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**DRAFT**

## Open Space & Recreation Plan: 2024-2031



City of Somerville  
Mayor Katjana Ballantyne

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## Section 1: Plan Summary

While the specific open space needs of Somerville residents may shift and change over time, one thing remains constant: high-quality open space is vital to resident happiness and urban vibrancy. Somerville was developed without a large open space network and grew to be the most densely populated city in New England. City planners have been striving to address this deficit for decades. While trying to create additional new acres in innovative ways, old parks are renovated every year because every square foot counts.

The desire for more open space is consistent, but many things have changed. Development pressure has steadily risen. Property rates and income levels have increased. Stressors from climate change demand relief from heat and flooding. Somerville adopted a new zoning ordinance in 2019 which requires developers to build public open spaces. Millions have been spent on renovating parks, schoolyards, and athletic fields across the city. Thousands of new trees have been planted in Somerville streets and parks.

This 2024-2031 OSRP directs City staff to continue looking for and constructing open spaces, but it notes a new focus on enhancing what we have through small and large upgrades. It emphasizes the need for “performance landscapes” to address community needs. These landscapes capture and infiltrate stormwater and create native habitat. Residents tell us they want relief from the heat, and parks provide shade and cooling water features. Our engagement feedback reveals a need for community connection (particularly evident during the era of COVID lockdown) and our parks offer flexible third spaces to gather. They also foster health with new and upgraded sports fields and outdoor exercise equipment. With limited space, the parks and programs that we have need to serve varied groups through layered uses.

Over 750 residents participated in engagement efforts related to this OSRP update and patterns in their feedback pointed to priorities related to passive recreation, access to the water, the need for gathering spaces, accessibility improvements, and ecological enhancements. At the same time, we must be aware that in a city of 81,000 residents, not all are at the table. Our park system is used by diverse populations, but this diversity is not reflected at public meetings where decisions are made about parks. The plan acknowledges this gap and directs staff to develop strategies that reach a broader audience in future park planning efforts to assure that all groups in Somerville have a say in the future of their city. There is a strong connection between parks, trees, and human health, and all our residents deserve to benefit.

Inside this document, you’ll find an overview of Somerville’s history, physical development, and environment (see Sections 3 and 4). It describes recent community engagement data and patterns in open-space needs (see Sections 2, 6, and 10). It condenses those patterns into a set of overarching goals and more detailed action items to guide the City’s work over the next seven years (see Sections 8 and 9). It is both a physical plan for Somerville’s open spaces and provides guidance for the public and private groups stewarding those spaces. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the plan acts as an information resource for residents and community groups who wish to learn more about the City’s commitment to expanding and improving open space and recreational opportunities in Somerville.

## Section 2: Introduction

### 2A. Statement of Purpose

Somerville is an incredibly dense and highly developed city. It is critical that we understand how our open spaces and recreational opportunities meet the needs of residents as every square foot counts. The Open Space and Recreation Plan process gives us a chance to reassess how we are doing and set a vision for the coming years.

The purpose of the 2024-2031 Open Space and Recreation Plan is to:

- Increase awareness of existing open and recreational spaces in Somerville.
- Connect with residents about their open space and recreation needs, especially those that we don't often hear from.
- Evaluate the City's goals as detailed in various planning documents, analyses, and conversations with staff.
- Outline a seven-year strategic action plan for the creation, protection, management, and enhancement of open space in the city that synthesizes stakeholder visions, goals, and needs.
- Encourage thoughtful planning and a sustained commitment to open space.
- Build on past plans to create a comprehensive, centralized document.

The plan includes physical network mapping (existing properties, amenities, and infrastructure), analyzes internal operation systems (maintenance, management, and decision-making), serves as an educational resource, and sets a course for prioritizing projects and policies. It covers the city's natural resources, its history, environmental conditions, past work, and opportunities and challenges ahead for those wanting to learn more about Somerville.

The careful analysis and vision outlined here should guide future decision-making and actions. At the same time, this is a living document. While the goals should be consulted on a regular basis by citizens and decision-makers, they should also be subject to periodic evaluations and updates. Residents' needs might change in the next seven years and the goals and analyses in this document will be a foundation for future data gathering, short- and long-term open space planning, and further community conversation. Public feedback on this plan is welcome and encouraged at any time.

### 2B. Planning Process and Public Participation

In October of 2023, the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) began the process of revising our Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). Outreach took place through the winter and early spring and the plan was drafted in 2024 by Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF) staff. This update builds on the significant work of the 2016-2023 OSRP, reflects what we hear from our constituents today, and aligns with other planning projects undertaken by City of Somerville departments.

Three public meetings were held in January 2024 as an initial round of engagement. The first two were held in accessible buildings on opposite ends of the city. Attendees learned about the OSRP process, the



importance of their input, and broke up into groups to discuss four topics: 1) natural and restorative spaces, 2) climate change resiliency, 3) play and recreation, and 4) urban agriculture. Relevant City departments facilitated discussions and listened to input directly from residents. The third meeting was held on Zoom to foster maximum attendance. At this meeting, staff presented patterns appearing in the outreach feedback and asked: “Did we hear you correctly? Did we miss anything?” Promotion for these meetings included flyering, social media posts, sharing project information at events, and City department network emails.

The City released a survey in November 2024 to poll residents about their feelings on open space, recreational programs, barriers to access, and their outstanding needs. We were happy to receive 708 responses, while we acknowledge that certain groups were overrepresented. Overrepresented demographics include white people in wards 3 and 5 between the ages of 35 and 54. Underrepresented groups include people aged 19-24, people of color, and the lowest-income households (earning 30k or less).

Given these demographic disparities, City staff set up a series of engagement events to connect directly with seniors and teens. These events were held at Teen Empowerment, Somerville High School, Groundwork Somerville, and the Council on Aging.

Many City departments shared their priorities and needs with the OSRP planning staff as well. Given that each department engages with public projects every day, we wanted to ensure that this plan reflects what our dedicated staff see, the issues they identify, and their own internal goals. OSRP planning staff met with staff in Parks and Recreation, the Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities, Economic Development, Mobility, Planning, Preservation and Zoning, the Department of Public Works, the Office of Sustainability and Environment, the SomerViva Office of Immigrant Affairs, and Capital Projects. Many City committees were also consulted, including the Urban Forestry Committee, Conservation Commission, and the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities. The feedback from the many public processes is summarized in Section 10.

Given the amount of hard work completed since 2016 across the City, this plan seeks to make use of the data collected through other planning efforts. It attempts to bring together many voices into this action plan including SomerVision 2040, the 2024 Climate Forward Plan update, Vision Zero Somerville, Union Square Plaza and Streetscapes Plan, annual Community Preservation Act engagement, among others.

Once the draft action plan was complete, it was published on our SomerVoice page.<sup>1</sup> This platform is a hub for City project information and has been the landing point for OSRP planning updates. We also circulated the draft action plan to the City departments and committees and each stakeholder had an opportunity to share comments on this draft. The final step was folding that input into the final action plan and OSRP text.

While this document will be complete in 2024, outreach efforts do not stop here. Each individual park project involves a public engagement process. Each neighborhood plan that Planning, Preservation, and Zoning writes reflects hours of public engagement. And each time a developer builds a civic space, they must engage the community. We are always ready to hear from our community about what they need.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Somerville, “Open Space and Recreation Plan Update (2024-2031),” 2024.  
<http://voice.somervillema.gov/open-space-and-recreation-plan-update>.

## 2C. Enhanced Outreach and Public Participation

Inclusive and diverse public participation was a central tenet of the OSRP update process. Staff sought to include many voices and address the varied open space and recreation needs/interests in the city.

However, we recognize that the residents who attend our public meetings and respond to surveys (our traditional means of engagement) rarely represent vulnerable or minority populations.

To address this imbalance, we worked with the SomerViva: Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA). They have extensive networks in varied immigrant communities in Somerville, many of whom fall into the Environmental Justice (EJ) category because they speak a language other than English at home (primarily Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Kreyol, Nepali, and Chinese). The SOIA language liaisons foster relationships to reach residents with important City information or resources. They work with churches, schools, cultural organizations, events, and run language-specific social media accounts. These cultivated networks give residents an accessible venue to voice their needs. For this OSRP update, SOIA staff translated flyers and press releases and disseminated event information through their networks. They were prepared to offer translation at any of the public meeting events (it was not requested). They also shared input about open space needs and desires from their networks with OSRP planners. That input was critical to making this plan a more effective reflection of our community.

This work, in addition to targeted focus groups mentioned above, sought to reach a broad community, but we acknowledge that our strategies are still a work in progress. We will continue to build relationships with community members and try new methods of outreach to increase the number of voices that inform City projects.

## Section 3: Community Setting

### 3A. Regional Context

Located in the coastal Boston Basin ecoregion, Somerville is bounded to the north by the Mystic River and the communities of Medford, Malden, and Everett; to the west by the Alewife Brook and the town of Arlington; and to the east and south by the cities of Boston and Cambridge (see Appendix A: Regional Context Map).

The Mystic River and Alewife Brook connect Somerville to towns up and downstream. The brook is linked by fragmented parkland (including Alewife Brook Reservation) up to Spy Pond in Arlington. The Mystic is also linked by fragmented riverside parks from Horn Pond in Woburn to Chelsea Creek in Revere and Boston Harbor (see Section 4C for more information).

Physical topography is a defining characteristic of Somerville. Seven hills create drainage divides between the Mystic River and Charles River watersheds while lowlands and filled marshlands have influenced the historical and current development of industry, housing, and transportation. Although Somerville is part of a vast regional network of natural resources and open space, the city has a unique urban character.

Because of its proximity to the state's largest city and local waterways, Somerville has always been part of the region's transportation infrastructure. Five major railroad corridors and three high-volume traffic arteries crisscross the city. These roads and rails connect Boston to northern suburbs, but they also pollute the air and create barriers that separate Somerville neighborhoods from each other and from some of the city's largest open spaces. Interstate 93 slices through historic parts of Winter Hill and East Somerville with few crossing points underneath its elevated sections. Route 16 (Alewife Brook Parkway) cuts residential areas off from riverside parks. State Route 28 (locally known as the McGrath Highway) isolates East Somerville and the Brickbottom district from the rest of the city, Foss Park, and the Mystic River.

Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) Red, Green, and Orange Lines, including Green Line stations that opened in 2022, and major improvements to local and regional bicycle infrastructure give residents many options for connecting to the broader Boston area.

#### **Open Space Context**

Due largely to development and subdivision patterns during the first half of the 20th century (see Section 3B), Somerville has little open space compared to its neighbors. At the end of 2024, there are 175 acres of publicly accessible open space within the city's 4.12 square miles, representing roughly 6.65% of the total land area.

The acquisition of large areas of new open space remains challenging due to high costs and a lack of available parcels. Past efforts have focused on three primary objectives: 1) meeting the maintenance and renovation needs of existing parks and open spaces; 2) acquiring small residential sites for pocket parks or community gardens; and 3) developing stronger connections to local and regional open space resources.

Somerville is located close to many regional open-space amenities. The Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR)'s over 2,200-acre Middlesex Fells Reservation lies less than a mile north of Somerville's northwest border. The Upper and Lower Mystic Lakes are two miles to the northwest and the Mystic River is on the northern border. The 115-acre Alewife Reservation is located a half mile beyond the western boundary of the city, and the popular Charles River shoreline and parklands are two miles south of Somerville. In addition, the Atlantic coast, with all its New England beaches and parks, is just a short trip away.

Despite the highway barriers mentioned above, recreational travel corridors (such as the recently extended Community Path and other regional bikeways) support connections to other towns and waterways. Ongoing projects include improvements to Mystic River Greenways,<sup>2</sup> the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail,<sup>3</sup> and other local projects like the Kensington Connector (opened in 2021) which gives pedestrians and bicyclists access under Route 93.

The city faces a variety of competing interests reminiscent of many of the cities in our region: development pressure by industries like biomedical, high housing costs, limited housing stock, and increasing climate extremes. The City is exploring ways to leverage the desirability to live and work in Somerville with the shared community goals of creating more open space and enhancing the vibrancy of the city's streets, plazas, and parks through public and private efforts.

The high density and expensive housing in Somerville, Boston, and Cambridge have led to longer commutes and an increased reliance on cars for transportation to work, school, and appointments. In 2024, the Greater Boston area received a significant Congestion Relief Grant from the federal government to investigate ways to reduce driving and enhance the use of other transportation modes, including improved public transit and biking. This grant aims to address several transportation issues that affect Somerville residents and workers in their daily lives: public transit gaps, transportation equity, commute times, limited parking, air quality, carbon emissions, and access to open space.<sup>4</sup>

## **Regional Planning Efforts**

Below are some regional open space initiatives that have helped guide Somerville's planning and implementation.

### *Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)*

The City of Somerville is a member of the MAPC which brings together the 101 cities and towns of Metropolitan Boston. Somerville is an active participant in collaborative planning projects with MAPC. Some projects include:

Inner Core Committee (ICC)

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<sup>2</sup> Mystic River Watershed Association, "Greenways," 2024.

<sup>3</sup> "Mass Central Rail Trail," 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Area Planning Council, "\$21.6M Grant To Fund Bluebike Expansion, New Transit Shuttles, Other Congestion Relief Solutions In Metro Boston," 2024.

MAPC's Inner Core Committee consists of 21 cities and towns, including Somerville. The ICC is MAPC's largest subregion, representing over 1.6 million residents. This group tackles its unique challenges, such as public transit, congestion, finite developable land, and affordability.

#### *Metro Mayors Coalition (MMC)*

MMC is a groundbreaking coalition made up of 14 communities in Greater Boston. Established by MAPC in 2001, the voluntary forum enables members to exchange information and create solutions that affect their over 1.3 million constituents. The Coalition launched a Climate Preparedness Taskforce in 2015 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address vulnerabilities. They have looked at sustainable land use practices and recently focused on urban heat mitigation.

#### *Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA)*

MyRWA conducts social and ecological projects throughout the watershed. They collaborate with organizations at the community, city, regional, and state levels, including direct partnerships with the City of Somerville. Their programs encompass water quality monitoring, evaluations of ecosystem health and bioindicator species, environmental education, and partnerships for regional greenway projects.

In 2023, they received a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to fund air quality monitoring in the Lower Mystic. This three-year study will collect data to inform transportation planning, reduce exposure to harmful vehicular air pollutants, and raise community awareness.

#### *Charles River Climate Compact (CRCC)*

The CRCC was established in 2019 as a voluntary alliance comprised of twenty-eight communities, including Somerville. The Compact focuses on climate adaptation and mitigation strategies using a watershed-wide approach to address regional risks such as flooding, sea level rise, extreme heat, and the health of ecosystems. In 2023, the CRCC published a strategic plan describing goals related to flood and drought mitigation, improving biodiversity, working together on smart and effective climate laws, among others.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Resilient Mystic Collaborative (RMC)*

Established in 2018, the RMC was created to address the urgent need for climate preparedness. It comprises staff members from 21 municipalities in the Mystic River watershed alongside participants from key state agencies and local non-profits. MyRWA and the Consensus Building Institute (CBI) facilitate the RMC, which works across political boundaries to plan, finance, and implement multi-benefit measures to enhance regional climate resiliency.

Within the RMC, staff from towns around the Lower Mystic joined to form the Lower Mystic Working Group. Together they conducted climate assessments on infrastructure and vulnerable communities in Somerville, Charlestown, East Boston, Chelsea, Everett, Revere, and Winthrop. This region of the Boston Harbor watershed contains the most concentrated critical infrastructure and densely populated residential areas in New England. The studies looked at lifeline sectors—systems deemed by the

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<sup>5</sup> Charles River Watershed Association, "Charles River Climate Compact," 2024.

Department of Homeland Security to be so essential that their disruption or destruction would severely impact U.S. security, the national economy, public health, or safety; they found five in the Lower Mystic:

- Transportation: Logan Airport, three MBTA rail lines, the Ted Williams and Callahan tunnels.
- Food distribution: the New England Produce Center.
- Energy: Over 100 fuel storage tanks, the Lower Mystic Generating Station.
- Wastewater management: Deer Island Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- Dam: Amelia Earhart Dam.<sup>6</sup>

### 3B. History of the Community

Archaeologists have documented evidence of Native American communities in this region since around 12,500 years ago. By 3,000 years ago, those communities had developed into a network of linked settlements across the Northeast, bound together by family, social ties, languages, ideologies, and trade. Those communities included the peoples now known as the Pocumtuck, Nipmuck, Massachusett, Pawtucket, Wampanoag, Pokanoket, Mohegan, Pequot, and Narragansett.

During the Contact Period (circa 1500 C.E. to 1630), Native American tribes engaged with European settlers through trade, exploration, and conflict. These interactions had a devastating and profound impact. The land that is now Somerville was inhabited by the Massachusett federation of tribes. The Pawtucket leader, Nanepashemet, ruled an area spanning the Mystic River from the Blue Hills to the Merrimack. The Charles River served as the territorial border separating the Massachusett and the Nipmuck peoples. In the early 1600s, conflicts with other Native American communities and European settlers, along with European disease outbreaks, led to a 75% mortality rate for tribe members in the Massachusett federation. Nanepashemet himself survived a smallpox epidemic in 1618 but was killed the following year later in a raid by the Tarrantine, a Native American group from the northern region now known as Maine.

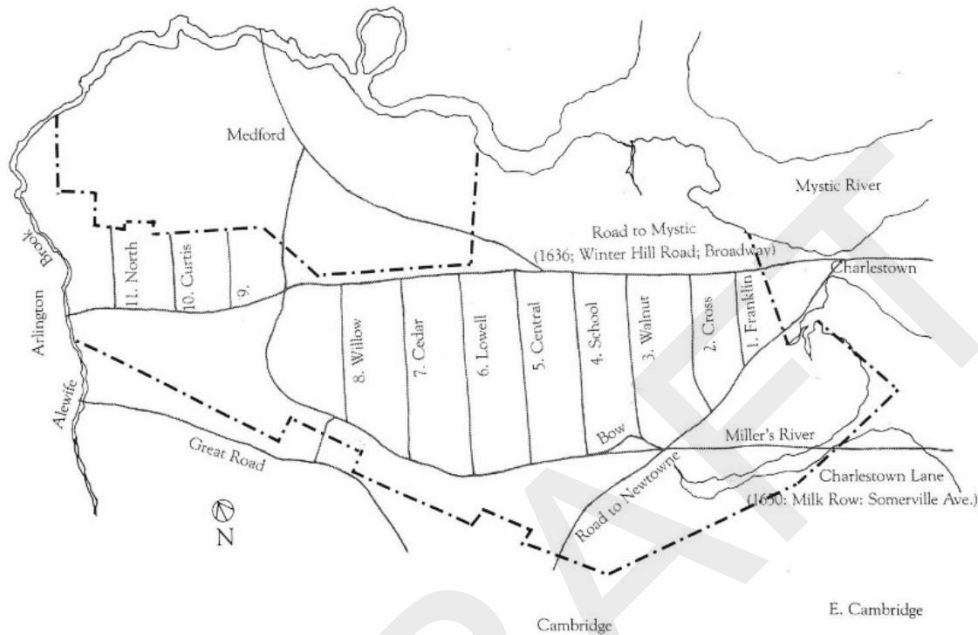
In 1639, Nanepashemet's widow sought to secure peace with the Massachusetts Bay Colony settlers by deeding land in present-day Charlestown and Somerville to the colonists, while retaining the Massachusett hunting and fishing rights near Mystic Pond. The Massachusett remained in the area for much of the remainder of the seventeenth century. While the land of current Somerville was part of their core domain during the Contact Period, no indigenous archaeological sites from this era have been documented.

Somerville's location in the Boston Basin coastal plain has influenced its development for the last four centuries. European settlement and land-use patterns in Somerville were historically driven by the geographic relationship to maritime Boston. First, colonists settled on the narrow strip of land connecting Somerville to Charlestown. Then in 1639, the Pawtucket Nation deeded present-day Somerville to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Ten Hills area along the Mystic River provided a defensible position for forts, and a direct trade path strengthened the connection to Charlestown and Boston.

