

Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels

Civic Advisory Committee

Date & Time: Thursday, April 25th, 2024, from 5:30-7pm

This public meeting of the Gilman Square City Redevelopment Parcels Civic Advisory Committee was conducted via remote participation. We will post an audio recording, audio-video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of these proceedings as soon as possible after the meeting on the project website: <https://voice.somervillema.gov/gilman-square-plan-implementation>.

The meeting was held as a Zoom Webinar.

Meeting recording: <https://youtu.be/XSLHVG64tZA>

Meeting notes

1. Roll call and approval of previous meeting summaries.

Ben Demers, an Economic Development Planner for the City of Somerville, welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Roll call:

- In attendance: Diana Marsh, Melinda Coneys, Ram Kelath, Jamie Cragnoline, Jennifer Koerber, Michelle Machado Moreira, Ben Elgart, Councilor Jesse Clingan, Rachel Nadkarni (staff), Ben Demers (staff)
- Not in attendance: Jack Lister, Casey Babbitt, Lisa Natale, Brittany Vetter, Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen

CAC members did not have any edits on the meeting summary for the previous meeting on March 28, 2024. CAC members voted to approve the meeting summary so staff could post it online.

2. First public comment period.

No public comment was made.

3. Update on temporary programming in Gilman Square on City-owned land.

The City of Somerville owns two parcels of land in Gilman Square: one at 350 Medford Street (colloquially known as the Homans lot), and one at the triangular green space at the intersection of Pearl

and Medford Streets. The Economic Development Division received ARPA funding to bring temporary activation to these spaces in Summer 2024, and hired a Somerville-based design and placemaking firm, CultureHouse, to manage this work. The CAC was joined by Rishika Dhawan, Community Manager at CultureHouse, to give an update on the firm's engagement and design work on the project and to solicit feedback on existing ideas. Following the presentation, R. Dhawan and staff fielded questions from CAC members.

A CAC member asked the timeline for the pop-up. Staff answered that they are aiming to finish the design in the coming weeks and then finish installation by early June. The space would then be open from mid-June to mid-September, since ARPA funding must be spent by the end of September. The CAC member asked if the teacher parking at 350 Medford Street could be used during the summer when school is not in session. Staff noted that the parking area on the site is also used by staff, but they can consider making it available for programming that needs a large amount of space.

A CAC member noted that they would like to see a lot of versatility in programming on the site, including seeing how services from City Hall could potentially come to the space. They want to make sure that building community goes beyond entertainment, so want to ensure a layout allows for this flexibility. Staff should consider how this space may be more conducive to the delivery of services than City Hall, which can sometimes be intimidating. They also asked that there be continued discussion of programming while the programming is occurring.

A CAC member asked CultureHouse and staff to make it clearer in presentations how the layouts address the question of how the site could be used longer term, to inform the future Request for Proposals for long-term development at the site.

A CAC member asked why the area labeled snow storage can't be used when there is not snow. Staff confirmed that it is available for general DPW storage needs beyond snow. Their access to the back area though is through the teacher parking, so they would not need to pass through the temporary activation.

A CAC member noted that R. Dhawan had mentioned a generator and was concerned because generators are often smelly and noisy. Staff affirmed that this is not their ideal scenario, but there is no electrical hookup on the site. R. Dhawan noted that CultureHouse is aiming to only use the generator for events where electricity is needed, which will not be all events.

A CAC member asked about evening lighting and what general hours the space would be open. Staff noted that the space will likely be open much of the time as a public space even when no staff are present. Staffing hours are currently planned for 1-8pm from Wednesday through Sunday, though these are still being finalized. CultureHouse is looking to use solar options for lighting to avoid use of the generator. A CAC member suggested shifting the hours periodically to collect data on how active the site is at different times of the day and night.

A CAC member noted that, in addition to lunch/dinner, a coffee truck would be very welcome at the site. This would encourage people to come to the space and gather, and is feedback that many local residents and employees have given.

A CAC member asked if staffing is a mix of CultureHouse and City staff. Staff confirmed that program management will be done by CultureHouse, but maintenance support will be provided by the Department of Public Works.

A CAC member asked what type of ground cover would be used. He would like to see grass, but worries where food trucks would go. Staff noted that food trucks will likely be located on the western portion of the site, because of the curb cut location into the teacher parking area. This removes the risk of driving over the ground cover. Staff noted however that grass and 6-12 inches of dirt are expensive, and they need to weigh this against other site priorities. The surface material selected needs to work from an accessibility perspective, be quick to install, and be easy to maintain. Grass likely requires too much maintenance for DPW to make it feasible for this timeline. Staff are aware however that many people do not want to see artificial turf on the site, so they are still trying to figure out an alternative covering. The CAC member asked for an official response to be given on the installation of grass and why this is not feasible. Another CAC member noted that they would rather see dead grass here than anything synthetic.

A CAC member also noted that scrim would be helpful along the fencing.

A CAC member asked if there will be shade structures. Staff confirmed that there will be structures, since otherwise it will be very warm in the space.

A CAC member asked when CultureHouse was going to start canvassing in the area. R. Dhawan noted that they will start soon but have been waiting for translated outreach materials, which are almost finished. A lot of outreach has also started over email and made an announcement on Instagram and their website, and have received a lot of responses. R. Dhawan will also be attending Open Studios on May 4th.

A member of the public, Matt Carlino, made comment that the current site would fail ADA compliance because it is lumpy, so a more complicated ground covering will likely be needed. The City could consider grass in some areas and then a stone path to allow people with disabilities to accessibly traverse the path. Sod should also be able to work since it rains a lot in this area in May and June. They would like to think about a site that stays useable for several years, in the case that development is still delayed. Staff stressed that they need to ultimately choose an option that can be installed in time to make the site usable and then be maintained by the City's Department of Public Works. Volunteer labor can not be used for maintenance, as is sometimes recommended.

Staff noted that if CAC members know anyone who may like to program the space or would like to program the space themselves, they can reach out to CultureHouse.

R. Dhawan left the meeting.

4. Check-in re: discussion of urban renewal in Gilman Square.

At the March 2024 CAC meeting, CAC members expressed that they would like to use the May 2024 meeting to come to a recommendation regarding the potential use of urban renewal in Gilman Square. In preparation for this meeting, staff asked if CAC members had any new questions about the logistics of urban renewal in Somerville, so that staff could be prepared to answer these questions in May.

A CAC member asked for an explanation at the May meeting of how the timing of development would work if they recommended urban renewal for the Mobil station, if the goal is to develop the Mobil station in conjunction with 350 Medford Street. They would want to make sure an RFP for development covers both lots.

Staff also noted that there are no quorum requirements for the CAC to vote, which staff were mistaken about at the March meeting. Staff will still aim, however, to have a critical mass of CAC members present for official recommendations, to ensure enough voices are weighing in on the process.

Staff also noted that they will reach out to CAC members to schedule a new date for the May meeting, due to a scheduling conflict on the fourth Thursday.

5. Neighborhood updates from CAC members.

No updates were shared.

6. Second public comment period.

No public comment was made.

7. Meeting adjournment.

The meeting adjourned at 6:45pm.