



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

4 MAY 2023 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on GoToWebinar.

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

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

The meeting was called to order at 6:02pm and adjourned at 8:36pm.

Acting Chair Aboff noted that Clerk Geno was not present, and that Member Habib would be Acting Clerk for this meeting.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Acting Chair Aboff, seconded by Acting Clerk Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the 16 February 2023 meeting minutes.

PUBLIC HEARING: 620 Broadway (P&Z 21-145)

(continued from 20 April 2023)

The applicant team stated that they provided a letter to the Board addressing the concerns raised at the last meeting. Staff reviewed that the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) and Mobility Staff had confirmed that there are no outstanding compliance issues, and that as conditioned, Staff is comfortable with the Board moving forward on this matter.

The Board asked the applicant team to present on the loading area. The applicant team described that there was no final loading plan and that conversations were ongoing with City Staff. Staff reviewed the proposed condition related to loading.

The Board raised concerns regarding loading as it may impact bicycle infrastructure, and stated they would prefer to review an updated Transportation Access Plan (TAP) that addresses loading in an appropriate manner. Staff reviewed updated Mobility-related conditions. The Board and Staff discussed the details of the updated conditions and the enforcement of said conditions.

The Board and applicant team discussed how it is the practice of the Board to hold off on voting on a case until all required documents are complete and that there are still concerns regarding how loading will be addressed in relation to use, security, and how it may impact bike lanes. They also discussed curb cuts, how the Planning Board would like the team to return to the Board with an updated TAP, how the applicant team suggested a condition

that the Board review the updated TAP once its complete considering it will be an extensive process and they would like to move the process forward, and how the Board was not comfortable with such a condition since it stands the team does not have a complete application.

The Board and applicant team continued the discussion with further concerns regarding solar panels, stating that there was different information provided about installing solar panels vs being solar-ready. The Board asked for clarity on the sustainability measures proposed, considering that the proposal appears to counter the city's sustainability goals. The applicant team stated that they will review and provide more information at the next meeting. The Board specifically asked if the applicant team would consider LEED Gold certifiability and if the city is looking for infrastructure for electric charging stations adjacent to the property.

The applicant team brought the proposed condition related to the location of the transformer to the attention of the Board. Staff clarified that they must review proposed conditions with the Board, not with applicants. Staff reviewed the condition language; the Board noted that they have no concerns with the condition as written. The applicant team reviewed the site plan as it relates to the open space and transformer, stating that they do not believe the transformer will impede access to the site. The Board expressed concerns regarding the transformer considering that ISD has previously stated that the location of the transformer is not compliant. Staff confirmed that they spoke with ISD, and the transformer location does meet the zoning requirements and therefore is compliant; an updated plan was provided following ISD's review. Staff noted that a proposed condition regarding the transformer stated that as the open spaces of the properties (this one and the adjacent MBTA property) are integrated, there will be continued discussions to ensure that the location of the transformer will not negatively impact that integration. If the location of the transformer needs to be shifted, that discussion can happen. The applicant team noted that the condition language seems unilateral, where it could state that coordination could occur, if necessary, as it is a mutual project; the Board understood the desire for the condition to read as coordination and noted that they will discuss the language further.

Following a motion by Acting Chair Aboff, seconded by Acting Clerk Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue the case to 18 May 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 51 Prospect Street (P&Z 21-181)

Staff reviewed the history of the project, noting that the project design has evolved and that this project is an important part of Somerville's electrification. Staff noted that ISD stated that there will be no Certificate of Occupancy for this project, but instead a final inspection, so any Staff recommended proposed conditions will need to be amended to refer to a final inspection where they currently refer to a Certificate of Occupancy.

The applicant team presented the context for the project, noting that Somerville's Prospect Street Substation will be at full capacity in the Summer of 2024 due to the increase in electrification and development across the city. They reviewed the proposed changes to the existing site, how the substation will be screened, the community engagement that occurred prior to this meeting, strategies to improve the site's appearance, and the project's timeline.