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<sup>6</sup> Mystic River Watershed Association, "Resilient Mystic Collaborative Releases Equity-Based Climate Assessment," 2022.

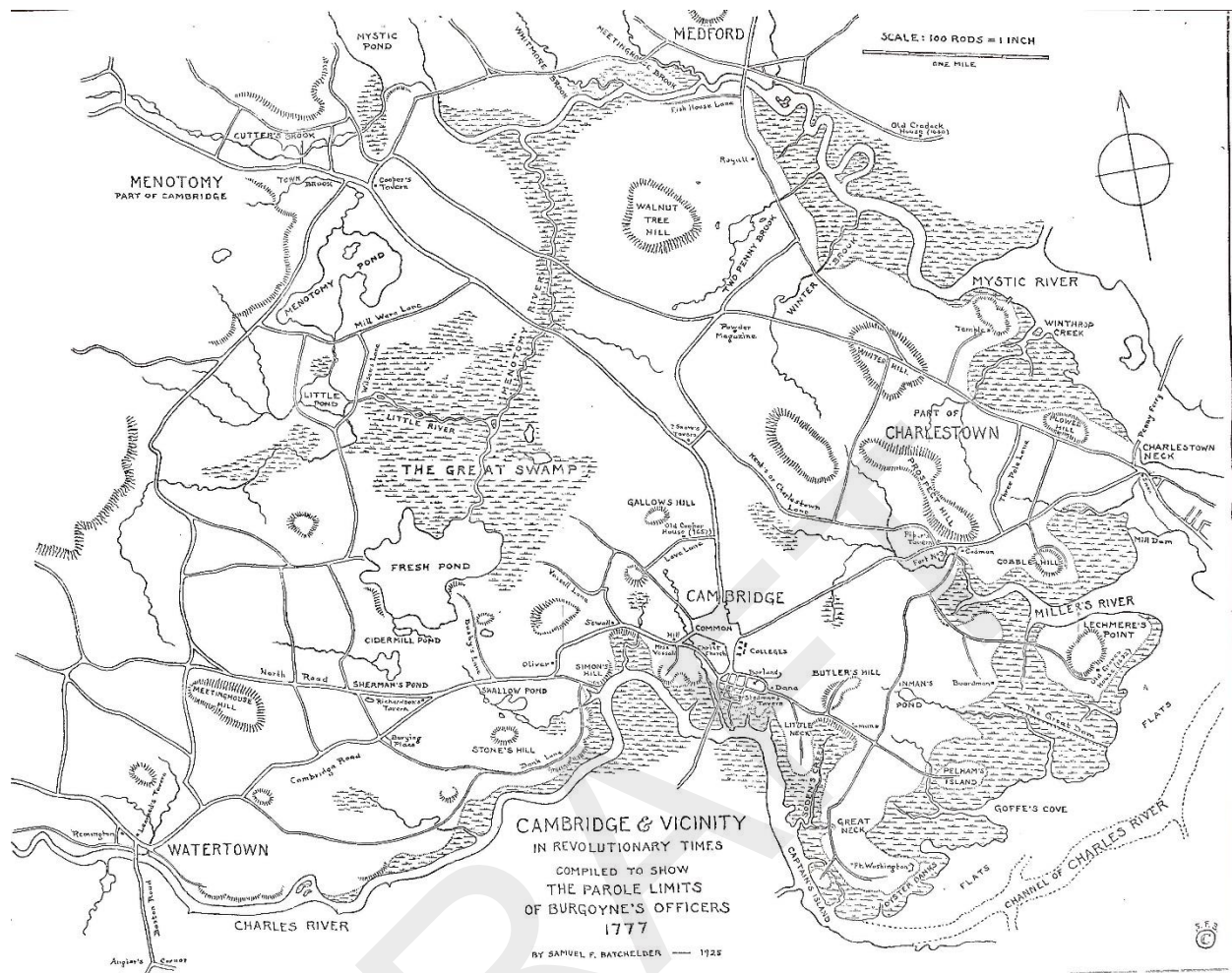
Another important route (now Washington Street) was established as neighboring Cambridge grew, connecting Cambridge to Boston through Somerville. Somerville's hilly ridgeline defined east-west routes (now Broadway and Somerville Avenue), while 11 north-south roads were built between 1681 and 1685 (see **Figure 1**).



**FIGURE 1.** Map published in Landscape Research's *Beyond the Neck*, 1982 (11).

Colonial Somerville land was mostly used for grazing and small farms. The first residential development was concentrated in Charlestown Neck, along what is now Broadway and Washington Streets.

Early industries in the area included sawmills, gristmills, and quarries, but most of the land was still used for agriculture throughout the 1700s. Somerville's "seven hills" and its river routes were strategically important to the Colonists during the American Revolution. Prospect Hill played a key role. It was the site of a string of fortifications created by George Washington and the Continental Army during the siege of British troops in Boston in the first year of the American Revolution. On New Year's Day 1776, the first official flag, featuring thirteen red and white horizontal stripes, was raised atop Prospect Hill.



**FIGURE 2.** Map by Samuel F. Batchelder, 1925. "Cambridge & Vicinity in Revolutionary Times. Compiled to Show The Parole Limits of Burgoyne's Officers, 1777." Published in the *Cambridge Historical Society: Publications XII, Proceedings for the Year 1917-1919*, 1925 (328).

After 1800, Somerville expanded its industrial base, most notably with the establishment of a bleachery and several brickyards. The strong road network and the new Middlesex Canal provided routes for dairy farmers in western towns to move their products to Boston through Somerville. As a result, Somerville agriculture shifted largely to small crops and fruit orchards.<sup>7</sup>

In 1835, railroad construction began, leading to the establishment of the Boston and Lowell line and the Fitchburg line within a decade. The railroads brought about the industrial and residential expansion that defined Somerville's growth throughout the mid-1800s.

In 1842, the Town of Somerville, with a population of 1,013, formally separated from Charlestown. New passenger rail service emerged, but the cost of rail travel was too high for all but the wealthiest. The railroads had a significant early impact on the landscape. Industry erupted along the railroad corridors,

<sup>7</sup> Beyond the Neck, 18.



particularly in the southeast floodplain where several lines crossed. This lowland area, the Miller's River marsh, was turned into rail yards, slaughterhouses, and other large-scale land uses. The industrialization of these tidal flats between Somerville and Cambridge caused so much pollution that the Commonwealth ordered this portion of the river to be filled.

After the Civil War, Somerville's population rapidly grew. While the most densely populated residential areas were historically in East Somerville, the advent of streetcars led to development in areas further west; the easy commute to Boston made the area appealing to new residents. Previously, hilltop lands in Somerville had seen limited development because of a lack of available water and limited roads, but a water tower built on Spring Hill (now Bailey Park) in the 1880s solved the problem of municipal drinking water at higher elevations. Sewer lines were built throughout the city as the Metropolitan District Commission established a pumping station along Alewife Brook. These infrastructure improvements facilitated a housing boom among immigrants looking for affordable rental units within easy commuting distance of employment in Boston.

Somerville was incorporated as a city in 1872 and rapid municipal growth ensued. Civic buildings were constructed along the Central Hill ridge and police and fire stations were built in Union Square. The top of Prospect Hill was lowered to fill the area of flats along Union Square to make this possible. The City followed this land use pattern for the next fifty years, with commerce and industry in the lower elevations and along major travel routes, and residences at higher elevations.

Between 1880 and 1890, Somerville's population experienced significant growth, increasing from 24,933 to 40,152. During this time, the orchards, farmlands, brickyards, and marshlands in the western part of the city were transformed into densely populated areas featuring mainly two-family housing. Additionally, it became common for larger residential properties to be divided into smaller lots with long street blocks and shorter dead-end spurs.

At the time, this rapid land subdivision was publicly criticized for its cheap construction and a lack of landscaping. In response, the Somerville Improvement Association was founded in the 1880s and started to garner support for planned trees and open space. The Heptoreans, a women's organization, also focused on acquiring parks and forming zoning ordinances. They played a key role in the decision to create Prospect Hill Park in 1903.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1870s, only two major parcels of land were dedicated as permanent open space before the enormous housing boom at the turn of the 20th century. These parcels were Central Hill Park—currently home to Somerville's High School, City Hall, and Central Public Library—and Broadway Park—now known as Foss Park and owned by the DCR. Private estates were largely sold for development and only one tract of land was donated to the City for public use: Nathan Tufts Park in 1890.<sup>9</sup>

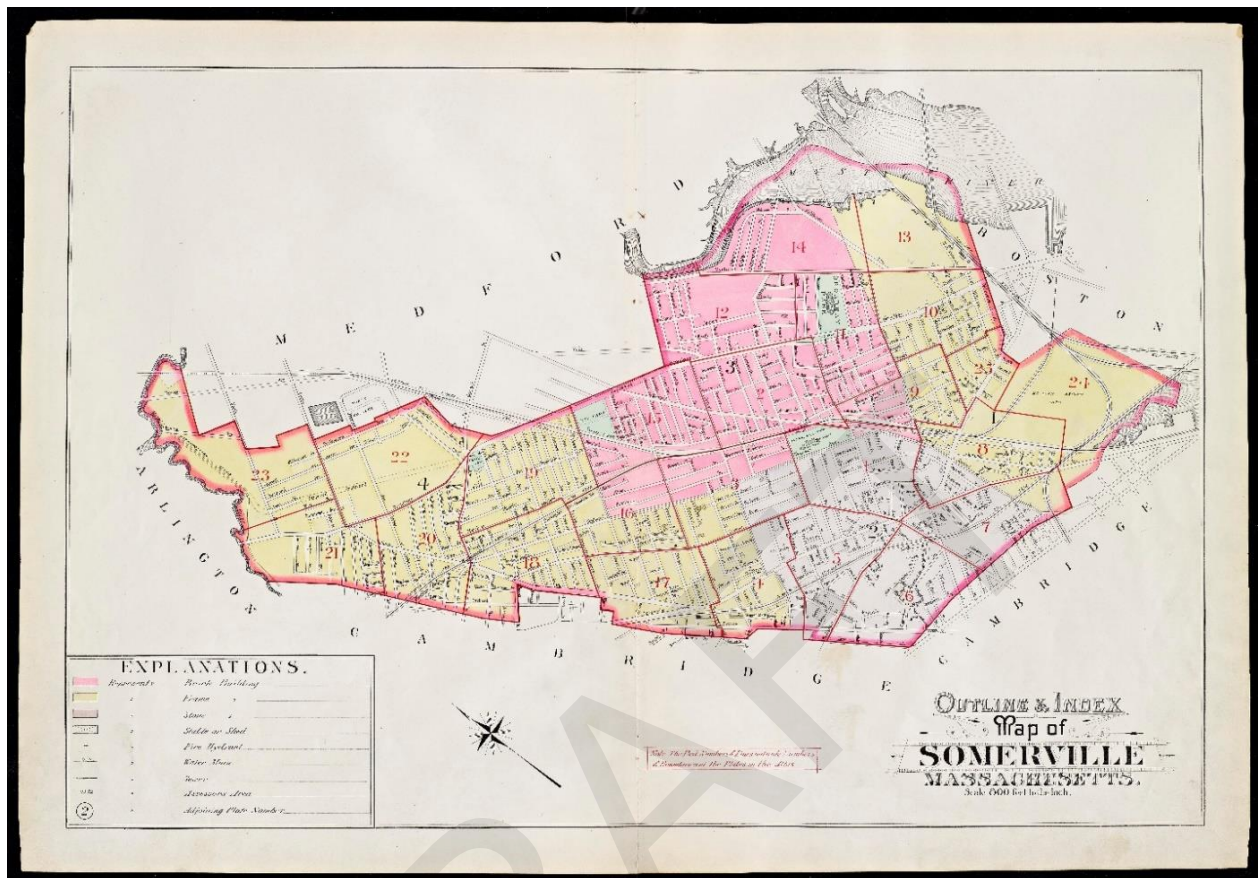
Between 1890 and 1910, 50% of today's housing stock was constructed. This rapid development and subdivision left little remaining land for public parks. By 1900, only 52 acres (4.7%) of Somerville's land had been dedicated to parks or playgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Beyond the Neck, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Beyond the Neck, 58.

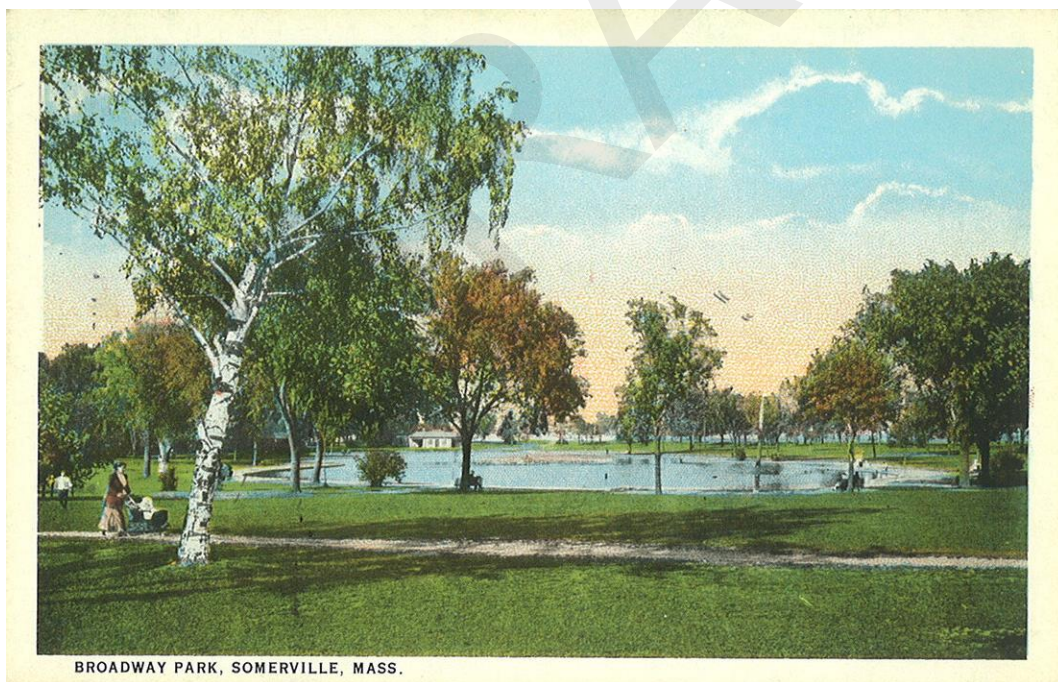
<sup>10</sup> Beyond the Neck, 58.



**FIGURE 3.** Map by G.W. Bromley and Co., 1895. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.



**FIGURE 4.** View of Central Hill Park, 1890.



**FIGURE 5.** View of Broadway Park (now known as Foss Park).



There was also a lack of strategic planning in creating or preserving open space at the state level. In 1900, the Governor vetoed a bill for the extension of the Metropolitan Park System, which also included an appropriation for a boulevard across Somerville that could have served as a green corridor.

This lack of planning is further evident in Somerville's public park history after 1900. Only two major parks, Lincoln Park (1900) and Trum Field (1903), were designated at the time. The rest of the city's parks, playgrounds, and open spaces were constructed with little administrative master planning and most of Somerville had already been developed. For this reason, many of Somerville's open spaces are less than half an acre in size and are irregularly scattered throughout the city (see Appendix A: Open Space Inventory Map). Some of today's parks are located on land that was previously undeveloped housing lots, while the City's larger parks are typically situated on former schoolyards and other municipal lands that were converted to parks in the latter half of the 20th century. Soon after the turn of the 20th century, almost all of Somerville had been developed.

### 3C. Population Characteristics

#### Population Trends

Somerville's population reached a historic peak in 1930 and then decreased consistently for the next 60 years. The most significant population decline occurred between 1950 and 1980, when the city lost an estimated 25,000 residents, largely from the neighborhoods of East Somerville, Spring Hill, and Union Square. This population shift is consistent with national trends toward suburbanization and smaller family size during these decades. In 1990, the U.S. Census recorded Somerville's population at 76,210 individuals. By 2000, the number of residents in Somerville rebounded to 77,478—a 1.7% increase. This influx of new residents was attributable to many factors, including increased immigration and the availability of affordable housing options in Somerville. Since 2000, there has been an attendant shift in demographics and growth patterns, giving rise to a modern mix of families, youth, retirees, and students, producing one of the most diverse cities in the Commonwealth. Between 2000-2010, the population decreased to 75,754. Several dynamics may explain this, including shrinking household size, housing supply, and a surge in housing prices. Since 2010, Somerville has become a highly desirable place to live, and the population increased to **81,045** by 2020.<sup>11</sup>

#### Density

Somerville possesses a large population relative to its area (19,671 persons per square mile, or 30.7 persons per acre based on 2020 data), and is the densest city in New England. This density, however, is not evenly distributed across the city. Typical residential neighborhoods have a population density of 40-60 ppl per acre. There are several former industrial areas, including Boynton Yards and Inner Belt, with few to no residents. Somerville is experiencing a surge of development, including in these less populated areas. Lab and commercial uses make up a large part of the new growth with some substantial housing developments in areas like Assembly and Union Squares.

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<sup>11</sup> The data in Section 3C comes from the following source unless otherwise noted: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics," 2020.

Because of its dense nature, open space is consistently identified as an important Somerville feature to residents in established and transforming neighborhoods. However, the dense development and extraordinary real estate costs are constant challenges. The City is always looking to buy parcels for open space, but resources are finite and open space is only one of many municipal needs, including affordable housing and infrastructure improvements. Presently, the biggest generator of new open space is private development. For more information about how private development creates open space, see Section 3D3.

### **Race, Ethnicity, and Language**

Somerville's racial breakdown is similar to Massachusetts' with a slightly larger Asian population and fewer Black and Hispanic residents. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 32% of the city's population is non-white, making Somerville more racially diverse than the state as a whole (20% non-white). Interestingly, the percentages are reversed when it comes to school children. The Massachusetts Department of Education enrollment data shows that only 38.8% of the students enrolled in Somerville Schools are white.<sup>12</sup>

While Somerville has a long-standing history as a gateway community for newcomers to the United States, foreign-born residents have decreased from 27% in 2010 to 24.6% in 2020. This percentage has been slowly falling over the last 20 years but remains higher than the state average. Not surprisingly, 24.7% of Somerville residents speak a language other than English at home, and many languages are spoken in the city. The most common are Spanish and Portuguese and there are smaller populations of Haitian Creole, Italian, Chinese, and Nepali speakers as well.

Between 2019-22, the Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities (OFAHC) researched Somerville park users to inform community-wide health initiatives. OFAHC conducted informal observational surveys and found that a larger proportion of park users are non-white in comparison to citywide census data (see Appendix D). This information underscores the importance of addressing staff concerns about the racial demographics represented in our public engagement processes. If our community meetings are attended by only a small sliver of Somerville's white population, then our park designs may not address the needs of non-white, non-English-speaking residents who heavily use City open spaces.

### **Age and Education**

Somerville's reputation as a young city is reinforced by 2020 U.S. Census data: the median age was 31.4 years old (Massachusetts' average age was 39.9). Of the city's residents, 44% (or 35,476 residents) are between the ages of 20 and 34 years of age, 14% are 18 and under, and 4% are under 5 years old. The 65 and older population is estimated to have dropped from 10.5% in 2000 to 9% in 2020. With such a young population, the demand for playgrounds, athletic fields, and active parks is evident. Since the last OSRP, the City has focused on meeting the demand for athletic fields for youth in Somerville.

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<sup>12</sup> MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "School and District Profiles," 2023.

The trend in Somerville is toward a more highly educated populace with 72.6% holding a bachelor's degree or higher in 2020. In 2010, this number was 52.3%, up from 40.5% in 2000.

### **Household, Families, and Income**

As of 2020, there are 35,035 households in Somerville. A household is one or more people who occupy a housing unit. There are 13,327 families in Somerville. A family household consists of two or more individuals who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. 38% of total households are families in Somerville.

