



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

1 FEBRUARY 2024 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	<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); Sarah Lewis (Director of Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Andrew Graminski (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:01pm and adjourned at 7:00pm.

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

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this application to 15 February 2024.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 45 Mystic Avenue (P&Z 22-029)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this application to 16 May 2024.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Davis Square Area Plan Staff Update

Staff explained that there was a public meeting on 29 January 2024 and there were many conversations regarding Phase One of the proposal, Elmway. The concept was well received, though it is complicated. There was also discussion regarding small businesses, development, and parking in the district.

The Board discussed the importance of making Davis Square usable for all forms of mobility. Regarding Elmway, there was a suggestion to make the area a part-time pedestrian thoroughfare. Staff explained that this may make it more difficult for those who do drive, pushing them into neighborhood streets. This is why phasing may allow for the piloting of closing certain lanes.

There was further discussion regarding the impact on small businesses in the area, with concerns raised about businesses forced to close due to anticipated development and how to compensate these businesses. Staff agreed on the need to address this issue, mentioning that it was a topic discussed at a previous meeting with representatives from the Economic Development Department. It was also noted that the Anti-Displacement Task Force is considering ways to preserve local businesses.

The Board expressed concerns regarding the adoption of the new Somerville Zoning Ordinance in 2019 and its potential impact on Davis Square development. The importance of understanding the type of development that might be feasible in Davis Square and the need for guidelines for public spaces was broached.

The Board highlighted the opportunity to plan for infrastructure, including power and stormwater infrastructure, and to promote renewable or sustainable infrastructure. There was discussion regarding the importance of maintaining diversity in office, lab, and retail spaces, and improving the pedestrian experience in Davis Square.

Staff explained that the comment period for this item will be kept open until the end of February.

OTHER BUSINESS: ACE/FAB Staff Update

Staff explained that the proposed changes are based on a recommendation from the Art Space Assessment conducted by the MAPC in partnership with the Arts Council. The proposed amendments to the ACE categories are meant to refine and redefine the use categories to better clarify the ACE uses that are proposed to be preserved in the city and continue to be expanded through zoning. The main proposed changes include separating out the art shared workspace and art education use categories. The co-working use has been pulled out of ACE and moved to the office use category. Text from the design services, specific to software development, has been moved to the general office use category. Another change includes repealing the current work live studio and creating an artist's housing residential land use, allowing for work live studios to be allowed by Special Permit within the Mid Rise districts.

The Board expressed concern that some areas currently marked as FAB may be reoriented to a Tough-Tech district. Staff explained that the potential proposed ACE/FAB changes related to certain tough tech uses would most likely put these existing businesses into a nonconforming status, meaning they would not be allowed to further expand. Staff needs to understand the potential consequences of these changes and address them before making any decisions. Other existing fabrication districts in the city also need to be protected.

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.