



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

2 NOVEMBER 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>	
Jahan Habib	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Debbie Howitt Easton	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Raisa Saniat (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Andrew Graminski (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Dan Bartman (Zoning & Urban Design)

The meeting was called to order at 6:02pm and adjourned at 7:08pm. Chair Capuano opened the 28-44 Broadway and 32 Prospect Street hearings. He noted that Member Schuster will need to exit the meeting at 7:00pm. At that time, any additional business will need to be continued, due to lack of a quorum.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the minutes from 5 October 2023.

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

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 16 November 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 45 Mystic Avenue (P&Z 22-059)

(continued from 19 October 2023)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 16 November 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS:

- Recommendations to the City Council on the following:

The Board discussed the first three, administration-generated proposals.

The Board explained that two weeks ago the Board heard a healthy presentation by Staff on these three ordinances. There was some discussion by members of the Land Use Committee, as well as the Planning Board. The Board also received robust oral and written testimony provided by the public. Public testimony has since closed on these items.

The Board discussed the lot depth proposal with Staff. The Board asked if an affordability requirement could be structured in the future. Staff explained that an economic impact analysis would be needed, to see if affordability of the fourth unit would impact the rest of the construction. Potential affordable requirements beyond the three units bring permitted by-right while being compliant for MBTA Communities. If the backyard cottages are not carried forward in this proposal, only three units are permitted in any of these building types. The community seems to want to permit backyard cottages. From a planning perspective, this proposal will allow the City to move forward from a position of strength to allow for changes while still being compliant.

Chair Capuano stated that the SomerVision 2030 plan was a multi-year process with multiple rounds of public engagement. The SomerVision, 2040 plan was the same. The 2019 progress report that was part of the plan showed that Somerville had already built approximately 2,000 housing units, 20% of them permanently affordable, and more has been done since that time. There has been multiple rounds of civic engagement over eight years to get to a comprehensive zoning overhaul, which was passed three years ago that dramatically increased density around transit. He believes that Somerville should have pushed back on MBTA Communities from the start, as Somerville has been a regional leader in increased density and affordable projects. While he cannot vote no on these items, as they are legally sound and largely required, he does intend to propose some modifications. He noted that the 4-and-related rule was never designed to penalize blended or non-traditional families. It was designed to prevent student tenants. This proposal will reward a university which has done next to nothing to build more housing for its own students and relied on the City to do it for them. Boston zoning ordinance prohibits no more than 5 unrelated persons, whether they be undergraduates or graduate students, and he would suggest doing something similar. One amendment he may suggest is a residential parking permit limit of 2-3 residential stickers per existing dwelling units in all residential neighborhoods. He expressed disappointment regarding the third unit by-right item, as increasing units in residential neighborhoods is why a lot of people left the City in the past and the City is now being asked to bear the burden of a regional failure. He would like to continue to work to perfect these proposed amendments.

The Board also discussed the use of a Special Permit for an affordability mechanism for the NR District.

Vice Chair Aboff stated that the idea that this change merits a broader conversation about parking is a valid one.

- Mayor Ballantyne requesting ordainment of an amendment to the Somerville Zoning Ordinances, Sections 3.1 Neighborhood Residence and 3.2 Urban Residence, to permit the house and triple decker building types without any conditions, and to repeal the lot depth, dwelling units per lot, and development benefits requirements.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted (3-0-0-1), with Chair Capuano voting present, to recommend the adoption of this amendment.

RESULT:	RECOMMENDED
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- Mayor Ballantyne requesting ordainment of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance to repeal Section 10.9 Steep Slopes.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted (3-0-0-1), with Chair Capuano voting present, to recommend the adoption of this amendment.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

- Mayor Ballantyne requesting ordainment of an amendment to the Somerville Zoning Ordinances to replace the text of Section 9.1.11 Residential Use Categories and revise Table 9.1.1 Permitted Uses and the corresponding permitted use table of each zoning district, in accordance with changes to Table 9.1.1, to replace the two residential use categories.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted (3-0-0-1), with Chair Capuano voting present, to recommend the adoption of this amendment.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

- Mai Lau, 635 Somerville Avenue LLC, requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 627 Somerville Avenue from Neighborhood Residence (NR) to Mid-Rise 3 (MR3).

The Board discussed this proposed amendment. The Board asked about the setback requirements from the private way behind the property. Staff stated that the Zoning Ordinance is agnostic to the street type with regard to dimensional standards.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0), to recommend the adoption of this amendment.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

- John Fragione and Agostino Feola, Trustees of Frala Realty Trust, requesting the adoption of an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance Map to change the zoning district of 295-297 Medford Street and 93 Walnut Street from Mid-Rise 3 (MR3) to Mid-Rise 5 (MR5).

The applicant team stated that allowing this amendment will add more units by the Gilman Square Station, which will further compliance with the MBTA Communities zoning requirements. Also, approving this does not approve the project; that will require an additional application process. This is a good proposal to utilize a vacant lot, but there are no formal plans proposed at this time.

The Board asked why MR5 instead of MR4 is being considered. The applicant team explained that the property is on a steep hill, making construction quite expensive. The applicant feels that a five-story building is needed to make this project financially feasible.

The Board noted that the height issue should potentially be before the ZBA for a proposed variance, instead of a map change to support increased density. The applicant team stated that a variance would be more difficult to propose and defend on an appeal basis. This site has two streets, a bike path/railroad tracks, and an 11-story tower building surrounding it on three sides, so that five stories does not seem inappropriate.

Vice Chair Aboff stated that it is difficult to make a change to a specific parcel outside of the bounds of a community planning process for a proposal that is strictly about the project's economics, and which did not appear to have a great deal of support from the immediate community. Chair Capuano agreed that he does not believe the Burton Faulkner 11-story tower is a persuasive argument, as a building this tall would not have been approved at this time. There was a previous public engagement process that discussed not overpowering residential homes in this area, with an agreement that most of Medford Street should have a cap on three story buildings. There has also been a City-wide policy regarding not going above MR3, where it directly abuts residential neighborhoods, which this one does. He is disinclined to support this but would like to consider alternatives moving forward. Member Schuster stated that this would lead to an increase in residential density, which could be a benefit. The Board discussed making a neutral vote to the Land Use Committee.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (4-0), to make no recommendation on this amendment to the Land Use Committee, with the comments made by the Board.

RESULT:

NO RECOMMENDATION

Member Schuster exited the meeting at 7:01pm. The Board noted that there was no longer a quorum and that all other agenda items would be continued to the 16 November 2023 meeting.

PUBLIC HEARING: 32 Prospect Street (P&Z 23-064)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (3-0) to continue this application to 16 November 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 28-44 Broadway (P&Z 23-061)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (3-0) to continue this application to 16 November 2023.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

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.