Somerville's median household income is rising faster than Massachusetts', which is already well above the national average. In 1999, the median household income in Somerville was \$50,502. By 2014, it was estimated at \$66,866, slightly lower than the statewide median of \$67,846. Within six years, it has risen to \$124,110 in 2020, significantly higher than the statewide median of \$94,448.

Somerville has a higher percentage of high-income households than the state as a whole. Although a quarter of households (25%) have median incomes of \$200K or more, and 60% earn over \$100K, 20% of households live on under \$50K per year. 10.2% of Somerville residents live below the poverty line. The poverty rate in Somerville has decreased significantly in the past 12 years, however it is worth noting that reducing poverty does not necessarily reflect improved quality of life. It can also be indicative of gentrification and displacement. Somerville has changed from a working-class, immigrant city to a city wealthier than the Massachusetts average. At the same time, there are still large segments of the population who are challenged to make a living in Somerville. Their voices are seldom at the table when making decisions about open space and recreation.

### **Veteran Status**

1.5% of Somerville residents are veterans. In recent years, veterans have been involved in design processes about the City's war memorials and where to place them.<sup>13</sup>

### **Disability**

8.2% of Somerville residents are estimated to have a disability. This is a population with unique interests and needs. Fortunately, it is also an increasingly organized community that advocates for the types of comprehensive, cohesive, and individualized services that it needs. While Somerville parks are all compliant with the ADA law at the time construction is complete, advocates continue to point out issues in older parks and the need for inclusive amenities and an inclusive playground in the city.

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Table – Veteran Status, Table S2101, 2022.

## Housing

According to the City's 2021 Housing Needs Assessment, Somerville has been historically a city primarily comprised of renters and remains so. However, a gradual, modest trend toward homeownership has been underway over the past two decades. In 2000, 30.6% of Somerville's housing was owner-occupied and 33% of all Somerville households own their home or condominium.<sup>14</sup> 5.4% of housing units are vacant. These are lower than state or national averages. 26% of residents moved within the last year (did not live in the same house one year ago), and 83% of housing units were built pre-1980, compared to 69% statewide.

Consistent with the metro Boston area, housing costs have skyrocketed in the last decade. Somerville's home values are higher than state or national averages and are increasing at a faster rate. The median value of owner-occupied housing units in 2015 was an estimated \$449,100 and has risen to \$860,500 in 2022. The median home value is 7.12x the median income, far higher than state or national rates. The median gross monthly rent in 2022 is \$2,357 (+/- \$48).

Housing has become so expensive that residents across all different income groups pay more than the industry standard. In 2021, out of 32,455 households in Somerville, 27% of homeowners and 35% of renters are "cost burdened," which means they pay more than 30% of their income for housing and utilities. In lower income brackets, the percentage of households cost burdened or "extremely cost burdened," which means they pay more than 50% of their income for housing and utilities, is progressively higher.<sup>15</sup>

## Environmental Justice Populations

While much of Somerville meets one of the three criteria of the Environmental Justice designation defined by the state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, small parts of East Somerville and West Somerville are designated as both low-income/minority or minority/English isolation (see Appendix A: Environmental Justice Map).<sup>16</sup> Many open space projects, including the transformative Winter Hill and Healey Schoolyards and the Foss Park athletic field (DCR), as well as those funded by PARC and LWCF grants, are located in these and other EJ areas.

## Employment

### *Labor Force Participation Rate*

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<sup>14</sup> City of Somerville, *Housing Needs Assessment 2021* (2021).

<sup>15</sup> City of Somerville, *Housing Needs Assessment 2021* (2021).

<sup>16</sup> The criteria can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/environmental-justice-populations-in-massachusetts>

The labor force participation rate in Somerville is 79.1% (percent of civilian population aged 16 and over that is working or actively looking for work). This is an increase from 75.1% in 2015. Only 2.8% of those in the labor force are unemployed, compared to 5.3% in Massachusetts as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

### *Industry Trends*

The top three industries in Somerville, by percent of labor force employed, are:

- Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services (28%)
- Educational services, and health care and social assistance (27.8%)
- Manufacturing (10%)<sup>18</sup>

Development and the creation of jobs has been concentrated in the “Transform Areas” identified in SomerVision 2040 Comprehensive Plan.<sup>19</sup> Union Square, Assembly Square, Boynton Yards, Brickbottom, and Inner Belt have all seen large scale development projects, many of which are life sciences. These developers are required to contribute new open space as part of their projects (see 3D.3 for more information).

### **Work-Home Patterns**

Somerville, much like the broader metro Boston region, has bounced back from the shutdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic but it has changed the way many employees relate to their places of work. 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates that 31.8% of Somerville residents work from home. This is up from 15.2% in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Additions to public transportation infrastructure, like the opening of the Green Line extension, have also made it easier to commute to work. In 2020, 7.1% of working people who lived in Somerville also worked in Somerville. They worked primarily in Central Hill, Assembly Row, and Davis Square.<sup>21</sup> Employed Somerville residents also worked most notably in the Financial District, Longwood Medical Area, Back Bay parts of Boston, Kendall Square, and Harvard Square in Cambridge. In 2020, 14.4% of people employed in Somerville lived in Boston, 3.8% in Medford, and 3% in Malden.

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Table – Employment Status, Table S2301, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Table – Selected Economic Characteristics, Table DP03, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> City of Somerville, *SomerVision 2040*, 2021, 11.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Table – Commuting Characteristics by Sex, Table S0801, 2023 and 2019.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (MA), 2020.



## 3D. Growth and Development

### 3D.1. Patterns and Trends

Early colonial settlement in Somerville occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, linked to development in adjacent Charlestown and Cambridge. During the nineteenth century, railroads were extended through Somerville, following the lowlands between the City's hills, and new neighborhoods were built alongside the routes. Industry and commercial uses often located in lowlands adjacent to the rail corridors, while residential subdivisions occurred on nearby hillsides.

Somerville's historic commercial squares developed at the junction of major thoroughfares. By the late 1800's Union Square, Gilman Square, and Davis Square had become established centers of small-scale commerce. A second type of commercial district was linear in geometry: the "main street" corridors along Broadway, including East Somerville, Ball Square, and Teele Square.

Large industrial landscapes developed along the eastern and southern edges of Somerville during the same era, often on filled tidelands. Assembly Square, Inner Belt, and Boynton Yards were characterized by heavy railroad uses, meatpacking, and industrial production businesses. As industrial activity increased, new residential building types were introduced, with many large classical apartment blocks constructed around Somerville between 1900 and 1920. Somerville's urban fabric by this point would closely resemble the present day: roughly 75% of the city's building stock dates from 1920 or earlier.

By mid-century, national and local economic conditions became less favorable, and public policy decisions at the federal, state, and local level discouraged growth and investment in Somerville. Rail and trolley service was discontinued, elevated highway projects sliced through historic neighborhoods, and suburban competition eroded the vibrant retail squares of the city. Widespread disinvestment took hold, and for several decades, the municipal government struggled to provide basic services.

Somerville's late-century renaissance was closely tied to the return of public transportation. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, regional subway service was extended to Somerville's borders, with Orange Line service at Sullivan Square and Red Line service at Porter Square and Davis Square. Redevelopment of land near the stations (especially in Davis Square) was guided by participatory planning among Somerville residents, business owners, civic organizations, and public officials.

Now, development is building on those successes. Public policy, and the SomerVision 2040 plan, steers large-scale growth toward old industrial areas well-served by public transit and medium-scale reinvestment to Somerville's commercial squares and main street corridors. Over-development of the traditional residential neighborhoods of two- and three-family homes is discouraged. Emphasis is placed on access to quality open space and on a mix of employment, goods, and services within walking distance of homes (see Section 3D.3 for more information).

There is a strong desire to increase the amount of open space in the city, but conflicting interests for businesses and industry, housing (particularly affordable housing), and open space are competing for land. Open space has to grow by very small amounts and space has to be used efficiently.

## 3D.2. Infrastructure

### Transportation

Somerville's development as a streetcar suburb of Boston created a dense and grid-like street network. Five major railroad corridors and four high-volume traffic arteries crisscross Somerville and connect Boston to northern suburbs. Portions of three state roads run through the city: Route 16 (Alewife Brook Parkway/Mystic Valley Parkway), Route 28 (McGrath Highway/Fellsway), and Route 38 (Mystic Avenue). Interstate 93 is also accessible from the northeast corner of Somerville. While these facilitate large volumes of regional automobile traffic, these roadways are physical barriers for Somerville residents hoping to traverse their neighborhoods. This is particularly evident in places like Dilboy Fields and Foss Park, where direct access from the neighborhood requires crossing a major roadway.

The City explores options to improve these connections, though it often requires collaboration and cooperation with State partners. The McGrath Highway in Somerville and Cambridge has been in a redesign process and construction is expected to begin in the next five years. The elevated overpass on McGrath Highway is to be demolished and replaced with a ground-level road. Removing the overpass will reconnect Somerville neighborhoods to much-needed open space and access to the rest of the city. The new, tree-lined "McGrath Boulevard" will also improve air quality and safety for pedestrians, cyclists, buses, and cars alike.

In general, Somerville is considered highly walkable, bikeable, and transit friendly. The well-connected streets, extensive sidewalk network, robust bike and train systems coupled with dense, mixed-use development, makes it very easy to get around the city sustainably. In 2015, the ACS reported that 43.6% of Somerville residents drive to work, 52.8% use sustainable transportation modes like public transportation, walking, or biking, and 3.3% work from home. As of the 2020 Census, the rate of residents commuting by car dropped to 34.1%, with 46.8% commuting via public transportation, walking, or biking, and 12.7% working from home.

The number of bicycle commuters, at 7%, is far above the national average of 0.5%, but City staff hope to increase that. As of 2022, roughly 26% of Somerville streets have some type of bicycle infrastructure and the recently released Somerville Bike Network Plan (2023) proposes an 88-mile citywide network of connected protected bicycle lanes and low speed and low volume residential streets ("neighborways"). Compared to the fragmented 30-mile network that exists today, the plan envisions a future with vastly more biking infrastructure, safer facilities, and better connectivity.<sup>22</sup>

The spine of the pedestrian and bicycling network is the Community Path which runs east to west for 3.2-miles in Somerville and now connects to Boston and regional off-street paths like the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway which reaches as far as Bedford. It is considered part of the state-wide Mass Central Rail Trail. The Community Path was opened in two sections, one in 2015 and the most recent in 2023 after the opening of the Green Line Extension.

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<sup>22</sup> City of Somerville, *Somerville Bike Network Plan*, 2023. <http://voice.somervillema.gov/somerville-bicycle-network-plan>.

Public transportation services in Somerville are provided by the MBTA. The city is principally served by fixed-route buses which facilitate east-west travel across and connections to the Red, Orange, and Green Lines.

- The Davis Square Red Line Station service connects west Somerville with destinations in Cambridge and Boston.
- The Assembly Square Orange Line Station connects a new mixed-use neighborhood with destinations in Boston, Medford, and Malden.
- The Green Line Extension (GLX) opened in 2022 and connects Somerville with Medford, Boston, Brookline, and Newton.

The emphasis on non-motor vehicle transportation aligns with a variety of recent City plans including the City's Vision Zero goals,<sup>23</sup> Somerville Climate Forward goals,<sup>24</sup> and SomerVision 2040 plan goals.<sup>25</sup>

## **Water System**

Somerville's water and sewage disposal systems are supplied by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA). Water supplies are transported from surface reservoirs in western and central Massachusetts by pipeline to Somerville. There are no surface impoundments within the city that are utilized for drinking water. Sewer services consist of a series of sanitary/stormwater lines that convey effluent to a regional treatment plant at Deer Island, operated by MWRA. City records do not indicate that any private water supplies or sewage disposal systems are in use.

All water in Somerville is purchased by the City's Water Department from the MWRA. The water is treated and then delivered through seven MWRA master meters into a system of pipes, valves, hydrants, and service lines. This brings our homes, businesses, and other facilities drinking water and water for uses like fire suppression. The system consists of approximately 125 miles of water main pipes, laid mainly in the late 1880s to early 1900s.

The City of Somerville is working on many upgrades to underground infrastructure including recent projects:

- replacing approximately 7283 linear feet of high and low service water main and replaced 63 gate valves and 20 hydrants on Spring Hill (as of 2023).
- replacing 85 linear feet of high service water main and two gate valves in the Ward 2 Sewer and water main rehab project (as of 2022).

Drinking water is sampled weekly at 21 locations to monitor for potentially harmful contaminants. They also regularly test for lead and copper to ensure a healthy supply for residents and actively work to replace any remaining lead services.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> City of Somerville, Vision Zero, 2020. <http://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/vision-zero-action-plan.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> City of Somerville, Climate Forward, 2024. [http://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/Final\\_Somerville\\_CAP\\_REV061824\\_Online.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/Final_Somerville_CAP_REV061824_Online.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> City of Somerville, *SomerVision 2040*, 2021. <http://www.somervision2040.com/plan>.

<sup>26</sup> Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, "Somerville," 2024.

## Sewer System

The city has approximately 165 miles of sewers—72 miles are combined sewers (handling both sewer and stormwater), approximately 64 miles are separated sanitary sewers, and approximately 48 miles are separate storm drains.<sup>27</sup> The majority of Somerville’s sewers were constructed in the latter part of the 19th century and aging infrastructure and increased demands burden the current system.

Somerville’s existing sewer system was not designed to handle today’s high levels of stormwater runoff. More buildings, streets, and paved parking lots exist now than when the sewers were built. These impervious surfaces exacerbate the effects of a storm as the runoff water is unable to filter into the ground, funnels to the nearest drains, and flows into the sewer system. With the predicted increase in rainfall due to climate change, this will be an ongoing and urgent issue.

Somerville has two combined sewer overflow (CSO) outfalls—one at Alewife Brook Parkway near the Cambridge border and one on the Mystic River in East Somerville by Baxter Park. These CSOs discharge into the waterways when heavy rain exceeds the system’s capacity, thus contributing to pollution in the rivers. One discharges a mix of wastewater and stormwater, and the other releases treated stormwater into the Mystic. The City of Cambridge and MWRA own additional outfalls that discharge into these two rivers.

The City is updating sewer, stormwater, and drinking water infrastructure through a variety of projects to move away from a reliance on CSO outfalls. The Spring Hill Sewer Separation Project adds new storm drains that separate stormwater from the existing combined sewer system. It also includes the construction of green stormwater and the planting of trees to absorb and slow water. This project is expected to be complete in 2025.

The Poplar Street Pump Station project will provide critical flood relief to streets and stormwater/sewer drains in a large portion of the city—particularly those flood-prone zones around Union Square. The new system will collect stormwater from the newly separated Spring Hill project and future sewer separation projects and will store any excess in an underground stormwater tank. This water will be slowly pumped, relieving pressure during a storm, into an MBTA drain which discharges to the Millers River. This major infrastructure modernization will impact how stormwater is managed for approximately 60% of the city. The project broke ground in 2023 and is expected to be completed late 2026. Upon completion of underground infrastructure work, the project will become a park.

### 3D.3. Long-Term Development Patterns

#### SomerVision

The SomerVision Map, adopted as part of the SomerVision 2040 Comprehensive Plan (see **Figure 6**), describes the long-term, strategic development patterns of the City of Somerville. This map apportions all City parcels into one of three category zones: Conserve, Enhance, and Transform. This categorization serves to guide citywide development in conserving residential neighborhoods, enhancing squares and

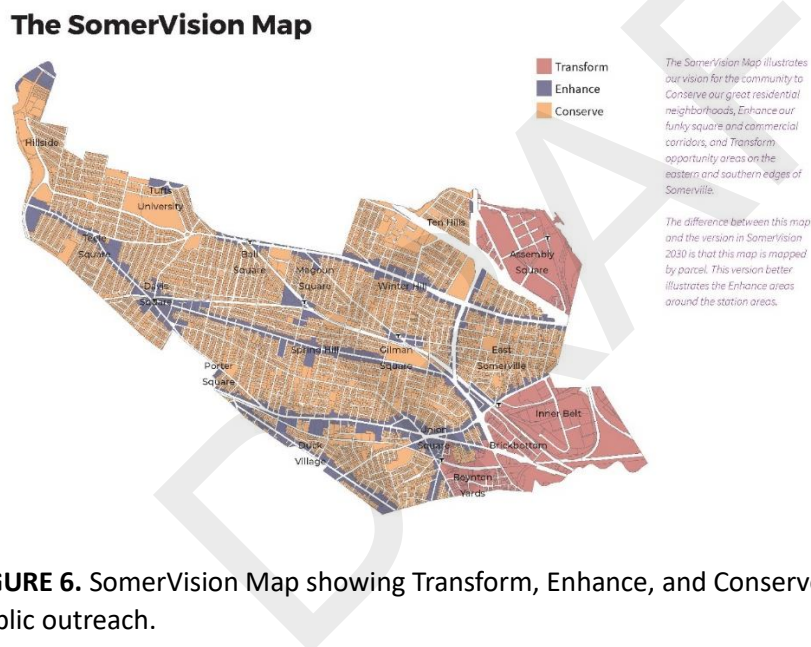
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<sup>27</sup> City of Somerville, “Stormwater Management,” 2023.

commercial corridors, and transforming opportunity areas in the eastern and southern edges of Somerville.

Currently, the transformation zones allow for increased density in the Assembly Square, Boynton Yards, Brickbottom, Inner Belt, and Union Square neighborhoods, all of which are at varying stages of development. These districts are zoned for mid- to high-rise mixed-use, commercial, and urban residential development. They make up Somerville's densifying urban core. The City is also working with developers and community members to plan a new overlay district for the Central Somerville Avenue area which would allow for increased density. This proposal envisions an innovative green technology R&D hub for the region.

Across all of the "Transform" areas and within special overlay districts defined by our 2019 Somerville Zoning Ordinance (described below), the City is working to strike a balance between growth, job development, and quality of life. They are also planning carefully to discourage displacement and to mitigate the impacts on City infrastructure and traffic.



**FIGURE 6.** SomerVision Map showing Transform, Enhance, and Conserve areas informed by extensive public outreach.

### 2019 Somerville Zoning Ordinance

To implement and enforce the SomerVision 2040 plan and the SomerVision Map, the City undertook a zoning overhaul (described in the 2016 OSRP), finally publishing the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) in 2019. The SZO notably requires that all new developments within "Master Planned Development" overlay districts (zones identified as SomerVision "Transform" areas) allocate a percentage of the development to public open space, called civic space.

While the City continues to actively pursue open space acquisition opportunities, the cost of purchasing land for open space is extremely high. The biggest chance for new open space acreage comes through

private development. The civic space requirement moves the City toward its SomerVision open space goals and ensures that, even in the rapidly densifying areas of Somerville, public spaces will continue to meet the varied civic space needs of those who work and live in these areas.

Building open spaces through private development means that we have more new open spaces opening around the type of construction most in demand by developers today: biomedical offices. It is vital that these spaces serve the entire neighborhood. City staff work closely with developers to design an open space that attends to local, community needs beyond the office workers—both existing neighbors and future generations. The Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space (2024) describes this need in detail and guides developers through the process.<sup>28</sup>

### *Green Score*

The SZO also requires a “Green Score” calculation for any new building construction and substantial renovation, guaranteeing that all new developments meet minimum environmental performance standards specific to their zoning district. The Green Score, which is reviewed by PSUF staff, incentivizes urban landscapes that infiltrate stormwater, filter pollutants, reduce urban heat island effect, provide habitat, sequester carbon, and improve air quality. Points are given for landscape elements that provide these benefits such as raingardens, green roofs, and tree preservation.

Since the implementation of the Green Score, PSUF has been working with the Planning, Preservation, and Zoning (PPZ) Division to further hone the calculation criteria to achieve high-quality ecological services on private property. Ultimately, the civic space requirement and the Green Score work together to provide landscapes (public and private) that are sensitive to environmental sustainability and meet community-specific needs within Somerville’s developing districts.

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<sup>28</sup> City of Somerville, *Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space* (2024).