The Board noted that many of the improvements being proposed are not subject to Board review and are being done in good faith to address the community's concerns. Staff confirmed that the facility is considered a minor utility use and only the new transformer requires a Special Permit, with no additional process. Staff also confirmed that the other improvements to the property do not require discretionary review, only a building permit, and those improvements are being done as a result of community engagement. Staff stated that it is within the Board's purview to address the entire site mitigation as proposed, but the Special Permit only applies to the minor utility use.

Acting Chair Aboff opened public testimony.

City Councilor J.T. Scott stated that he has recused himself from this case, and he is only participating as a constituent.

Michael Katz (3 Emerson St) – noted that he is a Board Member of Union Square Main Streets. He stated that he had no issues with the project in general but believed that the final design of the public art should be approved by the UDC due to its crucial positioning in Union Square. He also suggested asking the City Engineer to confirm that there is no way to fully screen the old transformers from Webster Street.

State Representative Mike Connolly (26th Middlesex District) - stated that although he appreciated Eversource's efforts and the need for additional electrification, he considered this somewhat of a planning failure considering the Green Line Extension and the location of the substation. He noted how other Eversource substation projects were managed. He addressed City Councilor Ewen-Campen's letter on the subject and echoed his sentiments, especially the notion that this substation should never be an impediment to any future Green Line extensions. Representative Connolly voiced his concern about the appearance and the importance of engaging with the UDC. He stated that he hopes the trees and plantings will be native species, and that Eversource will work with the Somerville Arts Council on the public art. He also stated that he hoped alternative locations will be considered long-term, considering its prime location in Union Square.

Jim McGinnis (26 Bow Street) – stated that he understands the importance of expanding the electric capacity in the area. He noted that while Eversource continued to improve the design, he thinks they can still do better. Mr. McGinnis wanted the equipment screened from Prospect Street and Webster Street and asked that the gap in the screening be filled and an alternative screen be considered. He did state his support for the project as a whole.

City Councilor J.T. Scott (35 Prospect St) – reiterated that he has recused himself as a City Councilor and is present as a private citizen and abutter. Mr. Scott stated his concerns and reiterated Representative Connolly's concerns. He stated that there are other sites for this project and urged a required future relocation. He also noted the incomplete nature of the design and would like to see a more complete screening around the entire site.

Jennifer Civitella Hilario (9 Bolton St) - stated that there are two points of inequity; first that it is unfair for Somerville to carry the burden of the substation, and second that the location borders two affordable housing sites.

Meredith Porter (104 Josephine Ave) – stated his concerns regarding the environmental justice issues with the proximity to low-income housing. He also shared his concerns about the location, the screening, the public art, and the landscaping. He would like to see the UDC review this project. He also expressed concerns regarding the future Green Line extension and the possibility of this interfering with that. He noted that the lot merger was approved by the Director of PPZ and argued that there was no Site Plan Approval process, as required by the zoning ordinance.

The Board asked Staff to comment on the Site Plan Approval for the lot merger. Staff described how lot mergers/splits/line adjustments only require Minor Site Plan Approval; Staff reviewed the process. Staff confirmed that the lot merger followed the correct process.

Acting Chair Aboff closed public testimony.

The Board and applicant team discussed the benefits of the new transformer, including how the majority of the Somerville area is fed by Mystic Station in Medford, how the anticipated overload issues in the near future are specifically a Somerville challenge, and how until the Cambridge station comes online interim measure are needed. The applicant team noted that they have been working closely with the City of Somerville to address these needs. The applicant team further reviewed the issues they are currently seeing with electrification, how existing conduits

are being exhausted, and detailed plans for how loads will be addressed. The Board and applicant team discussed if there is an option that will eliminate the need for this transformer, how this particular load is directly next to the substation, how the load is being served, and why the additional transformer is necessary. The applicant team stated that they are working on how to address larger lines to carry more capacity, but those projects take many years. The team reviewed immediate and future actions that will be taken, but without a new transformer they will not be able to resolve the issue.

