



December 2024 Meeting Minutes

Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Mayor Katjana Ballantyne

Meeting Information

Thursday, December 19, 2024, 6:30-8:00 PM

This meeting will be hybrid:

- **In-person meeting location:** Somerville Public Library, Central Library, 79 Highland Ave.
- **Zoom info to join remotely via computers, tablets, and smartphones:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89181225932?pwd=aWpoL2FtaUh3aGdVbHNRWUJmeDRNQQT09>

Passcode: 152274

Or join by phone:

Dial (for higher quality, dial a number based on your current location):

US: +1 646 558 8656

Webinar ID: 891 8122 5932

Passcode: 152274

International numbers available: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/kcVy69ROJG>

Members

* = present

1. * Ted Alexander
2. Ginny Alverson
3. Caroline Bodager
4. * Meredith Brown
5. Laura Evans
6. * Christopher Ferry
7. Tim Gilman
8. * Preston Gutelius
9. Satoko Hirai (Digital Communications Officer)
10. * Brenda Marvin (Secretary)

11. Steven Mulder
12. * Barbara Myers
13. Bianca Norkunas
14. * Vitor Pamplona (Vice Chair)
15. * Zach Rosenberg
16. * Alessandra Seiter (Chair)
17. * Robert Stanzel
18. Carole Voulgaris
19. Will Mbah (Ex Officio, City Council - At Large)
20. Katherine White (Ex Officio, OSPCD Mobility)
21. Justin Schreiber (Ex Officio, OSPCD Mobility)

Guests

1. Karen Molloy, *Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets*
2. Lily Worth, *Transportation Planner, OSPCD Mobility*
3. Jason Leach, *Somerville resident (Ward 1)*
4. Adele Watkins, *Somerville resident (Ward 1)*
5. Lori Segall, *Somerville resident, Ward 5)*
6. Mike Connolly, *State Representative*
7. Philip & Christine Hood, *Somerville residents (Ward 2)*
8. Julie Engel, *Somerville resident*
9. Logan B, *Somerville resident*

Acting Secretary

Meredith Brown

Call to Order

6:32pm

Agenda

Procedural Business (10 Minutes)

- Roll call and guest introductions
- Brief note on committee reappointment process
- Vote on November draft minutes - **approved** by unanimous vote

Subcommittee Updates (15 Minutes)

- Community Events
 - Tabling at Somerville Winter Farmers Market (Alessandra, Preston, Ted): great engagement, lots of new newsletter signups
 - 2025 calendar of events TBD
- Design Review (n/a)
- Special Projects (n/a)

Report-Back on 10/28 Meeting with McGrath Boulevard Project Team (40 Minutes)

- Co-presentation by Alessandra & Karen M (verbal - cannot share pictures)
- Overview from agenda:
 - On October 28, a group of advocates representing the McGrath Coalition met with MassDOT's McGrath Boulevard project team as well as Mobility staff and elected officials. The project team presented the latest draft of the plans, which have been progressing toward 25% design since the last public meeting in February 2024.
 - At this PTAC meeting, some of the advocates present at the October 28 meeting will summarize the plan's direction as presented by the project team, as well as the feedback offered by advocates and locations of particular consideration.
- Background:
 - 2/13/24: Last public meeting, presentation of concept design
 - Spring/Summer 2024: Community advocacy organized by SASS
 - 5/14/24 - McGrath Coalition letter (19 orgs, 25 individuals) requesting meeting with MassDOT leadership
 - 6/21/24 - PTAC letter aligned with McGrath Coalition
- 10/28/24 - Meeting with MassDOT McGrath project team on in-progress designs, attended by:
 - ~7 MassDOT staff
 - Brad & Justin from Mobility
 - Elected officials (Pat J, Mike C)
 - Local advocates (Karen M, Mark Chase, Aili Contini-Field, Karl Alexander, Alessandra S)
- In the 10/28 meeting with MassDOT, PTAC advocated for:
 - Road width: Max 3 travel lanes with ped refuges, or 4 if 2 were bus lanes
 - Median: Replace with ped request, reallocate space to edges
 - Crossings: Ped refuges
 - Sidewalks: Wide (>12ft), well lit, amenities
 - Otis St Ped Overpass: Ideally crossing would be safe at grade but if not, keep overpass; supported by parents of students in east somerville
 - Bus infra: More bus service & center lanes
 - Green spaces: Plenty on edges
 - Housing & other development: Using excess land from narrowed width for housing
 - Bike infra: Supportive, want clear markings & accessibility features
- McGrath coalition advocated for (very similarly):
 - Road width: No internal agreement about specifics but narrow & shift lanes to one side of ROW
 - Median: Remove if possible, narrow, reallocate to edges
 - Crossings: Traffic calming, eliminate highway-like designs
 - Sidewalks: Maximize human scale uses
 - Otis St Ped Overpass: Only eliminate once road narrowed & safe crossings in place
 - Bus infra: No specific prescriptive elements but in general stronger bus priority elements
 - Green spaces: Plenty on edges
 - Housing & other development: Reclaim land wherever possible for housing
 - Bike infra: Ensure continuous travel & safe crossings, connect to other paths, priority on pedestrians
- Major updates
 - Road width reduced from 6 to 5 lanes (likely narrowest we will get)
 - Partly to maintain right turn lanes to allow for protected ped signal phases