## Section 4: Environmental Inventory and Analysis

### 4A. Geology, Soils, and Topography

#### Geology

The geologic story of Somerville is as old as the earth itself, though the elements which are most visible to residents today are due to periods of repeated glacial advance during the Pleistocene. The most recent glacier, the Wisconsin, covered Massachusetts to the end of Cape Cod and Nantucket. Around 12,000 years ago, the ice retreated and left drumlins (literally “little hill ridges”) running west to east across the New England landscape. While the bedrock below is part of a geologic form called the Avalon Belt that defines the Boston area, the typical experience of Somerville is shaped by these small, glacier-formed hills.

When the glacial waters receded from the Boston Basin, the clay-lands were replaced with forest and then a layer of peat. Several millennia later, when Europeans settled in Somerville, the clay was exposed only in nearby streams or tidal creeks. At that time, marshes could be found in lower lying areas at the eastern, southern, and northern edges of the then-named Charlestown mainland, while meadowland and grassland interrupted by marsh grew at the western edge near the Alewife Brook. Until the late 19th century, the relatively flat tract between Charlestown Neck and Alewife Brook was used largely for agriculture. Before the onset of intense development in the early 20th century, large tracts of forested land could still be found in isolated upland regions in and around Somerville.

Glacial deposits including glacial till—unsorted and randomly layered rocks which were carried and left by the glacier—compose much of Somerville, particularly the “seven hills of Somerville.” Other areas, including some of the marshes mentioned above, were artificially filled to expand the city’s footprint.

#### Soils

Within the city’s boundaries, soil types range from sandy loam in the elevated areas of West Somerville to dense clay in the Ten Hills neighborhood and around the former Millers River estuary near Union Square and Beacon Street (see Appendix A: Soils and Geologic Features Map). Much of the southern and eastern portions of Somerville are part of the Cambridge Floodplain, which fills the lower valley of the Charles River from Watertown to Boston Harbor. Somerville’s clay deposits were formed 14,000 to 15,000 years ago and contain fossilized shells of the saltwater Leda clam, extensive beds of which were created with the retreat of the glacier.

Some of the city’s soils are characterized by wet substratum. These can be found in the areas along the Mystic River and former Millers River and overlap with locations of artificial fill and flood prone parts of the city.

Because of Somerville’s history of intensive land use, the soils in its parks and open spaces are designated as “Complex Urban Soil.” Commonly referred to as “urban fill,” these soils must often be removed and replaced or amended to support healthy plant growth. Soil is typically tested for nutrients, pH, and texture, as well as contaminants based on the land-use history of the site. In garden sites where



the soil conditions cannot be ameliorated, raised beds provide clean soil for community growing and urban agriculture.

There are no prime farmland soils in Somerville.

## **Topography**

Across the city, elevations range from below sea level under the Mystic River to 137 feet above sea level at Spring Hill. The drumlins left by the glacier greatly shaped how communities across the city developed and we recognize them today as: Clarendon Hill, Powder House Hill, Spring Hill, Prospect Hill, Winter Hill, Central Hill, and Mount Benedict (see Appendix A: Topography Map).

This topography was further defined by the Mystic River flowing along the northern edge of the city, Alewife Brook along its west, and Millers River along the southeast. While Millers River has since been buried, the low elevations around Union Square and the southeast corner of the city were carved by that waterway. Similar low elevations are found along the Mystic River where marshland was filled in.

## **4B. Landscape Character**

As discussed above, the Somerville physical landscape is characterized by its river borders and series of hills with relatively steep sides and outcroppings of slate. These hills create distinct neighborhoods and provide panoramic views of the Metropolitan Boston area while the Mystic River and Alewife Brook offer chances for water access and passive recreation.

Today, the Somerville landscape is very much a cityscape. Neighborhoods possess distinct urban, human-scaled, and walkable character. Historic patterns of land subdivision created a regular rhythm of 4,000 square foot lots occupied by detached two- and three-family homes. Main-street style commercial districts generally run from east to west, and where major roads intersect, town squares have evolved over time. Nearly every Somerville neighborhood contains the key amenities for daily life: a public school, parks and playgrounds, convenience retail and service businesses, community centers, and places of worship.

Somerville contains 81,045 residents in only 4.12 square miles. The population density in Somerville has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, residents are well served by a variety of open spaces within a very short walk. On the other hand, little land has been left undeveloped and competing development interests (e.g.: housing, commercial, or open space) makes it hard to acquire new tracts of land for open space or recreation. Large parcels of land are rarely, if ever, available and are prohibitively expensive to acquire at an average assessed acquisition cost of over 17 million dollars per acre.

Much of Somerville's landscape character can be found in its vibrant and creatively designed streetscapes, parks, and recreational areas. The juxtaposition of these open spaces with historic buildings and squares, local commercial activity, and the city's diverse residential population lend Somerville a truly unique urban feel.



## Civic Space Types

Since Somerville does not have large open tracts of preserved land, the City places high value on the wide range of open space types—everything from a sports field to a small plaza adjacent to a train station. During the development of the City’s 2019 Somerville Zoning Ordinance, we developed clear categories of “Civic Spaces,” which refer to open spaces that support “civic, cultural, ecological, recreational, or social activities.”<sup>29</sup> We use this term to describe open space at multiple scales:

**Parks.** A park is a civic space type designed for active and passive recreation, with its character defined by the uses and features provided to meet the needs of different user groups. There are four subtypes of parks: Regional Park, Community Park, Neighborhood Park, and Pocket Park. While each of these types may be unique in terms of their size, vegetation, furnishings, and components, they must all provide varied spaces that accommodate a wide range of ages, physical abilities, and programming. They must be welcoming, comfortable, and provide shade.

**Commons.** A common is designed for passive recreation and civic purposes and it is mostly vegetated, perhaps by lawn. There are three subtypes of commons: Public Common, Public Square, and Green. The openness of these spaces keeps options open for residents to engage in different forms of play, sports, picnics, events, and simple relaxation.

**Plazas.** A plaza is designed for passive recreation, civic engagement, and commercial activities. These spaces are typically paved with more minimal vegetation. Plazas are generally located in activity centers or the nexus of major roads, trains, or paths. There are three subtypes of plaza: a Central Plaza, Through Block Plaza, and a Pocket Plaza.

## Civic Uses

The Zoning Ordinance defines a variety of “Civic Uses”. They include the wide range of activities that residents expect from their open spaces (e.g.: community gardens or splash pads). The table in Appendix B identifies the use types in each open space parcel in Somerville and their locations are shown in Appendix A: Open Space Inventory Map.

**Athletic Field.** Athletic fields can be natural or synthetic turf and are designed for sports including soccer, baseball, and football. The recreational backbone for field users, both formal and informal, is twelve City-owned properties including Conway Park, Capuano Field, Hodgkins-Curtain Park, Lincoln Park, Nunziato Field, and Trum Field. There are also two DCR-owned regional parks (Foss Park and Dilboy Stadium and Auxiliary Fields) and the playing fields owned by Tufts University. A 2016 planning process identified the need for additional fields and field renovations. Since then, the City has built new fields at Somerville High School, the Healey School, and small fields at the West Somerville Neighborhood School, Winter Hill Community

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<sup>29</sup> City of Somerville, “Glossary,” in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 12.

School, and the Benjamin Brown School. They also renovated the Dilboy Stadium Field, Capuano Field, East Somerville Community School, and Conway Park.

**Café Seating.** These spaces, equipped with tables and chairs, are used for sitting, eating, games, and gathering. Often located in urban plazas, which are not conventionally considered recreational or open space, this civic use supports the vibrancy of a city's street life. Cafe seating can be accommodated on small parcels of land and can activate their use dramatically. Recently, pilot projects introducing movable furniture have worked towards re-imagining and activating street and plaza space.

**Dog Park.** Somerville has four parks designed for dogs to interact off-leash: Edward Leathers Community Park, Lincoln Park, Nunziato Field, and Zero New Washington Street Park. When properly planned and sited, dog parks are assets for community residents—dog owners and non-dog owners alike. They reduce the need for leash-law enforcement and provide a safe, secure environment for dogs and their owners to exercise and interact without competing with other park uses.

**Landmark.** Parcels of land set aside to commemorate a historic person or event are called landmarks. These include historic cemeteries, small parks (e.g.: Henry Hansen Park), or landscaped areas (e.g.: Paul Revere Park), as well as memorial structures and sculptures erected to commemorate people or events (e.g.: Union Soldier Memorial).

**Passive.** Passive recreation areas accommodate varied uses including walking, jogging, picnicking, sitting, and traveling on trails or paths. Given the restorative role of naturalistic parks in a dense, urban landscape, the city's passive parks are an important use type. Powder House Park (Nathan Tufts), Lou Ann David Park, ESCA Park, and Prospect Hill Parks provide meandering walks, while smaller parks like Edward Leathers Community Park, Quincy Street Park, and Symphony Park, offer contemplative spaces. Although water quality in the Mystic River and Alewife Brook are not yet pristine, paths and parks along these water features still provide valuable passive recreation. Sylvester Baxter Riverfront Park, Blessing of the Bay Park, and the soon-to-be-renovated Draw Seven Park continue to bring people to the Mystic River connect them to nature.

**Performance Space.** Often a feature in multi-use spaces, this use identifies spaces designed for live performances of cultural entertainment or artistic expression such as concerts, dance, comedy, literary readings, performance art, and theater. These spaces are important given the value of public art in Somerville. Street festivals, music performances, and art exhibits are not only a local source of pride, but a regional draw to the city. Multi-use amphitheaters, stages, and

display areas are crucial to supporting the vibrancy of the arts in Somerville. They can be found in spaces such as Symphony Park, Kenney Park, Lou Ann David Park, and Chuckie Harris Park.

**Playground.** Playgrounds are structured areas designed for children's play. Across the city, the most common civic use is playgrounds typically no more than a half-acre in size. There are 40 playgrounds in total. With 5,889 children under 10,<sup>30</sup> that averages to 147 children per playground. According to our 2024 walkability analysis, XX.X% of Somerville residents are within a quarter mile walk of a playground.

**Public Service.** This use accommodates essential government services that benefit the community at large. This can include municipal operations such as departmental offices, social service facilities, and public works facilities; public safety services, such as police and firefighting headquarters and substations; and open spaces reserved for social and recreational activities or natural resource protection.

**Schoolyard.** Many of the city's elementary/middle schools have an attached yard used for recess, gym, and events. In the past, these were often an asphalt expanse. The City has worked hard in recent years to build better play and learning environments adjacent to schools. Since 2016, six schoolyards have been renovated in the order of their condition (poor to high condition). The Kennedy School is the only remaining yard to be completed, though one of its playgrounds was renovated in 2015 and it is slated to begin the community design process in 2024. Schoolyards primarily serve the adjacent school, however they are used during non-school hours by neighborhood residents. They are not, however, protected open space.

**Skate Park/Rink.** Any facility providing a level surface intended for skating or a collection of ramps and other obstacles intended for use by skateboarders or bicyclists counts as this use type. Skateboard elements can be found in Lincoln Park and Morse-Kelley Playground.

**Urban Agriculture.** This use can range from a parcel of land divided into individual garden plots for residents to grow food to a larger urban farm working to produce sellable crops. There are currently 13 community gardens in use throughout the city. Together they comprise over 238 differently sized plots, including 13 ADA-accessible plots all of which are being gardened. Community garden plots are very desirable in Somerville and, as of 2023, around 400 people are on a waiting list. Each community garden has a garden coordinator who works with the Conservation Commission to ensure that the gardens are properly maintained. Some of these gardens have been in production for over 40 years and all are sources of community pride. Two

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<sup>30</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics," 2020.

are privately owned (Tufts and Avon), one is on MBTA land leased by the City (Bikeway Community Garden), and one is on land owned by the Somerville Housing Authority for the exclusive use of its residents (Mystic). South Street Farm, which is farmed by Groundwork Somerville, a non-profit group focusing on at-risk youth, operates the only urban farm in the city.

**Water Feature.** This use can be a feature of a civic space involving water in a variety of ways from spray heads and fountains to pools, ponds, cascades, waterfalls, and streams. Given that temperatures are increasing across the globe, water features are a vital civic use to provide increased relief from heat in the summer. They are one of the most popular features of Somerville's open space in the summer.

## 4C. Water Resources

While Somerville's water resources create a unique open space amenity and distinctive riparian environments in an otherwise urban context, development and pollution of these water resources limits their full potential for active water usage.

### **Watersheds**

Because of its distinct topography, Somerville contributes to two watersheds. The Charles River Watershed occupies its southern half, while the Mystic River Watershed runs along its northern half (see Appendix A: Water Resources Map). Both watersheds have important advocacy organizations with whom the City partners: the Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) and the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA).

### **Surface Water Resources**

Surface water resources, shared with Medford and Arlington, consist of the last mile of Alewife Brook and the last mile of the lower Mystic River down to the Amelia Earhart Dam. These waterways form the northern and western boundaries of Somerville and are part of the Mystic River watershed. This watershed encompasses approximately 76 square miles and contains 21 cities and towns in which over 600,000 people live.

#### **Alewife Brook**

A once-meandering brook surrounded by wetlands, the Alewife Brook has been substantially altered by development starting in the early 19th century. Industrial activity and clay extraction for bricks led to the disappearance of the historic river conditions. 20th century development, including channelization to deepen and straighten the brook's path, led to the form that we recognize today. The land along the river is owned by DCR and one portion borders the edge of the Dilboy Pool and Stadium.

## Mystic River

Formerly a tidal estuary before the construction of the Amelia Earhart Dam in the 1960s, the Mystic River is a slow-moving urban river with open parklands and riparian vegetation along its banks. DCR-owned riverside parks, including Blessing of the Bay, Sylvester Baxter, and Draw Seven, offer pleasing views and support a diversity of plants and animals. Assembly Square, a development begun in the last decade and still under construction, is located along its eastern banks. This area is a mixed-use urban neighborhood and commercial district with access to public transportation and vibrant outdoor spaces.

## Millers River

The Millers River once ran from Union Square to the Charles River and was buried in the 1870s. This created more land for industrial activity but eliminated habitat and stormwater drainage connections to adjacent water bodies. Now sections of the river flow underground through a series of drainpipes in Cambridge that empty into the Charles River. The underground flow also affects combined sewer overflow (CSO) drainage into the Mystic River due to interconnections throughout the City's pipes. Over the years, stormwater flooding has been a consistent issue around the former location of the river (particularly in Union Square). The City has invested heavily in underground system improvements and green stormwater infrastructure in this area to minimize future flooding.

## Water Quality

Water quality in the Mystic River Watershed is similar to other urbanized watersheds. Dense development and historic CSO systems contribute pollutants to the water. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s 2022 report card of compliance with water quality standards, the Upper Mystic Lake received an "A+" while Alewife Brook was rated a "D" (consistent with the last eight years' measurements) and the Mystic River a "B." While the "B" rating is a decrease from the A-rating received between 2015-2019,<sup>31</sup> it is a significant improvement from the "D" rating it received when the EPA issued its first report card in 2007.<sup>32</sup> Today it is typically okay to boat on the Mystic River, but it is not safe to swim or fish.

As of their reporting in April of 2023, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) and the cities of Somerville and Cambridge reported that the water in the Alewife Brook/Upper Mystic River Basin continues to struggle with bacteria and other pollutants. This includes pet and animal waste in stormwater runoff, nutrients (primarily phosphorus) that cause algae blooms, and CSOs.<sup>33</sup> Due to the nature of river systems, contamination sources all along Alewife Brook and the Mystic River result in limitations to recreation and ecological well-being in Somerville and each town is working to address these concerns in some way.

## Combined Sewer Overflows

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<sup>31</sup> EPA, "Mystic River Watershed Report Cards," 2023.

<sup>32</sup> EPA, "About the Mystic River Watershed," 2023.

<sup>33</sup> EPA, "Environmental Challenges for the Mystic River Watershed," 2023.

As described in Section 3D, CSO systems are common in older cities. When inundated in high rainfall events, more frequent now due to climate change, they release a combination of stormwater and wastewater into adjacent water bodies. Discharges at the two outfalls in Somerville on Alewife Brook and the Mystic River prevent wastewater from backing up into homes or streets during heavy rainfall, but they contribute to water pollution.

The municipalities around these waterways along with the MWRA (through its Long-Term CSO Control Plan), have closed 72 out of 86 CSOs in the metro Boston area and accomplished an 88% reduction in CSO volume discharges.<sup>34</sup> The remaining open CSO outfalls in Somerville continue to relieve pipes during large rain events. As the City completes sewer separation projects, the frequency of discharges of stormwater and sewage will continue to decrease.

Contaminant concerns can include microbial pathogens (i.e. bacteria, viruses, and parasites) and toxins (i.e. metals and synthetic organic chemicals). Exposure can cause skin irritation to gastrointestinal illness in humans. To avoid any health risks, public health officials recommend avoiding contact with the Alewife Brook/Upper Mystic River Basin for 48 hours after rainfall. Somerville, Cambridge, and MWRA all have rapid reporting systems and online notifications that alert residents of outfall discharges to the Alewife Brook/Upper Mystic River Basin. According to this system, the Alewife Brook outfall discharged 12 times in Somerville in 2023.<sup>35</sup>

Somerville City staff are in the midst of a planning process to control CSO outfall events even further<sup>36</sup> and local and state groups continue to advocate for the reduction of sewage overflow.

The combination of grassroots, municipal, regional, and national efforts continue to improve water quality in Somerville. The EPA works at a broad level through its permit requirements for pollutant discharge to surface waters and enforcement orders that demand municipalities identify and fix sewage discharges. Local advocacy groups, the City, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, neighboring municipalities, and MWRA work to increase access to water resources, to educate residents about the importance of urban waterways, and to implement physical projects to reduce future pollution.

## **Wetlands**

Most of Somerville's wetlands were lost due to extensive development during the first half of the 20th century. Those that remain are restricted to the 100-foot buffer zone on the shores of the lower Mystic River. They provide landscape diversity, natural habitat, flood mitigation, and recreational enjoyment. An inspection by the Conservation Commission in 2007 determined there were no other existing wetlands within the city. The limited quantity makes them a vital resource worthy of preservation.

While there is little wetland ecology in Somerville, wetlands can be found up and downstream of the city. The Mystic River Reservation on the northern shore of the Mystic River in Medford contains important habitat and is a much-used recreation area with more wetlands than along Somerville's river

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<sup>34</sup> City of Somerville, "Combined Sewer Overflow Control Planning Program," 2023.

<sup>35</sup> City of Somerville, "Combined and Sanitary Sewer Overflow Control," 2024.

<sup>36</sup> City of Somerville, "Combined Sewer Overflow Control Planning Program," 2023.

edge. Supporting ecological functions along the entire Mystic River and Alewife Brook can support the well-being of human and non-human species in Somerville.

### **Aquifer Recharge Areas**

Somerville contains no drinking-water supply aquifer recharge areas. The closest aquifer recharge area is in Medford. This aquifer is classified by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) as a medium-yield, “non-potential drinking water source.” Somerville obtains its drinking water from the MWRA and Quabbin Reservoir.

### **Flood Hazards**

Somerville’s historic floodplain was likely much larger than it is today. The filling of marshlands to make way for rail yards and other industries, combined with the channeling of Millers River and the construction of the Amelia Earhart Dam, eliminated most of the City’s flood storage capacity. These actions also made it possible to develop right up to the river’s edge, which puts residents at risk of flooding throughout the watershed.

Today, FEMA delineates flood risk in areas north of the Amelia Earhart Dam, particularly around Assembly Square, Foss Park, and along Alewife Brook.<sup>37</sup> DCR parklands in these areas (Blessing of the Bay, Foss, and Dilboy) provide important water storage capacity during flood events.

Recent flood mapping in Somerville has expanded our understanding of flood risk from these areas along the Alewife Brook and Mystic River to a block-by-block picture of inundation even in the innermost parts of the city.<sup>38</sup> This is in line with what we see today. Even now, much of the city’s lower elevation neighborhoods—including Assembly Square, Union Square, Somerville Avenue, historic rail beds, and parts of Davis Square—suffer from localized stormwater flooding during heavy storm events. This will likely intensify as the climate changes.

