never adopted. Staff stated that they will have to follow-up with the Board, as other Staff members were handling this Neighborhood Plan at the time.

### **PUBLIC HEARING: 256-260 Elm St (P&Z 21-039)**

*(continued from 16 February 2023)*

Chair Capuano started by stating that Staff did not have sufficient time to fully review the application materials, therefore they were not able to provide a Staff Memo or a recommendation on this case. He will open public testimony but expects to have Staff's analysis on the project by the next Planning Board meeting, which would introduce new information and require public testimony to be reopened. Chair Capuano stated that the Board's view on the project may change after they receive Staff's assessment of the application materials that were submitted on Friday, 24 February 2023. He also noted that members of the public may wish to reserve their testimony until there is a complete application, but it is their choice whether they wish to speak tonight or wait until the next meeting.

The applicant team gave an overview of the lab/office building, public engagement process, and how they developed the building design to fit within the Davis Square neighborhood. They presented materiality choices, Elm Street elevations, and noted that as part of their development covenant with the city they have agreed to keep two of the three Elm Street facing retail spaces below market rate to keep them more affordable for local businesses.

The Board and applicant team discussed the location of the loading and trash areas, the community concerns regarding going from a 1 story building to a 3-4 story building and the shadow impacts of that, and the phasing of development and why the Day Street building is not included in this application but is referenced in the phasing plan.

The Board asked about the transition plan for businesses that will be displaced, although that is not under the purview of the Planning Board. The applicant team explained that they have been working with many of the tenants and the Economic Development Division to find new locations elsewhere in Davis Square and have offered relocation packages to some of the tenants.

The Board expressed significant concerns with the application materials submitted; they found it confusing in some areas and sloppy in others. The materials do not reference any other development happening in the area, the square footage is listed as five different things in different places, the Green Score is not included in the zoning chart and none of the materials show the calculations, the notation of the development phases change in different documents, the shadow studies show sun on the civic space but the images show a canopy over it, the team expressed a commitment to ADA accessibility but the images show multiple items covering the area, and the building plan set has one layout for the basement but that has no relation to the building plans labeled "basement" on the updated area calculation document. The Board voiced their concern that there are this many errors and lack of attention to detail given that this team is planning on doing construction in one of the densest and the most utilized areas of the city.

The Board requested that the applicant team revise their application materials so that the Planning Board would be more comfortable moving forward. The applicant team apologized for the many errors noting that they were confused by having to legally present the project as two separate projects, two separate addresses, even though they are essentially one project. The team stated that they will revise their application materials.

The Board and applicant team discussed the evolution of the project over the last three years and how it might be worth having another neighborhood meeting with a new presentation showing the current proposal. Staff confirmed that the last neighborhood meeting was held in June 2022. They also spoke about the sustainability aspects of the project, such as the emergency power back-up system and the intention to purchase carbon offsets.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Tori Antonino (65 Boston St) – stated that she appreciated the upgraded plaza but noted that this could be an opportunity to add vertical infrastructure that allows for vines, especially native plants that will enliven the space. Ms. Antonino asked if the team would consider adding solar panels or a green roof; green space on roofs with native meadows help native pollinators survive the climate crisis we are in. She wondered if there will be community space or a community room.

Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

The Board raised concerns to be addressed at the next meeting regarding the size of trucks that will be accessing the loading zone, if any consideration was given to a more defined cornice line at the top of the building, and how much flexibility will be given to the ground floor tenants along the civic space to modify their storefronts given the artistic and quirky nature of Somerville as a whole. The Board would also like to better understand how the team approached the design to ensure that the building is compatible with the proposed use.

Chair Capuano left written testimony open until noon on 10 March 2023; public testimony will be reopened at the 16 March 2023 Planning Board meeting.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue the case to 16 March 2023.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

**PUBLIC HEARING: 270 Elm St (P&Z 21-042)**

*(continued from 16 February 2023)*

The applicant team gave a summary of the civic space study; the open space was rezoned as a “civic space” to ensure that it will continue to be a civic space and will be maintained as an essential part of Davis Square. The team stated that they designed the space as a Through Block Plaza and spoke about how it will connect with the surrounding area, how they designed it to be more accessible and inclusive, and how they want to ensure the design will be flexible enough to allow a wide variety of programming opportunities, such as music festivals, farmer’s markets, and movie nights. The team briefly spoke about the proposed hardscape, seating options, plantings, lighting plan, and opportunities for murals and public art.

The Board and applicant team discussed irrigation and the general maintenance plan for the plantings in the civic space.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Tori Antonino (65 Boston St) – noted that she didn’t see a planting list in the landscaping plan for the civic space. She would like to see more details and a native plant list.

Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

The Board raised concerns to be addressed at the next meeting regarding the survival of trees in the relatively shady space between two buildings and the balance of civic space versus retail space in the plaza. The Board would also like to see a planting list and how they plan to address the low-light conditions.

Chair Capuano left written testimony open until noon on 10 March 2023; public testimony will be reopened at the 16 March 2023 Planning Board meeting.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue the case to 16 March 2023.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

**OTHER BUSINESS: Guidelines on Unit Mixes**

Staff did not have an update on this matter but noted that the city is reviewing this as part of a larger housing initiative.

Vice Chair Aboff spoke about the Board’s role as a policy-focused group in addition to permitting; suggesting that the Board take up policy-oriented items at some meetings to discuss bigger picture policy items, and the possibility of forming a subcommittee to start addressing those topics. Chair Capuano expressed his support and noted that it would be a good use of the Board’s expertise, rather than having ad-hoc discussions. He added that the Board should discuss this at future meeting, partially due to the need to figure out the logistics of staffing, complying with Open Meeting Law, etc.

## **OTHER BUSINESS: Board Elections**

Chair Capuano nominated Erin Geno for Clerk of the Planning Board. No other nominations were made. Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted (5-0-1), with Clerk Geno abstaining, to elect Erin Geno as Clerk of the Planning Board.

Chair Capuano nominated Amelia Aboff for Vice Chair of the Planning Board. No other nominations were made. Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Howitt Easton, the Board voted (5-0-1), with Vice Chair Aboff abstaining, to elect Amelia Aboff as Vice Chair of the Planning Board.

Vice Chair Aboff nominated Michael Capuano for Chair of the Planning Board. No other nominations were made. Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted (5-0-1), with Chair Capuano abstaining, to elect Michael Capuano as Chair of the Planning Board.

The Board and Staff quickly discussed the status of the possible virtual public meeting extension and the expiration of the current extension.

*NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. A recording of these proceedings can be accessed at any time by using the registration link at the top of the meeting agenda.*