- Current design does not include bus lanes (no bus service currently planned) but center lanes could in the future be converted to bus lanes without significant investment
 - Median is retained at least in part to prevent unauthorized left turns (8 ft at narrowest and 20 ft at intersections)
 - City goal to keep median as narrow as possible to maximize edge trees
 - The longer the median, the longer the crossing time for pedestrians
 - Sidewalks 8-10 ft not including space for planting/amenities (not as wide as advocate for but within best practice guidelines)
 - Target speed limit & design speed (usually higher) not yet set
 - advocacy goal 25 mph
 - Slip lane removed from Somerville Ave onto Medford St
 - Opens up more land around future Milk Square
 - Poplar St (Brickbottom) will be Neighborway (low speed, high ped comfort) with reduced lanes where it intersects McGrath
- Reaction
 - Overall relatively pleased - the MassDOT team seemed to get the idea around advocacy efforts
 - Areas of remaining concern
 - Otis St
 - Closest northward intersection is Broadway, which per plans will have minimal traffic calming interventions
 - Advocacy opportunities:
 - Raised crossing is against MassDOT policy but not without precedent (Kensington Connector by I-93) - possible advocacy opportunity
 - Goal for RYG signal at Otis, rather than HAWK signal, with a ped phase to regularly stop traffic
 - Will have to work with contractors to determine feasibility of maintaining footbridge during construction
 - Cross St
 - Currently unsignalized but pedestrians would need to cross two lanes of traffic in two phases, not ideal
 - Medford St
 - Cyclists expected to turn left onto northbound McGrath in two phases
 - Likely behavior may endanger cyclists
 - Frontage roads (Dana St to the north, area btw Washington & Somerville to the south)
 - Neighborway like streets? Need to ensure traffic calming when cars enter (humps and other gateway treatments)
- Next steps / timeline
 - Mid-winter 2024/2025 - Project team will hold another public meeting (time TBD) as designs near 25%
 - PTAC: should plan for writing another advocacy letter shortly after
 - Summer 2025: Design Public Hearing with 25% designs
 - Last call for major design changes - difficult to do after 25%
 - 2027-28: Goal for start of construction
 - 2031-32: Goal for completion of construction
- Discussion & Q/A

- Ted A: On the frontage roads, why retain them at all vs convert them to green space or housing etc?
 - Alessandra: Residential housing directly abutting - concern about residents pulling directly into McGrath
 - However this concern presupposes that McGrath will still be highway-like as opposed to 25 mph calmer street
 - Lily: The northern frontage road may be under city jurisdiction and if so, city would target this road for calming measures
- Vitor P: Is the retention of median incompatible with center bus lane?
 - Lily: Justin has worked on this quite a lot, a way to recommend designs to the state that *would not preclude* possibility of bus lane and bus platform at strategic spots along corridor; state won't implement now without planned bus service but city's strong recommendation is to proactively design to allow for future bus service
- Preston G: Can we clarify on the number of lanes, is it 5 *max*, or basically the whole length of the highway?
 - Alessandra: Most of the corridor would have 3 lanes southbound & 2 northbound, but some areas that might have fewer lanes like Poplar St
- Rep Mike C: Had similar questions
 - to the last question - he thinks significant stretches will have 4 lanes
 - on the questions to the slip lanes (e.g. Dana St) he elaborates on the concern about driveways, that we'd lose continuity of protected bike lanes and sidewalks - lots of interruption to the continuity. Great to see road diet of 6 to 5 lanes
- Philip H: Number of light cycles to cross McGrath - currently 2 at Washington, 2-3 at Somerville Ave (neither acceptable). Plans available to public involve more light cycles (more like 3). Is this a factor in planning?
 - Alessandra: we also want to see this minimized but don't think we have details on this at this point
 - Did not come up much in discussion
 - Lily will take this back to mobility colleagues to make sure it's part of the discussion
 - we'll also continue to advocate for this
- Alessandra: concern about funding and certainty of execution of these plans given change of administration
- Christine H: Observation as pedestrian is that traffic calming encourages road rage and nobody respects the lanes, lights, etc; this applies to all modalities (car, ped, 2 wheeled vehicles). Concern that this will be open season for road rage. What will be done to ensure that this will work
 - Alessandra: this plan is in line with the city's framework of vision zero, if we try to change individual people's behavior we will just keep chasing individual behaviors forever, but if we structurally change our streets we have more hope of decreasing fatal impacts of human error, there will always be bad actors but we can design our streets to reduce harm
 - Lily: from the city side, we have a limited number of levers to pull, the status quo is quite bad, making things slower is better for both non-drivers and drivers; neighborhood interventions have been successful and trying to apply that to the highway as well
 - Philip expresses disagreement, with almost all of this
 - Lily appreciates perspective and feedback and notes that city collects data that informs approach and is used to evaluate impact