The *Citywide Flood Mitigation and Water Quality Master Plan* (2022) sought to understand the root causes of flooding and identify mitigation actions (four projects are now in the early design stage).<sup>39</sup> Other flood relief projects include: the addition of green infrastructure along Somerville Avenue, Spring Hill Sewer project, small incentives like the “Adopt-a-drain” initiative,<sup>40</sup> and the Poplar Street Pump Station (described in Section 3D.2).<sup>41</sup> Educational initiatives like our “Flood Ready” program prepare residents for flooding events and encourage actions to reduce its negative impacts.<sup>42</sup> Zoning changes, like the addition of a Floodplain Overlay District, aim to prevent damage and emergencies by requiring development to be in compliance with flood-safe building codes and to restrict development that might

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<sup>37</sup> FEMA, “FEMA Flood Map Service Center.”

<sup>38</sup> City of Somerville, *Urban Flooding Map* (2022).

<sup>39</sup> City of Somerville, *Citywide Flood Mitigation and Water Quality Master Plan* (2022).

<sup>40</sup> City of Somerville, “Stormwater Management,” 2023.

<sup>41</sup> City of Somerville, “Poplar Street Pump Station,” 2023.

<sup>42</sup> City of Somerville, “Flood Ready,” 2023.

obstruct flood flows away from community assets.<sup>43</sup> Building permitting and our Green Score reviews (see Section 3D.3) also monitor the amount of impervious surfaces and incentivize permeable surfaces, raingardens, green roofs, and vegetation to support infiltration and water storage on private properties. These strategies are great for diverting stormwater from city sewer systems and reducing flooding.

We have limited locations to store stormwater, so the City has been constructing storage chambers under its parks and schoolyards. Lincoln Park, renovated in 2018, can hold 250,000 gallons of water under the sports fields. Symphony Park, renovated in 2015, has a 2,000-gallon storage tank to capture stormwater and reuse it for irrigation. Conway Park contains 3,743 cubic feet of stormwater storage in underground chambers and a sand filter layer underneath the athletic field. In other parks, rain gardens and other stormwater storage features create “performance landscapes” that are solving contemporary flooding problems. This integration of stormwater storage and open spaces continues to be a priority for park projects in Somerville, though they cannot solve the issue alone.

All of these actions, educational efforts, zoning requirements, stormwater infrastructure projects, are directly in line with the Climate Forward Plan (2024).<sup>44</sup>

## Recreation

As the water quality of the Alewife Brook and the Mystic River improves, both areas attract users pursuing recreational interests like boating, canoeing, kayaking, birdwatching, wildlife viewing, and fishing (in the Mystic). The Blessing of the Bay Boathouse, owned by DCR and shared between private rowing clubs and the City’s recreation department, offers public canoe rentals. In the past decade, the City, DCR, and MyRWA worked to improve boat house access through design changes and by enlivening it with public art and signage.

Regional planning groups that include Somerville, like the Resilient Mystic Collaborative and its Lower Mystic Working Group,<sup>45</sup> consider these waterfront areas as important community resources and potential points of connection between municipalities.

## 4D. Vegetation

Dense development in Somerville substantially limits the size of vegetated zones. The largest swaths of vegetation can be found in parks, along railway corridors, and river edges. To fully understand the ecology of this city, one must look at private properties. Trees in backyards make up an important component of our urban forest and shrub and perennial plantings offer habitat and forage for pollinators and other wildlife.

Community gardens and small urban farms are our only agricultural lands. Though they bear little resemblance to Somerville’s traditional agricultural past, they offer an outlet for community building, food production, and contribute to the range of plant species growing in the city.

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<sup>43</sup> City of Somerville, “Overlay Districts,” in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 393.

<sup>44</sup> City of Somerville, *Climate Forward* (2024).

<sup>45</sup> “Resilient Mystic Collaborative,” 2023.



The riparian soils along the Mystic River and Alewife Brook support a diversity of mature vegetation. In 2018, the tree species along the Mystic River were inventoried revealing the dominance of non-native Lindens and Norway maples. Other species included alder, ash, birch, black pine, cottonwood, red oak, and staghorn sumac.<sup>46</sup> Invasive species—most notably water chestnut, phragmites, oriental bittersweet, and Norway maple—have infested large areas along the shorelines. Invasive vegetation competes with native plants for limited natural resources, dominating habitats and reducing food and shelter for native wildlife. Groups like MyRWA organize volunteers every year to remove plants like water chestnut and bittersweet. In 2022 alone, 1,303 volunteers removed 2,555 baskets of water chestnut, 388 bags of Bittersweet, and 727 bags of trash.<sup>47</sup>

Somerville's parks are home to some of the largest concentrations of trees and feature some of the most mature and stately trees in the city. Powder House Park (Nathan Tufts) has many mature red oaks and white pines over 80 feet tall. The City is actively planting trees throughout parks and schoolyards to foster comfortable, shady public spaces in anticipation of increasing heat extremes.

Though the tree species are diverse across the city, there are no known rare or endangered plant or tree species in Somerville.

## Urban Forestry

The City completed its Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) in 2021 and determined that 14.6% of Somerville's land is covered by tree canopy according to 2018 aerial imaging. By far the largest number of public trees can be found along the city's streets. Nearly 14,000 trees grow on publicly owned property in Somerville (e.g.: in parks and on municipal- or state-owned properties), and over 9,000 of these are found along the public right-of-way (i.e., street trees). About 2/3 of the city's tree canopy is found on private residential and commercial property, creating a patchwork across the city. Together, these public and private trees comprise a vital urban tree canopy which offers a host of ecological, social, and economic benefits.

The UFMP estimates that trees on public and private property provide residents with "almost \$283,869 annually in quantifiable benefits related to stormwater runoff reduction, air quality improvements, and carbon sequestration." On top of that, the amount of carbon stored in the woody tissue of those trees over their lifetime adds an additional \$2.2 million in benefits.<sup>48</sup> In addition to their monetary value, trees provide innumerable environmental, aesthetic, and psychological benefits that cannot be quantified based on tree canopy data.

### Management and Oversight

The City's Urban Forestry program is split between two departments: DPW and OSPCD. Two Urban Forestry Planners in OSPCD collaborate with the DPW Tree Warden to meet the city's tree canopy needs and goals. DPW's urban forestry work focuses on reacting to resident concerns regarding tree health and public safety via a three-person tree crew as well as outside

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<sup>46</sup> Offshoots, "Living Tapestry," 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Mystic River Watershed Association, "Invasive Plants," 2023.

<sup>48</sup> City of Somerville, *Urban Forest Management Plan* (2021), 18.

contractors. Meanwhile, the two Urban Forestry Planners in OSPCD manage the planting of trees on city streets, spearhead proactive maintenance, and planning and policy efforts to protect trees. A community-led Urban Forestry Committee advises the management and maintenance of all existing and new trees and shrubs on public grounds and public ways. They meet monthly to review policies, promote and educate residents on the benefits of trees, and review tree removal and maintenance issues.

### Increasing Tree Canopy

The UFMP makes a clear argument for increasing urban canopy cover and sets a goal of reaching 16% landcover. To get there, we need to involve residents and City staff. We need to plant trees on private and public property, to make efficient use of existing pervious landscapes, to plant large-growing trees, and to reduce tree loss through maintenance.<sup>49</sup> City staff currently plant at least 350 street trees every year and actively replace young trees that did not establish successfully. They also take opportunities to add and replace trees during public construction or renovation projects.

Exact planting locations are informed by resident requests and evaluations of canopy density data in each ward. They seek to address disparities and climate change vulnerability. The 2018 inventory also assessed the most common tree species and their ecological benefits. It found that three species are dominant (Norway maple, Callery pear, and red maple) and 44% are native to New England. With this data, OSPCD staff carefully select species that are appropriate for each planting location and diversify the species ratio while maximizing ecosystem services (e.g.: stormwater capture and carbon sequestration) and survivability.

Tree placement also considers physical limitations of each space and ensures that ADA requirements on the city's sidewalk and streets are maintained.

### Care & Maintenance

To reach the goal of 16% canopy landcover, proactive tree maintenance is essential. It helps prevent property damage, injury, and fosters long-term tree health. Currently, the Tree Warden and Urban Forestry Planners conduct tree inspections and direct mature tree maintenance by external arborist contractors. New trees under warranty are watered and maintained by the external planting contractor. Future DPW staff hires will increase internal capacity to manage maintenance requests for public tree needs like pruning.

In line with the UFMP's maintenance goals, the Parks Tree Health Program and the Young Tree Training Program are currently cycling through young and public park trees in Somerville. Proactive pruning aim to increase tree health and longevity, reducing the need for tree removal or costly high-priority tree maintenance in the future (see "Success Stories" for more details).

### Education & Stewardship

Since 66% of Somerville's tree canopy is located on private lands, educating the public about the importance of trees and how to care for them is critical to their survival. The Urban Forestry

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<sup>49</sup> City of Somerville, *Urban Forest Management Plan* (2021), 28.

Committee is partly tasked with engaging the public at events throughout the year. The “Adopt-A-Tree” program tries to get residents invested in their street trees by inviting them to water, mulch, and weed around new trees to help them establish successfully. Each time a resident engages with the Green Score permitting process, they are also encouraged to think about the value of their trees. Many points are given for preserving trees and planting high-value, large tree species. All these public relations efforts will bolster citizen interest and City support for the Somerville urban tree canopy.

#### 4E. Fisheries and Wildlife

Although Somerville lacks large areas of conserved habitat, it does support a diversity of plant and animal species typical in an urban environment. This biodiversity is greatest along the Mystic River and Alewife Brook and thins toward the city’s center, where there is less desirable habitat.

Resident mammals are spread throughout the city, occurring in many neighborhoods, parks, and along railroads. These mammals include gray squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats, rabbits, raccoons, opossums, skunks, and even brown bats. Coyotes are frequent visitors along the railbeds in Inner Belt and Brickbottom. More heavily vegetated areas and parks along the river may provide access points for foxes, muskrats, moles, shrews, and other mammals into Somerville, but documentation of these species is minimal. It should be noted that all the latter species have been seen upriver from Somerville and therefore have the potential for occurring in the city.

Given its location along the Atlantic Flyway migration corridor, bird life is relatively varied in Somerville. 122 species are identified on iNaturalist including sparrows, finches, cardinals, chickadees, juncos, mockingbirds, blue jays, crows, downy woodpeckers, mourning doves, pigeons, robins, nuthatches, catbirds, starlings, grackles, gulls, mallards, Canada geese, turkeys, red-tailed hawks, Cooper’s hawks, kestrel, swans, herons, terns, osprey, and woodcocks.<sup>50</sup> Many of these birds can only be found in specific habitats such as along the Mystic River. The Massachusetts Audubon Society has designated the Mystic River Watershed as an “Important Bird Area.”<sup>51</sup> Each Spring, the herring and alewife run (discussed below) provides a tremendous food source for gulls, cormorants, and is vital for black-crowned night-herons. The common tern, last seen in Somerville in 2017, is the only “Species of Concern” listed in the city according to MassWildlife’s Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program.<sup>52</sup>

Between May and June of 2020, over 700,000 blueback herring and alewife migrated up the Mystic River to points beyond the upper Mystic Lake. The surge in population over the past 10 years is thanks to functional fish ladders that allow the fish to pass through dams and travel further upstream.<sup>53</sup> There, the fish spawn and then return to the ocean. While there are no documented sites of herring spawning in Somerville, our city is on their travel route, and they are considered a fishery resource within the city.

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<sup>50</sup>“iNaturalist,” 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Mass Audubon, “Important Bird Area Sites in Massachusetts,” 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Mass.gov, “Rare Species Viewer,” 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Mystic River Watershed Association, “Love Nature? Count Fish,” and “The Amazing Return of Mystic Herring: An Urban Ecological Restoration Story,” 2023.

Other resources include the freshwater fisheries of the Mystic River and Alewife Brook system. The species that make up that system are not well inventoried, but it is known that carp have invaded both the river and the brook.

Groups like the Tuft Pollinator Initiative and Earthwise Aware have led substantial citizen-science observation efforts to understand insect (particularly pollinator) populations in Somerville. The Somerville *Pollinator Action Plan* (2024) builds on this data and examines pollinator species and habitat in the city.<sup>54</sup> It identifies which species are of particular concern and proposes ways to increase habitat for the wide array of native species in Somerville.

One major problem for fisheries and wildlife in Somerville is the fragmentation of available habitat areas. Somerville's open spaces are typically small and interspersed with dense development. Few areas of contiguous passage for wildlife are possible other than the rivers' edges, the community path, and railways. Just as the successful resurgence of herring populations is due to town efforts all along the Mystic River, increasing habitat in Somerville will require substantial collaboration among private and public entities to bridge the developed landscape.

#### 4F. Scenic Resources and Unique Environments

As described in Section 3B, Somerville's history of residential development without planned open space has resulted in a series of small, scattered parks that must meet demanding community needs. Large, scenic landscapes are few, and those that exist (such as Central Hill Park or Foss Park) have suffered from accommodating changing community needs without a master plan to support trees, preserve unique character, and provide adequate maintenance.

Due to its unique physical geography, however, Somerville has an abundance of scenic perspectives in a very small land area (See Appendix A: unique Features Map). Some of the "seven hills of Somerville" command excellent views of the Boston metropolitan area, and hilltop open spaces offer cool breezes and respite in the summer. Protected lands along the Alewife Brook and Mystic River also provide valuable scenic views and a welcome refuge from the city's urban character. Finally, some street corridors provide important scenic perspectives. From east to west through the city there are ten notable scenic vistas in Somerville:

- From the banks of the Lower Mystic River near Assembly Square looking north and east in the direction of the Amelia Earhart Dam, and along Shore Drive looking north and east across the Mystic River toward Medford.
- From the summit of Prospect Hill (particularly from the Prospect Hill Monument) in all directions. Excellent views of the Cambridge and Boston skylines.
- From Central Hill looking toward the northern suburbs (the site of original cannon defenses) and southeast in the direction of the Boston skyline.
- From Winter Hill looking southeast toward the Boston skyline, and west at sunset.
- From the crest of Spring Hill (particularly along Summer Street at St. Catherine's Church and at the corner of Craigie Street) looking south and west over Cambridge.

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<sup>54</sup> City of Somerville, *Somerville Pollinator Action Plan* (forthcoming in 2024).

- Former and current railroad corridors: from any of the railroad bridges looking down the tracks, and along sections of the Community Path looking west toward Route 2 in Arlington.
- From Nathan Tufts (Powder House) Park overlook looking northwest over Tufts University.
- From Powder House Boulevard looking in either direction, for the tree canopy/setback.
- From the open space along the shore of the Alewife Brook on Somerville's western boundary, in all directions.
- From the Healey School's athletic field looking toward the Boston skyline.

### **Historically Significant Areas**

Somerville greatly values and commemorates its significant historic holdings, including many parks and landmarks. Several public landscapes are used for historic reenactments, celebrations, and other educational events.<sup>55</sup> The following open spaces are of particular historic and cultural interest:

#### **Paul Revere Park**

This park is located at the junction of Broadway and Main Street, at the crest of Winter Hill. Locally referred to as the "smallest park in the world," the site is marked by a simple stone to commemorate the route taken by Paul Revere on his ride to Lexington and Concord. This is also the site of the Winter Hill Fort, a Revolutionary stronghold during the siege of Boston and a prisoner of war camp.

#### **Milk Row Cemetery**

Milk Row cemetery is located on the south side of Somerville Avenue opposite the terminus of School Street. Originally part of the Samuel Tufts farm, this land was established as a cemetery in 1808 with the condition that the land be used only as a burying ground and that it always be fenced. The City of Somerville was given control of the site in 1893. The cemetery is no longer in active use but is featured in local historical walks and events. The first Civil War Memorial in the country, erected in 1863, is the main focal point of this site.

#### **Nathan Tufts Park (also known as "Powder House Park")**

This park is the site of a historic powder house, originally built in 1704 as a gristmill. In 1747, the mill was deeded to the Province of Massachusetts Bay for use as a public powder house. The first encounter of the American Revolution occurred here in 1774, when the British seized more than 200 barrels of gunpowder. The property was later owned by the Tufts family, which operated a large brickyard just east of the site. At the end of the 19th century, the family conveyed the property to the City with the stipulation that a park be erected around the Powder House for public use. The Powder House was renovated in the late 1990s and the park renovated in 2003.

#### **Prospect Hill Park**

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<sup>55</sup> Event information can be found here: <http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/historic-events-and-education>.

Prospect Hill, one of the highest of Somerville's drumlins, was the site of camps and fortifications built after the Battle of Bunker Hill. The Battle of Prospect Hill occurred when the British troops were retreating from Lexington and Concord. The first flag of the United Colonists was raised on January 1, 1776, on the highest point of the hill. The top of the hill was later lowered to fill adjacent meadows and to form the Boston and Main railroad yard in the Brickbottom area southeast of Prospect Hill. A monument erected at this site commemorates Somerville's involvement in the Revolutionary War. This park is designated a "Local Historic District."

### **Archaeologically Significant Areas**

Any archaeologically significant sites in Somerville are likely to have been disturbed by extensive movement, extraction, and filling of lands within the City's borders in the past 200 years. The significance of any future uncovered artifacts may hold meaning for the communities connected to their lineage. Consulting those community members, when possible, is necessary to understand if the object or the site holds historic importance.

### **Unique Environments**

According to DCR, as of 2010 there are no designated areas of Critical Environmental Concern within city limits.<sup>56</sup> However, the Mystic River and Alewife Brook are identified as Core Habitat or Critical Natural Landscape by BioMap for their importance to connectivity, natural communities, and resilience.<sup>57</sup> These are the most well-recognized areas of ecological value in the city, though there is increasing interest and appreciation for urban tree canopy and networks of smaller habitats that can increase the experience of nature, resilience to climate change, and support wildlife in an urban context.

## **4G. Environmental Challenges**

As a highly urbanized, coastal city, Somerville faces many challenges shared by our neighbors. City planning must address everything from the effects of climate change to soil contamination to noise, water, and air pollution. Understanding these is key to planning for a healthy and sustainable future.

### **Climate Change Risks – Heat and Flooding**

Somerville, like all cities, is entering a critical phase in planning for, adapting to, and minimizing the impacts of climate change. The region is already seeing increasing temperatures and more hot days, precipitation and drought extremes, and flooding. Planners in Somerville are thinking carefully about reducing greenhouse gas emissions and becoming more resilient and adaptable. Local and regional action is underway and needed more than ever.

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<sup>56</sup> MassGIS, "Areas of Critical Environmental Concern," 2009.

<sup>57</sup> BioMap, "Interactive Map," 2022.

### *Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment*

The *Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment* (CCVA) was first published in 2017 and updated in 2023. The CCVA identifies key areas of concern and ever-increasing vulnerabilities in Somerville. It inventories critical assets (e.g.: schools, medical facilities, food resources, social services, etc.) vulnerable to flooding and neighborhoods that will experience particularly high temperatures. It identifies two important coastal flood inundation paths: one from the Mystic River in Assembly Square and the other from the Charles River Dam, through Cambridge, into Union Square. 82% of Somerville is identified as at risk for extremely high temperatures. This analysis calls out Assembly Square, East Somerville, Union Square, Winter Hill, and Davis Square as neighborhoods with the highest number of assets exposed to either flood or heat.<sup>58</sup> The information in the assessment is used to develop strategies in the *Climate Forward Plan* and will help the City make future decisions that can reduce risks to climate impacts within Somerville and within the region.

### *Climate Forward Plan*

In 2018, the City of Somerville published its first climate action plan (*Climate Forward*) with the goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050. The open space-related action items called for updated stormwater management policies and an expanded tree canopy. A thorough update was released in 2024 and outlines climate goals for 2030 and 2040 to help us get to carbon net-negative by 2050. The strategies and action items aim for a more equitable and climate resilient community.<sup>59</sup>

The update proposes actions related to building standards, energy supply, alternative transportation options, green infrastructure, urban canopy expansion, sustainable material practices, and expansive educational programs and resources for community members.

One *Climate Forward* update goal states that through the implementation of the plan, Somerville's natural systems will be resilient in the face of climate change and provide resilience benefits to all. This goal will be accomplished by prioritizing nature-based solutions and using climate-adaptive practices to enhance our urban tree canopy and open spaces.

