



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

**16 NOVEMBER 2023 MEETING MINUTES**

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Absent</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Member	<i>Present</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); Stephen Cary (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:04pm and adjourned at 8:01pm.

**GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes**

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the minutes from 19 October 2023.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the minutes from 2 November 2023, as amended.

**PUBLIC HEARING: 45 Mystic Avenue (P&Z 22-059)**  
*(continued from 2 November 2023)*

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 7 December 2023.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

**PUBLIC HEARING: 28-44 Broadway (P&Z 23-061)**  
*(continued from 2 November 2023)*

The applicant team explained that this project was before the Board in June 2022. The exterior of the building from what was previously proposed has not changed much. There were minor changes made to the interior of the building on the plans, such as an increase from 81 to 84 units. Also, regarding the transformer room, the layout has changed slightly and requires approval. The proposed Bluebike station location has been reconfigured to reflect City guidance. The exterior material palette has been changed to remove the rust-colored panels, to bring the previously filed plans more in line with Board comments.

The applicant team requested that the MBTA subsidy and passes be brought in line with the recommendations from the previous submission for one month per unit. They emphasized that the current financial burden is significant and difficult to support and proposed reducing the subsidy back to the original recommendation.

Vice Chair Aboff opened public testimony. Seeing none, Vice Chair Aboff closed public testimony. Written public testimony was left open until noon on 1 December 2023.

In response to a question from the Board, the applicant team explained that this item was previously approved on 16 June 2022. There has been no on-the-ground movement on this project since that time. The subsidy issue was a financial hardship that was not discussed thoroughly at previous Board meetings. The project was ready for construction but due to market changes and increased interest rates, financing became a challenge. The Board agreed to address this further at the next meeting on this application.

The Board expressed concerns about the timeline for development and asked for thoughts on what it might look like if approval was granted. The applicant team stated that they are eager to start development as soon as possible.

There was discussion regarding the potential increase in traffic from the new plan and the bay doors. The applicant team clarified that the doors are only needed for replacement of the switch gear and therefore there should not be a significant amount of regular servicing.

There was discussion regarding the mix of units proposed and the impact on affordable units. The applicant team noted that additional information on this item would be made available for the next meeting.

The Board expressed confusion over the clarity of the Staff Memo used in the decision-making process, highlighting an omission of Mobility's recommendation to strengthen the transportation demand and a management measure by requiring the applicant to subsidize transit passes for a longer period. The applicant team clarified that the recommendation had been revised, with the new suggestion being to either have no one-year passes or passes only for the affordable units. The applicant team emphasized the importance of moving this project forward to provide much-needed housing for the community. The Board urged for further consideration of measures that align with the spirit of the original recommendation, noting that the modification to the design does not negate the importance of addressing traffic and circulation concerns. The applicant team noted that the City's transit benefit program provides free MBTA passes to some residents and suggested that tenants could utilize this instead of additional passes from the project. Both the Board and applicant team expressed concern over what was perceived to be a backing away from a previous commitment, specifically the reduction in parking spots, and its impact on the project's financing.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 7 December 2023.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

**PUBLIC HEARING: 32 Prospect Street (P&Z 23-064)**  
*(continued from 2 November 2023)*

The applicant team presented the Life Alive business and expressed interest in joining the Union Square neighborhood. They shared the history of the business, which started in 2004 and recently opened its ninth and tenth locations. They highlighted a commitment to plant-forward food, made from scratch in-house, with an emphasis on community building. They also discussed the challenges they faced with the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, which now classify them as a "formula business," requiring additional approval to join the Union

Square project. The applicant team expressed enthusiasm to become a neighborhood hub, providing a space for the community to gather, work, and socialize. The team highlighted its menu, mentioned its compostable materials, and noted that the café is open all day. The design of each restaurant is unique and tailored to the community it serves. The proposed café in Union Square will be integrated with the surrounding environment with a goal to be a hub for the community. The interior design will include the use of natural materials and a space for community engagement. Upon approval, the intention would be to open in the Spring 2024.

Staff stated that it supports the proposed application.

Vice Chair Aboff opened public testimony.

Greg Karczewski (31 Union Square) – expressed support for this proposal. He stated that he believes this company will be a great addition to the Union Square community.

Jessica Eshleman (366 Somerville Avenue) – stated that, on behalf of the Board of Directors of Union Square Main Streets, the intent of the formula business zoning clause in Somerville's Zoning Ordinance is clearly to limit and not encourage the growth of formula businesses. Special Permits should always be special. There is a long history of community opposition to formula businesses in Union Square, resulting in the zoning restriction in the current ordinances. Formula businesses are seen as antithetical to Union Square's distinctive vibe. Small, frequently immigrant-owned businesses have long characterized the Square and have been a major contributor to its special community feeling. Any attempt to introduce new formula businesses into this special area should be carefully scrutinized. While the focus of Union Square Main Streets is to advocate for small, often immigrant-owned businesses, and to support the unique character of the square, there may be occasions when larger and more established businesses, whose values are in line with the character of the neighborhood, can contribute effectively to the overall success of the Square. Life Alive may present an acceptable alternative with some attractive upsides. Life Alive offers a product that will probably be extremely attractive to the new demographic that is increasingly characterized in the Square. While it is clearly a formula business by the City's definition, it is probably far from the formula that was envisaged by the zoning when it was written. Small businesses are the life blood of Union Square. A formula business is by definition mapping a successful formula learned elsewhere onto new locations. Conversations with the Life Alive team gives confidence that they are committed to the vision of what a small business looks like. The applicant will be treating this business like an independent business as much as possible, one that is tailored to and focused on the unique neighborhood of businesses and people. There is currently considerable retail vacancy in the Square, and financial uncertainty could increase this trend. At the same time, Union Square Main Streets cannot emphasize too strongly that this tentative approval in no way indicates general support for formula businesses in Union Square.

Vice Chair Aboff closed public testimony. Written public testimony was left open until noon on 1 December 2023.

The Board discussed the process that applications must go through for approval, including keeping this hearing open for an additional two weeks at this time. Staff noted that this is a current practice of the Board, to allow for as much public engagement as possible.

The Board expressed overall support for the application.

In response to a question from the Board regarding the business' recruitment process, the applicant team stated that there will likely be job fairs on site, with engagement to local career centers. Recruitment from within the neighborhood is prioritized.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 7 December 2023.

**RESULT:**

**CONTINUED**

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

*(continued from 2 November 2023)*

The applicant team explained that the ZBA has ruled that the variance has been exercised and is in full effect. The applicant team discussed the loading and striping plan for the project and sought feedback on the revised plan. The team presented details of the plan, including the placement of the loading area and parking spaces. The group also discussed the broader redesign of Broadway. The team decided to wait for more feedback before making any further developments. The team discussed Mobility's requests for adjusting the 35' traveling area and eliminating a 5' buffer. The team agreed to reach out to Mobility for further clarification on the alignment with the proposed marking plan and restructuring of Broadway.

The Board agreed to continue this discussion to the next meeting. Public testimony was not opened at this time.

Following a motion by Vice Chair Aboff, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this application to 7 December 2023.

<b>RESULT:</b>
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<b>CONTINUED</b>
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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.*