The Board and applicant team discussed construction and the potential noise mitigation that will be undertaken to protect the abutters and the T station, that one of the project goals is constant communication with the community and how they plan to accomplish that goal, if there is a contingency plan if any issues arise during construction, if the project does not occur in the next year than Eversource will need to have detailed discussions with the city on how to maintain full coverage for their customers, how the transformers are heavily sound treated and meet all state and local requirements, and if the additional transformer would increase the use of clean energy. They also discussed the design of the screening, the community process created to address the overall design, and how the team is willing to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Somerville Arts Council for this project. The Board and applicant team continued the discussion with the long-term plan for the location of the substation, the height and security of the fencing, and the final design and arts coordination. The applicant team stated that Eversource will continue to work with the community until the design is finalized, which can sometimes take up to a year.

Acting Chair Aboff left written public testimony open until noon on Friday, 12 May 2023.

The Board noted the request that plantings are native species, and that any brick materials be full dimensional brick and not veneers. The Board asked the applicant team to consider those requests, which will likely be proposed as conditions, if they are not already.

Following a motion by Acting Chair Aboff, seconded by Acting Clerk Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue the case to 18 May 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

Acting Chair Aboff recused herself from this item and left the meeting at 8:00pm. Acting Clerk Habib is now Acting Chair.

PUBLIC HEARING: 1 McGrath Highway (P&Z 21-028)

(continued from 20 April 2023)

Acting Chair Habib asked Staff to confirm that there is a quorum for this item; Staff confirmed. Acting Chair Habib stated that it is the long-standing policy of the Planning Board to wait to vote on a case until all covenant negotiations are finalized and the covenant has been signed by all parties.

The applicant team stated that there is a finalized covenant and that it is currently on the Mayor's desk awaiting signature. They then reviewed the questions that were asked by the Board previously and noted how the project would benefit the community.

The Board, applicant team, and Staff discussed the arts space and cinema programming, if the space could be restricted to a non-profit organization, and how careful the team plans to be in selecting a tenant and collaborator for the space, noting that this is planned to be an engaging, arts-centered hotel.

The Board asked for confirmation about the covenant status; Staff confirmed that it is on the Mayor's desk awaiting signature.

City Councilor J.T. Scott stated that restricting the ACE use to a non-profit could be addressed in the covenant, noting that he hadn't actually seen the covenant yet. He stated that procedurally, the last neighborhood meeting occurred in October 2021 and asked why another neighborhood meeting hadn't occurred since then. Staff stated that they were unable to answer why there was not another neighborhood meeting, as they inherited the project from another planner when they moved onto another position within the city; Staff confirmed that they can look further into it and report back. The applicant team reviewed the process of submitting their application, and why such a length of time has occurred since the last neighborhood meeting, including the challenges of the lot being in two different municipalities and the coordination that comes with such challenges. They stated that the project hasn't significantly changed since then; it has simply taken some additional time. City Councilor Scott responded that the process with the project has been a complicated one, and that he wanted to confirm that the project is compliant with the process, and that there is support for the project. The applicant team stated that they originally submitted the application in 2021 and it has taken a long time and a lot of coordination between city and state entities to get this far in the process.

The Board asked Staff to confirm, for the next meeting, that the project is compliant with the appropriate process.

State Representative Mike Connolly expressed his support for the ramp to the community path proposed for this project. He noted that this is an opportunity to offer a great community benefit in a dilapidated area of the city and he congratulated everyone involved, as it is not easy to add to the multi-modal infrastructure in the city.

Acting Chair Habib opened public testimony.

Jason Stockman (7 Cornelius Way) – echoed Rep. Connolly's comments on the community path and expressed excitement that the design element is included in the project's scope; noting the importance of connecting the Somerville Community path and the Grand Junction path. He asked for attention to the plantings along the path connection, particularly the tree canopy.

Lynn Weissman (112 Belmont St) – is the Co-President of the Friends of Community Path. She noted the history of the project and commended the developer for including the connector, as well as the arts space.

Jim McGinnis (26 Bow St) – stated that he is in support and noted he was having technical difficulties. He echoed others' comments, particularly that the bike path connection is critical. He commended the developer for being so forward-thinking.

Acting Chair Habib asked Mr. McGinnis to submit a written comment to ensure his comment is fully entered into the public record, due to his technical difficulties.

Acting Chair Habib closed public testimony and left written testimony open until noon on Friday, 12 May 2023.

Following a motion by Acting Chair Habib, seconded by Member McNeley, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue the case to 18 May 2023.

RESULT:	CONTINUED
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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.