### *Climate Change and Public Space*

Open space (everything from parks to sidewalks) has the potential to mitigate stormwater and extreme heat. The City's efforts to plant more trees and create habitat, install stormwater storage tanks under parks, and to explore green infrastructure along roads all work toward these ends (see Section 4C for more information about flood risk and mitigation).

The CCVA and *Climate Forward* plans direct City planners to work in neighborhoods that are particularly vulnerable. For example, flood data points us to consider how natural areas and constructed landscapes along the Mystic River can absorb and filter stormwater to protect interior inhabited areas. Additionally, communities in East Somerville tend to have higher land surface temperatures and lower incomes (See Appendix A: Open Space and Heat Map). This

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<sup>58</sup> City of Somerville, *Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment Update* (2023), 3-8.

<sup>59</sup> City of Somerville, "Climate Forward Update," 2024. <http://voice.somervillema.gov/somerville-climate-forward-update>.

overlap reflects a mix of land use history (Inner Belt and Brickbottom are mostly industrial) and historic investment disparities. Some of these neighborhoods (Assembly, Union Square, Boynton Yards, and Brickbottom) have high development pressure and both the Zoning Ordinance and City staff attempt to guide development to increase open space, tree canopy, habitat, and cool areas for all residents. The City's expanded tree planting efforts also address some of these temperature concerns. Parks and street trees can be part of the solution to alleviate flood water and heat pressures, especially for more vulnerable populations.

OSPCD is already implementing strategies so that the city's parks can play a role in mitigating contributions to climate change and building community resilience. Somerville staff are planning for and implementing the following practices:

- Selecting plant and turf species that are more resilient to heat and precipitation/drought extremes.
- Building biodiverse ecosystems in parks with horticultural maintenance and careful plant selection to create habitat.
- Exploring sustainable building material choices.
- Reducing water usage through drought-tolerant plant species selection, low-flow water heads in water features, and the reuse and capture of stormwater.
- Improving stormwater retention capacity in all parks with permeable pavements, underground storage chambers, and rain gardens.
- Increasing tree cover on sidewalks, parks, and open spaces to reduce heat island effect.
- Planting trees strategically to provide shade in playgrounds, gathering and active areas.
- Continuing to survey the health of the tree canopy, pruning as needed, and replanting dead and dying trees to help mitigate heat extremes.
- Adapting tree care and species selection to pest and disease risk.
- Reducing energy consumption for lights and fountains by upgrading to energy efficient systems and equipment.

## **Air and Noise Pollution**

Major highways cut through several Somerville neighborhoods exposing our residents to harmful air pollution and acting as a barrier to access for many public parks, playgrounds, and open spaces including Foss Park and DCR parklands along the Mystic River. The City of Somerville works closely with numerous community partners to study and mitigate the impacts of near-highway air pollution. Community-based organizations including the Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership have partnered with Tufts University and other research institutions to collect extensive scientific data on the levels of ultrafine particulate matter and other harmful traffic-generated pollutants in our Winter Hill, Ten Hills, Mystic Apartments, and East Somerville neighborhoods. The 2022 Cambridge Health Alliance also published a *Regional Wellbeing Report* which further details air pollution risks in the region.<sup>60</sup> The City's mitigation strategies include working to reduce motor vehicle traffic, planning and designing physical barriers between major roadways and adjacent neighborhoods, and upgrading building systems such as windows

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<sup>60</sup> Cambridge Health Alliance, *Regional Wellbeing Report* (2022), 53-56.



and HVAC systems in homes near the highways. PSUF is also building parks in these underserved neighborhoods with thick evergreen plantings to mitigate air pollution. An example is ESCA Park along I-93 which opened in 2023.

## **Brownfields**

Somerville's brownfields program is administered by the OSPCD Economic Development Division. The program comprises several innovative initiatives to remediate brownfields sites owned by public, private, and non-profit redevelopers. These initiatives have catalyzed new housing, parks, and commercial development throughout Somerville. For example, Somerville coordinated federal, state, and local resources to clean up and transform the former Kiley Barrel site into a 700,000 square foot mixed-use development adjacent to the new MBTA Union Square Station. Somerville's program features a Brownfields Cleanup Revolving Loan Fund, which can be used to loan cleanup funds to private developers and grant funds for City projects.<sup>61</sup>

Somerville has worked with the EPA on several brownfields-to-parks conversion projects. These include the Allen Street Community Garden, Somerville Junction Park, and Ed Leathers Park. Most recently, the City partnered with the EPA and the DEP to clean up soils underneath the Conway Park ballfield. This involved the removal of 8,714 tons of contaminated soil and field reconstruction with enough cover material to prevent any direct contact with residual pollutants. The partnership was unprecedented in the region and today the once contaminated site is Somerville's most heavily used athletic field.

## **Landfills**

All municipal solid waste generated in Somerville is taken to a waste-to-energy facility in Saugus. All recyclable materials generated in Somerville are transported to a Materials Recovery Facility in Charlestown, MA. The athletic field of the former Matignon School was used as a landfill in the early 1900s, terminating prior to 1930.

## **Ground and Surface Water Pollution (Point and Non-Point Source)**

Despite ongoing monitoring and containment efforts by City departments and Somerville's Conservation Commission, point and non-point source water pollution remains a major obstacle to the realization of recreational goals for the City's waterways. The Mystic River and Alewife Brook are on the DEP's 2022 Integrated List of Waters for a variety of causes such as E. Coli, oil and grease, phosphorus, high pH, lead, copper, and trash, among others.<sup>62</sup>

Point-source pollution originates primarily from upstream CSOs outside the City's jurisdiction, as well as the two remaining CSOs in Somerville. These impacts are magnified by illegal sewer hookups to stormwater collection systems. These problems are shared by most of Somerville's neighbors, however significant improvements have been made in the last decade (see Sections 3D and 4C for more details).

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<sup>61</sup> City of Somerville, "Brownfields Remediation Assistance," 2024.

<sup>62</sup> EPA, *Final Mass Integrated List of Waters* (2023), 128 and 131.

This includes active implementation of the Illicit Detection and Discharge Elimination Program to identify any illegal sewer hookups.<sup>63</sup>

Non-point source pollution issues arise from stormwater flowing through Somerville's urbanized development—particularly its expansive impermeable surfaces such as streets, paved residential yards, and commercial lots. These impervious surfaces generate large volumes of stormwater runoff, which is commonly contaminated with road and highway dirt, auto leakage, animal waste, trash, and other contaminants. Phosphorus is a particular concern as it accumulates in waterbodies from landscaping fertilizers, road salt, animal waste, car exhaust, and plant and leaf litter. Excess phosphorus in waterbodies can cause harmful algae blooms. Again, Somerville shares these non-point water pollution issues with most neighboring communities. The *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* places limits on impervious surfaces for new developments and requires landscaped areas on all lots to reduce runoff.

### **Sedimentation**

The accumulation of sediment on the concrete bottom of the Alewife Brook is a long-standing, historic condition. This area was once tidal but since the construction of the Amelia Earhart Dam, sediment does not flow downstream as it once did and builds up in the channel. Sediment that has accumulated may contain contamination that would be dangerous to disturb. Alewife Brook is recognized as an important resource and the City, in collaboration with state agencies, the Conservation Commission, and local community groups, continues to explore means for safely improving water quality and preventing further sedimentation.

### **Invasive Species**

Either by accident or brought in as specimens, certain species have found a home in our local ecosystem. According to the state, 725 plant species are “naturalized” (non-native) and 72 in that group are classified as “invasive.”<sup>64</sup> “Invasive” indicates their tendency to out-compete, displace, or kill native species. These include garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*), Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*), and black swallow-wort (*Cynanchum louiseae*) which is toxic and threatens monarch butterflies and songbirds. The City publishes a “Most Un-Wanted Weeds” list to aid volunteer groups in identifying invasives on its website and a partnership between staff and community groups seeks to spread the word annually about the importance of black swallow-wort removal.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to plants, some invasive insects like the Asian longhorned beetle, emerald ash borer, and the spotted lanternfly can damage or kill native tree species. Somerville has over 1,000 ash trees which are under threat from the emerald ash borer. Our ability to support a healthy urban canopy and wildlife habitat is challenged by these species and arborists are actively working on solutions including bi-yearly inoculation of Ash trees.

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<sup>63</sup> City of Somerville, *Final Illicit Discharge Detection and Elimination Plan* (2022).

<sup>64</sup> MassWildlife, “Invasive Plants,” 2024.

<sup>65</sup> City of Somerville, “Plantings in City Spaces: Information on Natives Policy & Invasive Plants,” 2024.

Considerable invasive-species data has been collected in certain areas (e.g., along Mystic River and the Somerville Community Path) and about invasive trees, however a citywide inventory of the types and density of invasive populations in Somerville has not been completed.

### **Biodiversity Crisis**

For National Climate Week in 2023, Governor Maura Healey signed an executive order directing the state to develop biodiversity goals.<sup>66</sup> Just a few months prior, Somerville staff began work on a pollinator action plan to address threats to pollinator biodiversity. These actions reflect an awareness of the urgent need to respond to global biodiversity loss from habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution, climate change, and invasive species. The health of humans is directly related to non-humans (e.g.: many insects facilitate food growth by pollinating flowers). These actions at state and local levels mark an important movement to support wildlife even in an urban context. Somerville is proud to be at the forefront of these efforts (look to our Somerville Pollinator Action Plan for more information).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Governor Healey and Driscoll, *No. 618: Biodiversity Conservation in Massachusetts* (2023).

<sup>67</sup> City of Somerville, *Somerville Pollinator Action Plan* (2024).

## Section 5: Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest

As this Plan illustrates, the City of Somerville's parks and open spaces comprise a vital resource for individuals, neighborhoods, and the city as a whole. All of these spaces are used extensively by the city's more than 80,000 residents. As articulated in SomerVision 2040 and by community members during our outreach process, the desires to expand, protect, and activate open spaces are important shared community values.

According to our Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) open space is: "A ground level or upper story outdoor landscaped area including, but not limited to, natural woodlands, yards, forecourts, courtyards, green roofs and civic spaces."<sup>68</sup> The 2019 ordinance update added the term "Civic Space" to the glossary. This definition reads:

An open space designed to support civic, cultural, ecological, recreational, or social activities. Civic space types are defined by a combination of characteristics, including the interrelationship between the intended uses, size, landscape design, and abutting real property.<sup>69</sup>

This is a change from the prior OSPR, when "open space" meant publicly accessible land (publicly owned or privately owned). As of 2019, the SZO uses "civic space" to contrast and distinguish landscaped areas that could be public or private. Section 13.1 of the SZO describes the many standards that define public civic spaces from open hours to tree cover to dimensions.<sup>70</sup> This section is intended to leverage private development funds into quality civic spaces.

### 5A. Land Ownership

The updated 2024 inventory of parks and open space shows that Somerville has 96 open space properties encompassing 175.0 acres. The amount of open space in Somerville has increased by 16.1 acres since the last OSRP, with increases in State-owned, City-owned, and privately owned open space (see **Table 5.1**).

The State owns the largest proportion of open space in the city; the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) owns 73.4 acres and the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) owns 13.1 acres. The MBTA's open space acreage increased significantly since the last OSRP due to the completion of the Community Path Extension. The off-street, multi-use Somerville Community Path now traverses the entire length of Somerville and connects to regional paths east and west of the city.

The City owns 64.2 acres of open space. This includes two parcels where small portions of each are owned by another entity (MassDOT in one case and a private property owner in the other).

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<sup>68</sup> City of Somerville, "Glossary," in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 2.1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> City of Somerville, "Public Realm," in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 13.1.

24.4 acres of open space are privately owned. Of that number, 6.4 acres are legally designated as publicly accessible. These properties are called “POPS” (privately owned public space). There are an additional 18.0 acres of privately owned open space in the city with limited public access. This includes fields for Tufts University (a not-for-profit University) and the Benjamin Banneker Charter School (BBCS, formerly Cambridge Matignon School). Tufts fields have restricted use by the public, whereas BBCS fields cannot be used by the public at all. Public use of Tufts Fields is permitted through the City’s Parks and Recreation Department.

## 5B. Protected Open Space

The City of Somerville works diligently to ensure that its residents have access to as much green, open, and inviting space as possible. This requires building new parks and protecting our existing resources. Below is a description of all forms of open space protection in the City of Somerville (see **Table 5.2**).

Of the types listed, only lands protected by Article 97, deed restrictions, or Conservation Restrictions are considered protected “in perpetuity.” Some grant funding programs result in the placement of a deed restriction, including: Massachusetts Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Program, Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) programs, and older versions of these programs such as the Urban Self-Help Funding Protection. Receipt of these grant funds is conditional upon dedicating the open space to the public in perpetuity (giving them Article 97 protection). This is the case with many Somerville parks and playgrounds. In total, 74% of City-owned land, 100% of State-owned land, and 24% of privately owned land (including all POPS built after 2019) are fully or partially protected in perpetuity.

### City Protections

**Open Space Zoning “Civic District.”** The 2019 SZO includes a designation for “Civic District” (CIV) which affords a degree of protection to open space parcels. This district is characterized by “parks, commons, and plazas, and buildings dedicated to arts, culture, education, recreation, and local government that serve as necessary components of any community.”<sup>71</sup> This includes cemeteries and most schoolyards (some schoolyards are protected under Article 97). The construction of new buildings is prohibited on open space properties in the CIV district. If the City sells the property, this development restriction carries over to the new owner.<sup>72</sup> However, the City is exempt from its own zoning ordinance. This gives the City flexibility to make choices about the preservation or development of its own open spaces.

**Rights of Way (ROW).** According to the SZO (1.3.2.c: Unmapped Land), any area that is “not specifically included in any zoning district on the maps of the Official Zoning Atlas is subject to the provisions of Article 11: Public Realm Standards and classified as the Civic District.”<sup>73</sup> Our streets and some civic spaces like Union Square Plaza (which is partly a

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<sup>71</sup> City of Somerville, “Glossary,” in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 7.1.

<sup>72</sup> PLACEHOLDER TEXT: City of Somerville, XX, in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), XX.

<sup>73</sup> City of Somerville, “Glossary,” in *Somerville Zoning Ordinance* (2019), 1.3.2.c.

ROW) are not mapped and are thus considered part of the CIV district. That means they are protected from development as described above. This layer of protection adds to a broader understanding of ROWs as part of the public commons.

**City Ownership.** Open spaces that are owned by the City, including privately developed open spaces conveyed back to the City, are preserved through the discretion of the City's administration. This is not a formal layer of protection, but it allows the City to make choices about the future of these parcels.

**Local Historic District.** One open space, Milk Row Cemetery, is a designated Local Historic District (LHD) due to its historic significance. This LHD designation provides an extra layer of protection to this property. Any proposed changes to the site come under the review of the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) and require their approval. Approval is not guaranteed.

### In Perpetuity

**Article 97 Protection.** A codification of the "Public Trust Doctrine," Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution protects all publicly owned lands used for conservation or recreation purposes. Before these properties can be sold, transferred, or even converted to a different use, this amendment requires a vote of the Conservation Commission and the Board of Aldermen as well as a roll-call vote of the State House and Senate.

**Open Space Zoning "Civic District" (if sold).** As described above, if a property within the Civic District transfers ownership to another private entity, they are prevented from building upon it through the Zoning Ordinance.

**Protection through Easements, Deed Restrictions, and Covenants.** In the case of POPS, easements, deed restrictions, and covenants may be required of the developer as part of a permit approval process. These preserve access to the property by the public in perpetuity.<sup>74</sup>

**Conservation Restrictions.** Conservation Restrictions (CR) permanently protect properties with natural resource or recreation value. They are legally enforceable and prevent future uses that don't align with those conservation values. The CR must be held by an organization like a government body or non-profit dedicated to conservation. CRs must be approved by the State Division of Conservation Services. In 2019, Somerville's first CR was placed on 5 Palmer Avenue, a former residential lot that was acquired and transformed into a community garden using Community Preservation Act funds. The CR is held by Groundwork Somerville.

**Note:** There are no **Chapter 61 lands or Agricultural Preservation Restrictions** in Somerville.

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<sup>74</sup> For more information about POPS development, see: City of Somerville, *Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space* (2024).

Table 5.1 Public and Private Open Space by Ownership

Open Space Type	Open Space Ownership	2024 Acres	2016 Acres
Public Open Space	City of Somerville	63.4	
	City of Somerville/MassDOT <i>Cremin (Otis Street) Playground</i>	0.2	
	City of Somerville/Private <i>East Somerville Committee Action Park</i>	0.6	
	<b>TOTAL CITY OWNED</b>	<b>64.2</b>	<b>58.3</b>
	Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR)	73.4	
	Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA)	13.1	
	<b>TOTAL STATE OWNED</b>	<b>86.5</b>	<b>81.3</b>
	Privately Owned, Publicly Accessible <i>Assembly Row Dog Park</i> <i>Assembly Square Block 2A Plaza</i> <i>Avon Street Community Garden</i> <i>Davis Square Plaza</i> <i>Great Lawn at Mass General Brigham</i> <i>Martha Perry Lowe Park</i> <i>MaxPac Square</i>	6.4	

	<i>Metro9 Park</i> <i>Middlesex Plaza</i> <i>TAB Building Basketball Courts</i> <i>Tufts Community Garden</i>		
	<b>TOTAL PRIVATELY OWNED (publicly accessible)</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>1.2</b>
<b>Privately Owned Open Space (Restricted Access to Public)</b>			
	<i>Benjamin Banneker Charter School</i>	4.2	
	<i>Tufts University Fields</i>	13.8	
	<b>TOTAL PRIVATELY OWNED (restricted access)</b>	<b>18.0</b>	<b>18.0</b>
<b>TOTAL OPEN SPACE (City, State, Private)</b>		<b>175.0</b>	<b>158.9</b>
<b>TOTAL LAND AREA IN SOMERVILLE</b>		<b>2624.0</b>	<b>2624.0</b>
<b>TOTAL % OF OPEN SPACE LAND AREA</b>		<b>6.7%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>



Table 5.2 Open Space Levels of Protection in Somerville

Level of Protection	Sum of Total Acres	% of Total Open Space
In Perpetuity (Article 97, CR, etc.)	133.5	76.3%
<i>entire property</i>	112.3	
<i>part of property</i>	21.2	
CIV District	15.8	9.0%
Deed Restriction or Covenant - Privately Owned Public Spaces Built Prior to 2019 (Exact level of protection to be determined)	5.6	3.2%
City Ownership (Not CIV District)	1.1	0.6%
None	19.0	10.9%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>175.0</b>	<b>100%</b>

[Full Open Space Inventory will be posted with final plan]

## Section 6: Community Vision

### 6A. Description of Process

Since the last OSRP, Somerville has been engaged in numerous planning processes to understand the needs of its residents and to help prioritize the City's work. This plan is informed by a public process which began in the fall of 2023 and involved three public meetings, a survey, and stakeholder meetings. The process is described in Section 2 and the findings are detailed in Section 10: Public Comments.

This plan also incorporates information from recent City plans and studies, including SomerVision 2040 and the Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (see Section 7B for more information about the SCORP). Taking the myriad of planning efforts—each grounded in their own community feedback processes—into consideration is an attempt to align this OSRP with others' outreach efforts.

### Long-Term Planning

#### SomerVision 2040 (2021)

Ten years after developing goals, policies, and action statements for the original 2012 SomerVision Plan, it was time to reassess and reprioritize. This update process engaged hundreds of participants over dozens of community events and working sessions from 2019-2020.<sup>75</sup> The plan set many new goals including:

- Securing 105 new acres of open space by 2040.
- Acquiring open space with consideration of barriers to access such as infrastructure like McGrath Highway, or I-93.
- Engaging the community in topics related to the natural environment like native landscapes and invasive species.
- Encouraging residents to contribute to ecological needs in the city on their own properties (pervious surfaces, tree canopy, etc.).
- Expanding the use of privately owned public space (POPS).
- Innovating ways to secure open space for interim/temporary uses.
- Empowering residents to feel welcome and safe in our open spaces.
- Designing parks to include elements for a wide variety of users.
- Prioritizing sustainability.
- Studying and increasing maintenance capacity.