- Christine: question about enforcement
 - Lily: enforcement is not mobility's remit
- Brenda M: Comment that it may take a little time for drivers and cyclists / two wheeled operators to adapt to the redesign
- Julie E: drives on McGrath frequently, it takes 3-25 min to get through McGrath currently; during the 4 years of construction and then afterward, what will be done to mitigate impacts of traffic (e.g. air pollution)
 - Alessandra: one thought slash huge hope is that right now McGrath is really *only* built for cars, and after construction will be much easier for other modes to use and shift away from having to use cars (not forcing people out of cars, but making it more attractive to use other options); the other more counterintuitive observation from other data and other similar projects is that traffic naturally diverts itself; there's also lots of data to show that adding lanes to highways actually makes traffic worse (there could be a lag in this happening while people adapt)
 - Karen M: she doesn't have the data on hand but MassDOT noted that traffic on McGrath has decreased over the years
- Logan B: as a transportation professional, it's complicated but part of the data is that intersections are disproportionately impactful to traffic, and improvements at intersections offset the loss of lanes in terms of traffic; losing lanes sounds a lot scarier than it tends to really be in practice

Reflection on PTAC's Work in 2024 & Planning for 2025 (20 Minutes)

- From agenda:
 - We will have a brief presentation summarizing PTAC's work over the past year and identify strategic priorities for 2025.
- Accomplishments:
 - 8 new members (2 new officers, 1 new subcommittee lead)
 - Restructuring of subcommittees
 - 5 letters (consistent rate since 2022): continued funding for Transit Benefits, West Broadway concept design, McGrath concept design, Elm St Parking Pilot, Safe Streets ordinance
 - Reviewed and provided feedback on 6 projects: McGrath, Davis Sq Commercial Area Plan, West Broadway, Elm, Tufts, Western Pearl
 - 5 teams of invited speakers outside Mobility ex officio members: Somerville Eng on 5 year repaving process, Students from Harvard GSD, Adam Polinski on traffic signals, SPD (Mike McCarey) on Municipal Road Safety Grant & traffic safety, DPW (Eric Weisman) on snow clearing for peds/transit
 - 129 subscribers to newsletter (now almost 150 after event)
 - Official co-organizer of Streetwise event with SBAC & SASS
 - 8 events (5 tablings, 2 walks, 1 new member social)
- Progress against 2024 goals
 - Onboarding new committee members & restructuring subcommittees: Done
 - School mobility: Not pursued
 - Engaged on enforcement: met with SPD, identified schedule for feedback on MRS grants
 - Monitoring parking & curb use study: No updates from city but hopeful to engage in new year (parking minimum removal could be anchor to that discussion)
 - Monitor bus network redesign: ongoing

- Monitor snow clearing pilot: met with DPW
- Monitor no turn on red installation: did not pursue
- Engage on Safe Streets Ordinance: wrote letter, & it passed in June 2024
- Low priority goals not pursued (engage on GLXX, rubric for projects/plans, engage on trash/recycling sidewalk clearing)
- 2025 goals
 - Meredith +1 for school mobility - maybe opportunities to specifically engage with parents e.g. tag along on group bus rides
 - Alessandra: Bike path traffic calming on the community path?
 - Preston +1 for parking and curb use
 - Preston +1 for monitoring no turn on red
 - Vitor: Bus shelter / improvement advocacy or data collection
 - Lily to look into whether there's data (whether direct or inferred) on this
 - Ted: could we do a retrospective about past projects and collect data or feedback on them, and roll feedback (whether positive or negative) into communications with city
 - Alessandra: Wondering if there's a way to more systematically incorporate that work into our PTAC meeting cadence - like automatically add a note to google calendar to follow up on project 1 year out
 - Lily supports feasibility and value of this
 - Alessandra: shortly after green line opened, PTAC had a meeting about the status of the stations; Magoun Square continues to come up a lot in terms of needing crosswalk
 - Lily: a lot of constituent feedback on that crosswalk, engineering looking into feasibility (it's complicated)
 - Vitor: +1 for continued enforcement conversations; not sure how to take this to next level, difficult but necessary conversations; monitor status of conversations / legislation around automated enforcement
 - Vitor: advocate for mini bus pilots
 - Previous mobility employee was once tasked with exploring feasibility of e.g. north south connector
 - Christopher: proposal for gondola service
 - Preston: hears lots of laments about the 85 bus: definitely demand from residents for buses that connect through central/spring hill
- Final call for asynchronous communications about hopes and dreams for 2025

Other Business (5 Minutes)

- Public comment (n/a)

Final Items

Action Items from Meeting

1. Alessandra to work on annual report, bring to committee in Jan/Feb for review

Meeting Ended

7:55pm