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<sup>75</sup> City of Somerville, *SomerVision 2040: City of Somerville Massachusetts Comprehensive Plan Update 2010-2040*, October 2021.

## Neighborhood Planning

The implementation of SomerVision calls for the creation of design-based plans for each Somerville neighborhood. These planning processes engage residents to define the long-term future of their neighborhoods, identify challenges and opportunities, establish goals and objectives, and create a clear path for the future. In addition to in-person events, the City's "Somerville by Design" and SomerVoice websites allow residents to read planning documents, follow processes, and give feedback without physically attending a meeting.<sup>76</sup> To date, plans have been published for Lowell Street, Gilman Square, Union Square, Winter Hill, and Brickbottom. Neighborhood plans for Assembly Square, East Somerville, Davis Square, and Magoun and Ball Squares are in different stages of development.

## Open Space Creation Task Force (2019)

To address the large open space acquisition goals set by the SomerVision plan, a group of City staff, elected officials, and community members met to develop an understanding of issues related to open space creation and to develop recommendations.<sup>77</sup> The overarching goals included:

- Goal 1: Increase new publicly accessible open space.
- Goal 2: Increase the number of athletic fields to meet the demand for youth recreation hours.
- Goal 3: Increase the number of community garden plots.
- Goal 4: Provide a range of publicly accessible open spaces within a 5 minute (0.25 mile) walk of every residential parcel in Somerville.
- Goal 5: Provide equal access to high quality open space across the city.
- Goal 6: Maximize the ecosystem benefits that open spaces provide to residents and the natural world.

The plan and its recommendations are discussed further in Section 7B and the report is included in Appendix E.

## Climate Forward Update (2024)

Between 2023-24, the City and a wide group of stakeholders updated the Somerville Climate Forward plan. The plan's ambition is to create "a strong, healthy community in the face of climate change while simultaneously reducing climate pollution, also referred to as greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and our dependence on fossil fuels."<sup>78</sup> This plan looks at five focus areas, including "Natural Resources and Waste." Four action items relate to this OSRP:

- Increase drainage capacity to mitigate stormwater-based flood impacts.
- Utilize green infrastructure to improve water quality and mitigate heat risk to senior living, supportive, and public housing facilities.

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.somervillebydesign.com> and <http://voice.somervillema.gov>.

<sup>77</sup> City of Somerville, *Open Space Creation Task Force Strategy Memo*, August 2019.

<sup>78</sup> City of Somerville, "Climate Forward Update," 2024. <http://voice.somervillema.gov/somerville-climate-forward-update>.

- Prioritize tree planting and preservation of existing canopy in heat vulnerable neighborhoods.
- Implement strategies of the Pollinator Action Plan, Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Urban Forest Management Plan to increase biodiversity and support healthy habitats.

#### Consolidated Plan (2024)

In 2024, the City updated its Consolidated Plan which outlines local housing/community development needs and priorities. The plan is required to qualify for funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and its focus is on the needs of households with low and moderate incomes. The plan was informed by focus groups, a multilingual survey, stakeholder meetings, and other City plans. Its findings note that the City should continue to invest “in suitable, quality open space...particularly those areas that are most densely populated with higher concentrations of families and children.”<sup>79</sup> It identifies the importance of both active and passive parks and recreational spaces, like pocket parks and community gardens, and supports City tree planting efforts in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods.

#### Happiness Survey (2023)

Every two years since 2011, City staff poll a random sample of Somerville residents to rate their personal happiness, wellbeing, and satisfaction with City services.<sup>80</sup> Topics range from “How happy do you feel right now,” to “How would you rate your trust in the local police.” In 2023, there was one question related to open space, described below:

How satisfied are you with your proximity to parks and open spaces?

- 13% said they were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied
- 14% said neutral
- 34% said they were satisfied
- 39% said they were very satisfied
- The average score was 4.0 out of 5

Did the responses vary by demographic groups?

- Age – The most satisfied age groups were 35-44 (79%), 45-54 (84%), and 75+ (75%). Ages 18-24 reported satisfaction at only 65% and recorded the most unsatisfied responses (29%).
- Ward – The results were relatively even. The range for satisfied responses by ward was between 69-79%. The most unsatisfied responses (20%) were from Ward 1 and the most “very satisfied” responses (47%) were in Ward 7.
- Income – The \$75-100k income group reported the most unsatisfied responses (20%) followed by the income group under \$25k. Satisfied responses came in between 63% (under \$25k) and 79% (\$100-150k).

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<sup>79</sup> City of Somerville, *Consolidated Plan FY2024-FY2028*, 2024.

<sup>80</sup> City of Somerville, “Happiness Survey,” 2024.

- Disability – There was minor variation in the range of satisfaction, though 17% reported either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied in comparison to 11% of those who did not report a disability.

## Open Space Planning

### Park Use Analysis

The Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities completed evaluations in 2019, 2021, and 2022 to understand who uses Somerville parks, when, what activities they engage in, among other questions. They developed five key recommendations based on their study (see Appendix D for the full analysis):

1. People of color use the parks in Somerville. Continue to work on creative ways to engage communities who use the parks in future design or other changes to park spaces.
2. Offer more programming for older adults in parks.
3. Continue to build opportunities for young people who identify as female to be active in park spaces.
4. Prioritize upkeep and addition of features in parks near preschools and programming for children.
5. Provide opportunities for adults to be active while watching kids and conduct outreach to promote these opportunities.

### Parks Projects

In addition to the larger planning conversations about open space in Somerville, each park project has its own public engagement process. Typically, parks projects have a minimum of three community meetings in addition to other stakeholder conversations or tabling events. Park designs respond directly to the feedback received through these engagement events. Information about park projects and upcoming outreach events can be found at <http://voice.somervillema.gov>.

#### *Foss Park Community Outreach*

To understand community needs for Foss Park, City staff held two public meetings in October and November 2019 and one youth focus group in February 2021. The findings from these meetings inform an ongoing collaboration between DCR and City staff to ensure the park serves the community. Outreach found that many residents think the park needs partial or substantial improvement and identified action items around health/safety, access, park amenities, and engagement. The report can be found in Appendix F.

#### *Union Square Plaza and Streetscape Design (2023)*

Between 2021-22, the City engaged in an extensive public engagement project to inform design proposals for Union Square Plaza and the surrounding streetscapes. An interdisciplinary team of community members, staff, and design members collaborated with the Design Studio for Social Intervention to increase the reach of outreach efforts. The 25% design was released in 2023 after five years of work. Key recommendations in the plan include:

- Creating more than 1.3 acres of new open space, up from the existing 0.56 acres today, for festivals, events, play, rest, outdoor dining, markets, and more.
- Converting the Union Square Plaza parking lot into part of the renovated Plaza.
- Prioritizing design elements to mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- Converting a portion of Bow Street into a shared street that will function as an extension of the Plaza.
- Adding an array of new public amenities like tables, different types of seating, and art.
- Planting new trees.<sup>81</sup>

### Community Preservation Act Annual Engagement (2024)

Each year, Community Preservation Act (CPA) staff conduct outreach to understand the priorities of residents. Outreach typically includes a survey, tabling, and a public hearing. Staff ask how CPA funds should be spent: on historic preservation, open space and recreation, or affordable housing? Of the 75 survey responses, 32% said open space should be the highest funding priority. Other comments related to open space and recreation included requests for more (especially in East and West Somerville), park improvements, passive open spaces for community gathering, more tree cover and shade, public restrooms, pickleball, dog parks, and performance space.<sup>82</sup>

## 6B. Statement of Open Space & Recreation Goals

Somerville's open space and recreation goals reflect the community's desires to increase open space acreage, to make our existing amenities inclusive and welcoming for all, and to improve our experience of natural resources in the city. They reflect both community feedback, the various planning and engagement efforts described above, and many conversations with City staff.

### Goals

1. **Acquire and build new open spaces** to expand Somerville's total open space acreage, meet open space variety needs, and ensure equitable distribution of open space access across the City.
2. Invest in existing parks and open spaces to **preserve and enhance** what we already have.
3. Work to make open spaces **inclusive, safe, and welcoming** for all.
4. Continue to incorporate **resilient landscape practices and amenities** in open spaces and streetscapes in response to the challenges of climate change.
5. Ensure **recreation programs and facilities** meet the needs of residents today.

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<sup>81</sup> City of Somerville, "Union Square Plaza and Streetscapes," 2023. <http://voice.somervillema.gov/union-square-p-and-s>.

<sup>82</sup> City of Somerville, FY25 Community Preservation Plan, 2024.

## Section 7: Analysis of Needs

### 7. A. Summary of Resource Protection Needs

Somerville may not have large swaths of protected natural resources, but the urban nature that defines the city still requires protection and care. The waterways (the Mystic River and Alewife Brook), tree canopy, parks, and each backyard or container garden contribute to the ecological well-being of wildlife, the City's ability to adapt to climate change stressors, and to the mental and physical health of residents.

#### **Preserve & Enhance**

While it may not be readily apparent how to define “natural resources” in a densely developed urban landscape, the bottom line is that they exist and are vital. Somerville's borders along the Mystic River and Alewife Brook are unique in the city, as access points to water for humans and urban wildlife and the only densely wooded areas. These ecologically and socially important sites must be protected and enhanced. Not only do residents wish they had improved access to the river for recreation (in alignment with the goals of the SCORP—the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan), but vegetation and water quality still need attention (see Sections 4C and 4D). Enhancing the quality of vegetation, water, and recreational amenities serves both human and non-human resident needs. Note that any work in these areas will require collaboration with State agencies.

Parks and gardens throughout Somerville, regardless of size, build upon one another to create valuable habitat, relief from the heat, stormwater infiltration, etc. Without them, the city would be inhospitable to wildlife and stressful for humans. Today's patches of habitat must be preserved and maintained, but they should not be isolated. Adding new biodiverse plantings, new shade trees, and permeable landscapes will create corridors of habitat and relief from climate stressors. The 2024 Somerville Pollinator Action Plan called out Assembly Square, Brickbottom, Inner Belt, and areas east of Lincoln Park as key locations for new plantings.<sup>83</sup>

#### **Water Resource Protection Needs**

The City, DCR, local non-profits, and regional partners have taken great strides to improve local water resources, particularly the Mystic River. Many additional projects are in the works that will further separate sewage and stormwater pipes, reduce the overall amount of stormwater flowing into riverways, and improve riverside habitat and access to it (see Section 4C for more information). To meet the community's desire to access the waterfront and the need for quality habitat, the City must continue its work on stormwater infiltration/filtration, reducing nutrient content in stormwater runoff, and sewer separation. Actions can include everything from streetscape green infrastructure projects (and addressing their maintenance), to completing the Poplar Street Pump Station stormwater tank, to further promoting public stewardship programs like “Adopt-A-Drain.”

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<sup>83</sup> City of Somerville, *Somerville Pollinator Action Plan* (2024), 127.

Open space projects, while not a fix for stormwater and river water quality issues, can complement Engineering's works by infiltrating, filtering, and reusing stormwater on site. Park projects like ArtFarm (to be constructed above the Poplar Street Pump Station) can also function as a public education tool. Including signage that describes the infrastructure underneath the soil would be a great opportunity to increase public awareness of the City's flood-prevention actions.

### **Urban Forestry Needs**

Somerville's approximately 14,000 public trees are a vital natural resource that offer measurable ecological, economic, and social benefits. The *Urban Forest Management Plan* and input gathered from the community through many recent planning processes underscore the need for shade, additional street trees, and the preservation of our existing canopy (see Section 4D for more information). The City has made great strides toward these goals in recent years and should continue this work. It should continue its strong tree planting program, push for the protection of trees during construction and development, and enforce fines for illegal tree removal. With robust, current data about the urban canopy, it can also continue to advocate for biodiverse and climate resilient/urban-tolerant tree species.

The City should continue to increase its capacity for proactive maintenance and care to ensure the mature trees we have stay healthy and young trees establish well. Steps include increasing the capacity of DPW to meet tree care goals and continuing pruning programs like Young Tree Training. Recent updates to our tree inventory and future data maintenance and updates will help monitor progress toward these goals.

The City should also collaborate among departments to develop solutions for streetscapes that give trees enough room to grow while also accommodating pedestrian and bike access. Somerville's historic streets are narrow and while the City requires wider streetscapes on new thoroughfares, there remains a need to address this conflict between access and tree health.

### **Private Property as Natural Resource**

In our densely developed urban environment, City staff and residents need to consider the role that private property plays as a natural resource. The *Somerville Pollinator Action Plan* argues that even small actions—such as putting pollinator-friendly plants into pots on a balcony—benefit pollinators. That means that each renter, property owner, or developer has a role they can play in developing ecological resources for wildlife. The Green Score requirement for development and substantial home improvements is one way that City is pushing for landscape elements like tree preservation, biodiversity, native plants, invasive plants, stormwater infiltration on private property. The City should continue pursuing education and stewardship projects that encourage and enable residents to enhance their properties as a valuable part of our urban ecology.



## 7. B. Summary of Community Needs

Huge steps have been made toward the improvement and expansion of our open space resources in recent years. City staff, including DPW, Parks and Recreation, and PSUF, have worked to increase the variety and quality of our open space and recreation amenities. Nearly every athletic field has been improved or reconstructed. Nearly every schoolyard has been rebuilt and upgraded. Projects like Lincoln Park have added new amenities (including a skate park) and substantial stormwater storage.

The residents and stakeholders who responded to the OSRP survey or attended community meetings continue to ask for more open space, confirming the goals set in SomerVoice planning processes. They also reveal some new patterns, including an interest in more passive recreation like walking paths and picnic tables, a focus on accessibility, and a desire for more equity in open space/street tree distribution.

The following statements are not comprehensive, nor do they perfectly reflect the needs of all residents in Somerville. They describe patterns that emerged from community input and stakeholder conversations, State priorities, and an Urban Lands Assessment. We know these needs will evolve over time and City staff will continue to engage the community through each new park design and planning process.

### **Increase and Protect Open Space**

The need for additional acres of open space is a consistent ask from the community. It was documented clearly in the 2012 SomerVision Plan, restated in the 2020 SomerVision update, and confirmed in the survey for this OSRP. Out of 706 survey responses, 91% said that we need more open space. Since 2011, 19.3 acres of open space have been added to the city's inventory. This includes additions to City parks, privately developed open spaces, and State-owned land. This is substantial for a city that is so densely developed and there remains a long way to go to reach the ambitious SomerVision 2040 goal of 105 new acres.

In 2019, the Open Space Creation Task Force identified the following strategies to create new open space:

1. Develop an open space acquisition plan that identifies parcels for acquisition.
2. Develop at least 60 acres of new open space in the Transform Areas.
3. Prioritize proper siting of open space in neighborhood planning.
4. Integrate open space into affordable housing and community organization sites.
5. Convert excessive street space and underutilized parking lots to open space.
6. Purchase mid-block access outright or through easements to increase pedestrian access to open space.
7. Explore back of sidewalk tree programs and secure front yard easements along streets to create Commonwealth Avenue style tree boulevards.
8. Solidify efforts to create land trusts in Somerville.

The task force explored financial barriers, including the high cost of real estate, and developed creative solutions to meet the acreage goal. A series of financial actions were proposed, including creating a linkage fee, increasing the CPA surcharge (passed in 2024), working with developers, and exploring

District Improvement Financing for open space creation.<sup>84</sup> Currently, the City gathers funds to purchase land for open space through the CPA Acquisition Fund and other grant applications, City Council requests, and in-lieu payments from developers who are granted exemptions to civic space development requirements.

The City continues to look for opportunities to gather funds and purchase open space where it is financially feasible and in line with neighborhood plans. But this goal will not be met by the actions of the City alone. It is critical to continue to leverage private development for open space and to partner with other organizations and non-profits to make this goal a reality.

City staff work closely with private partners to achieve high quality open space that meets the needs of residents. Given the fast pace of development and the emphasis on increased housing density (especially around public transit), open spaces are important additions to the urban landscape. Residents need comfortable outdoor spaces that mitigate the impacts of taller and denser construction. And these spaces must be truly public, regardless of private investment. This process, common pitfalls, and City goals are outlined in the Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space (2024).<sup>85</sup>

Meeting the demand for open space in Somerville also requires protecting open space acres and increasing awareness of what we already have. While City staff work to acquire land, spreading the word about existing parks and recreational programs is one step toward addressing a perceived lack of amenities and services. Some parks are small and tucked inside of residential neighborhoods. Outreach and new communication tools could increase awareness of these hidden gems.

### **Upgrades and Small Fixes**

The bulk of park improvement work in the past decade has focused on full park renovations. This OSRP marks a moment when we have made huge strides to improve the overall condition of Somerville parks, schoolyards, and fields. There will always be a need to renovate aging parks, but the City can increase its impact by embracing partial park upgrades. Upgrades can take fewer staff hours, cost less, and are completed more quickly as they do not change the overall function or design. They simply improve the quality and lifespan of our existing parks. Financial avenues like CPA funds are appropriate for smaller improvement projects, such as installing inclusive swings, adding seating, or refreshing a planting bed.

According to PSUF's inventory, 78% of open spaces are in good or excellent condition. An additional 9 are in design or active construction and only 11 are in poor condition. In 2024, PSUF conducted condition reviews for the 11 in poor condition plus an additional 2 rated as "good" but with some safety or quality concerns. Each park was ranked based on set criteria and identified as either a full renovation or upgrade project. Each park was then run through a "priority matrix" with criteria informed by the 2023-24 public outreach efforts. This process is recorded in Appendix C. These rankings directly inform our parks renovation priority list following the Action Plan table in Section 9.

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<sup>84</sup> City of Somerville. *Open Space Creation Task Force Strategy Memo* (2019).

<sup>85</sup> City of Somerville, *Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space* (2024).

## **Desire for Passive Recreation and Nature**

This OSPR is being written four years after the start of the COVID pandemic. The survey sent out in 2023-24 asked residents to reflect on the impact it had on their experience of open space (the results can be reviewed in more detail in Section 10). Many responded that it made them appreciate and spend more time in parks. 70 respondents noted that parks became an important place for community gathering. This pattern was reflected in survey respondents' general requests for passive parks for sitting/gathering and other passive recreation amenities like trails/walking paths, access to the waterfronts, and immersive experiences of nature. While the survey is not a fully comprehensive look at Somerville residents' needs, it does point to a pattern of valuing the experience and flexibility of passive open spaces.

## **Desire for Variety, Multi-Use, Multi-Season, Multi-Generational**

The need for flexible open spaces was repeated in a variety of responses that asked for unprogrammed, passive open spaces. Many noted the value of playgrounds but commented that they are not open to all residents. Lincoln Park was called out many times for its mixed uses and varied amenities. There were also requests for usable spaces in all seasons. Given that Somerville has limited open space for thousands of residents, embracing layered uses, variety, and all-season functionality would make efficient use of our limited space.

## **Inclusivity and Comfort**

Community members voiced requests for accessibility improvements and comfort amenities in parks. These ranged from needing bathrooms (or information about the nearest bathroom), to inclusive playground equipment, to places to rest, to safe/accessible routes to parks.

Some open spaces have a seasonal portable toilet, but the demand seems to outweigh supply. City staff have been trying to increase public toilet amenities around the City and staff should promote these to ensure residents know their location. Staff should also explore opportunities to increase awareness of public bathrooms or any future bathroom installations.

To ensure high-quality, inclusive park designs, staff members and members of the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities should collaborate on park design reviews to ensure that improvements successfully meet the needs of our diverse residents. While City staff follow ADA law when constructing parks, there is room to go above and beyond that requirement and to address issues in aging parks.

Increasing the availability of inclusive open space amenities should be done with attention to the location of schools, daycare centers, senior housing, and communities identified as particularly vulnerable to climate change stressors. Areas of more extreme heat, as in East Somerville (see heat analysis in Appendix A), would benefit from increased access to shade, water features for cooling, and access to the waterfront. These amenities should be well communicated to those groups to ensure they are known resources in moments of need.

The 2016 ADA Transition Plan was informed by a self-evaluation of public spaces prepared by the Institute for Human Centered Design. A new task force assembled in 2024 and will be updating this plan and analysis. Findings from this planning process will inform future actions related to inclusive design and upgrades in our open spaces.

### **Equitable Distribution and Representation**

Residents and City staff express a need for tree plantings, open space amenities, and public engagement practices to be equitably distributed and representative. While there is an outreach process for every new park project, very few residents participate. City staff, particularly the staff in the SomerViva: Office for Immigrant Affairs (SOIA), have been working to build relationships with community members to shift this dynamic. PSUF staff recognize that park designs and open space analyses require more equitable representation to meet the needs of residents, especially at a time when displacement of low-income residents is a critical concern. Open spaces should be welcoming and meet the needs of diverse populations. City staff must continue to expand their outreach efficacy to include the opinions of historically underrepresented populations (teens, seniors, immigrant communities, etc.).

Additionally, residents and staff identify disparities in open space distribution across the City. Many survey respondents requested additional tree coverage and open space in East Somerville, in particular. City staff should prioritize open space and recreation projects in these areas, especially where amenities are missing. SOIA staff can help to promote existing amenities, programs, and events to non-English-speaking residents to ensure residents are enjoying what we do have.

### **Active Recreation Needs**

Somerville has limited space for large recreational amenities like fields or skating rinks, but the City has made progress in adding them or improving them where possible, including completing the goals of the 2016 Athletic Fields Master Plan.<sup>86</sup> State improvements to Foss Park and the addition of a field at the Healey School have increased the equitable distribution of active offerings across the City.

There remain unmet desires for indoor recreation (e.g.: a teen center) with a direct connection to outdoor recreation for all-season comfort. There are also requests from the public for more unpermitted field “open hours” to allow for drop-in play. OSRP outreach also revealed desires for more outdoor fitness equipment, pickleball, tennis, and generally more fields (though this may be impossible given the lack of large open space availability in Somerville). Demand for active recreation remains high and the City should support active recreation and fitness where possible and appropriate.

In all open spaces, but particularly in privately developed public areas, it is critical for new open spaces to draw in more than the employees of adjacent buildings. Be it with basketball courts, volleyball, or splash pads, engaging active features can bring in residents outside of workday hours. The City should continue to advocate for active amenities with developers, following the Civic Space Design Guide to Privately Owned Public Space and with an eye on amenity distribution and community needs.

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<sup>86</sup> City of Somerville, *Athletic Fields Master Planning Staff Report: June 2016 Update* (2016).

## **State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)**

In 2023, the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs' Division of Conservation Services published a plan that examined statewide and regional recreational facility needs.<sup>87</sup> The four goals of the 2023 Massachusetts SCORP are as follows:

1. Improve Access to Beaches and Other Water-based Recreation Facilities
2. Support Trail Projects
3. Create and Renovate Neighborhood Parks, Especially to Benefit the Underserved
4. Create Opportunities, Especially for the Underserved, to Enjoy Protected Natural Areas

Most of these goals overlap with previously stated Somerville goals, including access to riverfronts, walking and trail projects, prioritizing projects in Environmental Justice areas, and trying to give all residents access to urban nature.

**Urban Lands Assessment (ULA) – To come after mapping complete**

## **7. C. Management Needs, Potential Change of Use**

### **Sustainable Workforce**

To meet the maintenance needs of a growing open space network, DPW needs adequate staffing with a range of landscaping skills, including horticultural knowledge. Unfortunately, DPW Grounds has been struggling to hire and retain a crew. They are exploring ways to incentivize learning and skill development to meet the needs of Somerville landscapes and have identified the need for professional growth opportunities and adequate compensation to encourage job applicants and staff retention. Given staffing shortages, DPW is struggling to keep up with day-to-day maintenance needs and they are unable to do above-and-beyond tasks like proactively reviewing park infrastructure to address issues before they arise. Supporting DPW in building stable grounds and tree maintenance crews is critical to ensuring that our park investments last as long as possible.

### **Horticultural and Arboricultural Maintenance**

As the City increases the complexity of plantings and the number of public trees, maintenance demands increase. However, DPW Grounds has been unable to meet those increasing demands due to the staffing issues described above. DPW is building a tree crew to address the needs of the urban canopy, but they are still working to fully train and staff the team. They seek out applicants with horticultural experience,

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<sup>87</sup> Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services, "Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2023," 2024.

but there remains little experience with plants on their grounds crew. While the Pollinator Action Plan proposals include “doing less” (e.g.: leaving the leaves in garden beds), it also calls for the planting of new pollinator gardens in existing parks and beyond. This will only increase the need for a skilled and robust maintenance crew. If DPW can expand its horticultural and arboricultural knowledge and retain staff, the city can rely less on outside contractors.

### **Collaboration and Communication**

Effective communication and delineation of responsibility is an important part of an open space network where many different parties own and maintain parks and recreation facilities (DCR, MBTA, City of Somerville, private entities like Tufts). At the moment, there remain some grey areas around maintenance identified by City staff and evident through PSUF’s work with private developers of public open space.

Privately developed open spaces are privately maintained, which relieves DPW Grounds of those responsibilities, but it also leaves some room for confusion. Each time PSUF works with a private party to build public open space, they collaborate on a “Landscape Management and Maintenance Plan.” Through these conversations, City staff clarify standard permitting procedures that apply to even privately developed open spaces and define responsibility for tasks like snow removal or equipment replacement. Because these procedures overlap with DPW and Parks and Recreation work, communicating those agreements and workflows to all parties is a necessary part of new park development.

For State-owned properties, recreation facilities, or streetscape plantings, confusion often emerges over maintenance responsibilities like pruning plants, replacing dead lights, or repairing broken equipment. These issues overlap again with Parks and Recreation, DPW, Engineering, and State partners. Making sure that we have clear and responsive lines of communication to resolve these points of potential confusion ensures that each space is usable and safe.

The City also needs to increase its communication with the public about maintenance work to prevent misunderstandings about what to expect from DPW (e.g.: snow removal on playgrounds). The new proposals for pollinator-friendly maintenance practices from the Pollinator Action Plan embrace more naturalized landscaping (e.g.: mowing no more than every two weeks). Communicating the intention and purpose of these practices—to foster pollinator habitats—could reduce the number of complaints.

### **Design for Maintenance**

PSUF staff have cultivated a practice of consulting with DPW during open space design development to make sure that DPW is able to care for the site after construction. Their concerns, such as snow removal or access to water cabinets, inform design details and successful design outcomes. This process has been successful so far and leads to better long-term outcomes. The City should continue and strengthen these collaborative practices in future projects.

## Section 8: Goals & Objectives

The City is committed to implementing a seven-year action plan (2024-2031) as outlined in Section 9. This plan aims to achieve the following identified overarching goals and objectives:

### Vision Statement

The City will provide a network of inclusive, safe, and welcoming parks/open spaces that meet the needs of varied user groups and foster a resilient ecosystem and community.

### Goals/Objectives

1. **Acquire and build new open spaces** to expand Somerville's total open space acreage, meet open space variety needs, and ensure equitable distribution of open space access across the City.
  - a. Continue to add to **acquisition funds** through CPA applications, private development "in lieu" payments, and other grant applications when appropriate parcels are identified.
  - b. **Acquire** new parcels using techniques developed in the Open Space Task Force to meet SomerVision 2040 goals.
  - c. **Build** high-quality, new open spaces to address open space network gaps (gaps in civic space type or geographic distribution).
  - d. Foster **public understanding** of the City's work to meet SomerVoice 2040 open space expansion goals.
2. Invest in existing parks and open spaces to **preserve and enhance** what we already have.
  - a. Fully **renovate or make upgrades** to existing parks and open spaces to improve those in poorest condition and ensure attractive, safe, and accessible public lands.
  - b. **Protect** existing open space acres, both publicly and privately owned.
  - c. **Maintain** what we have to protect open space assets and ensure public enjoyment.
  - d. **Communicate** existing amenities and park use procedures to the public.
3. Work to make open spaces **inclusive, safe, and welcoming** for all.
  - a. Continue to improve safe, healthy, and comfortable **access** to parks and open spaces.
  - b. Improve design processes to include more **equitable representation** of residents/stakeholders.
4. Continue to incorporate **resilient landscape practices and amenities** in open spaces and streetscapes in response to the challenges of climate change.
  - a. Continue to expand, protect, and care for Somerville's **urban canopy** through new plantings, proactive maintenance, tree removal permitting, and education.

- b. Continue to incorporate **resilient design elements** that increase community and ecological resilience to climate change.
  - c. Enhance **urban habitat** on public property and encourage private property participation in ecologically valuable improvements.
- 5. Ensure **recreation programs and facilities** meet the needs of residents today.
  - a. Expand and improve **facilities** for Parks and Recreation programs.
  - b. Continue to improve **equitable access** to programs and facilities for all residents.
  - c. **Support City staff's** ability to meet Somerville recreation demands.

DRAFT



## Section 9: Seven-Year Action Plan

The following Seven-Year Action Plan is reflective of community feedback received during the development of this document in 2023-24 and of plans developed in previous years. Each of these action items supports the goals identified in Section 8. Funding may not yet be available for many of these actions and possible funding sources are noted when possible. Each action is also accompanied by proposed responsible leads that can see to the completion of the task and an estimated timeline.

### **Abbreviations used for these responsible boards/groups are as follows:**

CC	Conservation Commission
Comms	Communications & Community Engagement
CPA	Community Preservation Act
DPW	Department of Public Works
ED	Economic Development
GDO	Grants Development Office
IAM	Infrastructure & Asset Management
MD	Mobility Division
OFAHC	Office of Food Access & Healthy Communities
OSE	Office of Sustainability & Environment
OSPCD	Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development
PPZ	Planning, Preservation, & Zoning
PR	Parks & Recreation
PSUF	Public Space & Urban Forestry
PNP	Private Non-Profit
SCPD	Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities
SOIA	SomerViva: Office of Immigrant Affairs
SS	SomerStat
UDC	Urban Design Commission
UFC	Urban Forestry Committee

Goal 1: Acquire and build new open spaces to expand Somerville's total open space acreage, meet open space variety needs, and ensure equitable distribution of open space access across the City.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible Lead</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Proposed Completion</b>
<b>1a. Continue to add to acquisition funds</b>	Pursue CPA applications for land acquisition funding.	PSUF/CPA	CPA	Ongoing
	Collect "in lieu" payments from private development where civic space is not appropriate.	PSUF/ED	Private	Ongoing
	Explore grant opportunities for land acquisition when appropriate parcels are identified.	PSUF/GDO	State/Federal	Ongoing
	If the opportunity arises, request acquisition funds from City Council.	PSUF	City Budget	Ongoing
<b>1b. Acquire new parcels</b>	Analyze existing open space network to determine gaps (e.g.: in walkshed, amenity distribution).	PSUF	n/a	2026
	Share analysis with OSPCD to inform other divisions' planning work.	PSUF	n/a	2026
	Continue to pursue opportunities for land acquisition to meet SomerVision 2040 goals.	OSPCD	See 1a.	Ongoing
	Continue to work with private developers to develop quality civic space development proposals as required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance.	OSPCD	See 1a.	Ongoing
	Prioritize open space land acquisition in Environmental Justice areas of Somerville, particularly East Somerville.	OSPCD	See 1a.	Ongoing
	Prioritize open space land acquisition that addresses gaps in the open space network.	OSPCD	See 1a.	Ongoing

<b>1c. Build high-quality, new open spaces</b>	Design and build new open spaces to address type/amenity needs (informed by open space network analysis and community input).	PSUF	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	Ongoing
	Complete Civic Space Design Guidelines.	PSUF	n/a	2024-2025
	Review private developer civic space designs to ensure they meet community needs and follow Somerville Zoning Ordinance requirements and Civic Space Design Guidelines.	PSUF/UDC	Private	Ongoing
	Collaborate with State and local partners to explore opportunities for new open space in State projects (e.g.: McGrath Boulevard Project).	PSUF/State	Private	Ongoing
	Continue to participate in regional planning efforts (e.g.: Resilient Mystic Collaborative) to meet demand for cohesive and connected recreation along the Mystic River.	PSUF	?	Ongoing
<b>1d. Foster public understanding</b>	Communicate methods of open space land acquisition to the public through City data portals.	SS	n/a	Ongoing
	Promote new public spaces when acquired and/or constructed.	PSUF/Comms/SOIA	n/a	Ongoing

Goal 2: Invest in existing parks and open spaces to preserve and enhance what we already have.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible Lead</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Proposed Completion</b>
<b>2a. Fully renovate or make upgrades to existing parks and open spaces</b>	Set project priorities based on safety needs and prioritization matrix (see Appendix C). Adjust as needed over next 7 years.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Update Capital Investment Plan for City parks and open spaces based on condition reports, prioritization matrix, and community input.	City of Somerville	n/a	Ongoing
	Continue to fully renovate parks in worst condition.	PSUF	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	Ongoing
	Develop program to prolong the life of our assets by doing smaller park upgrades to address safety needs and improve user experience.	PSUF	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	2025-2026
	Continue to apply for grant opportunities for design/construction from outside funding sources to reduce the burden on City budget.	PSUF/GDO	n/a	Ongoing
<b>2b. Protect existing open space acres</b>	Complete analysis of open space parcel protections. Identify any gaps or unresolved protections issues.	PSUF	n/a	2025
	Identify City-owned open spaces that require additional protection. Determine next steps.	PSUF/PPZ	n/a	2025-2026
	Follow-up with POPS (privately owned public space) owners to ensure that open spaces are clearly marked and welcoming to the public.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing

<b>2c. Maintain what we have</b>	Continue exploring strategies to foster skill development, professional growth, and workforce stability in DPW Grounds staff.	DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Increase DPW Grounds staffing to meet maintenance needs of the City's landscapes.	DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Develop proactive review of parks to address maintenance needs before problems arise.	DPW/PSUF	n/a	?
	Continue to increase arboricultural and horticultural maintenance capacity through DPW staff training and new hires.	DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Continue to supplement internal arboricultural and horticultural maintenance capacity with outside contracts.	PSUF/DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Establish clear responsibilities and strengthen communication between DPW, PR, State partners, and private developers.	PSUF/DPW/PR/State	n/a	Ongoing
	Explore and implement strategies to save money and increase ecological value/sustainability of City landscapes informed by the Pollinator Action Plan.	PSUF/DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Communicate Pollinator Action Plan-informed maintenance strategies to the public to foster acceptance and awareness of new care practices.	PSUF/DPW/Comms/SOIA	n/a	Ongoing
	Continue to communicate with State agencies that own and manage open space in Somerville. Advocate for maintenance and community needs.	PSUF/State	n/a	Ongoing

<b>2d. Communicate</b>	Work with City staff and community liaisons to increase awareness of existing open space amenities and permitting process, especially to non-English-speaking community members.	PSUF/SOIA/Comms	n/a	Ongoing
	Communicate year-round maintenance expectations to the public (e.g.: snow removal in playgrounds).	PSUF/ DPW/SOIA/Comms	n/a	Ongoing
	Continue to work with those involved in community garden program and food production to understand and respond to internal and community needs.	PSUF/CC/OHFAC	n/a	Ongoing

Goal 3. Work to make open spaces inclusive, safe, and welcoming for all.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible Lead</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Proposed Completion</b>
<b>3a. Continue to improve safe, healthy, and comfortable access</b>	Analyze distribution of inclusive amenities and comfort features (e.g.: bathrooms, shade, water features) across the city to identify any gaps.	PSUF/OSE	n/a	2026
	Build an inclusive playground and explore options for park upgrades that can increase inclusive amenities for residents with disabilities (e.g.: seating, swings, communication boards, sensory environments for self-regulation, etc.).	PSUF/SCPD	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	Ongoing
	Work with MD to lessen pedestrian/bicycle conflicts in open spaces (e.g.: along the Community Path).	MD/PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Support MD's goals to create safe and accessible routes to parks.	MD/PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Collaborate with IAM and MD to develop strategies that support healthy street trees and create accessible sidewalks and implement in streetscape/thoroughfare projects.	PSUF/IAM	n/a	Ongoing
	Collaborate with City departments and State partners on roadway improvements (like McGrath Boulevard) to improve streetscape experience, to foster healthy trees, and to improve connections to the waterfront, Foss Park, Assembly Square, and other nearby open spaces.	PSUF/MD/IAM/State	n/a	Ongoing

<b>3b. Improve design process</b>	Continue to improve design success through interdepartmental collaboration with DPW, PR, MD, IAM, and commissions like CC and SCPD.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Develop strategies for open space design processes to increase equitable community feedback (in particular from low-income residents, people of color, non-English speakers, youth, and seniors).	PSUF/SOIA	n/a	Ongoing
	Compile and analyze community engagement input to understand what makes open spaces successfully inclusive and welcoming to the broadest array of residents.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Continue to work with SOIA to reach community members that are not traditionally represented at public meetings or in survey data.	PSUF/SOIA/Comms	n/a	Ongoing



Goal 4: Continue to incorporate resilient landscape practices and amenities in open spaces and streetscapes in response to the challenges of climate change.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible Lead</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Proposed Completion</b>
<b>4a. Continue to expand, protect, and care for urban canopy</b>	Identify high-priority areas for tree planting through analysis of tree inventory data, Pollinator Action Plan priority matrix, and routes to parks and schools.	PSUF	n/a	2025-2026
	Continue to plant 350+ trees every year, especially in high-priority areas.	PSUF	City Budget	Ongoing
	Continue to implement the Young Tree Training and Parks Tree Health programs to proactively care for City trees.	PSUF	City Budget	Ongoing
	Staff a full tree crew in DPW and increase their capacity to meet urban canopy maintenance needs.	DPW	City Budget	Ongoing
	Continue to develop educational programs to increase public awareness of the importance of street trees and ways residents can support urban canopy health.	PSUF/UFC	n/a	Ongoing
	Continue to process tree removal permit applications, mitigation requirements, and illegal tree removal fines.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Update/refine the Tree Preservation Ordinance as needed.	PSUF	n/a	2025
	Improve tree protection requirements during construction projects.	PSUF/DPW/IAM	n/a	Starting 2025, Ongoing
	Continue to implement and measure action items from the 2021 Urban Forest Management Plan.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Assess need for an update to the 2021 Urban Forest Management Plan.	PSUF	n/a	2030

<b>4b. Continue to incorporate resilient design elements</b>	Continue to incorporate stormwater capture, reuse, and infiltration design elements into park and streetscape projects.	PSUF/IAM	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	Ongoing
	Prioritize the inclusion of water features or tree plantings in open space improvements in the identified gap areas and especially in high climate vulnerability areas as identified in the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment Update (2023).	PSUF	LWCF, PARC, CPA, CDBG, among others	Ongoing
	Support DCR projects that increase public enjoyment of and access to the waterfront.	PSUF/DCR	n/a	Ongoing
	Support DCR projects that increase shade tree and biodiverse plantings.	PSUF/DCR	n/a	Ongoing
	Communicate location of amenities to the public for relief from climate stressors.	PSUF/SOIA/Comms	n/a	Ongoing
<b>4c. Enhance urban habitat</b>	Complete Somerville Pollinator Action Plan and brochure.	PSUF	n/a	2024-2025
	Analyze existing pollinator habitat in Somerville and identify high-priority locations for new pollinator plantings. Reassess at regular intervals.	PSUF	n/a	Started 2024, Ongoing
	Implement biodiverse, pollinator-friendly plantings in existing parks, new parks, and other open space locations based on the Pollinator Action Plan and high-priority analysis.	PSUF	City Budget	Ongoing
	Continue to meet percentages of native plants required by the Native Planting Ordinance.	PSUF	n/a	Ongoing
	Partner with non-profit groups and residents to engage the public in pollinator habitat creation and insect data collection.	PSUF/PNP	n/a	Ongoing

	Promote seasonal insect data collection opportunities, pollinator-friendly garden maintenance tips, and related events/programs.	PSUF/SOIA/Comms	n/a	Ongoing
	Update Green Score requirements in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to improve the ecological value of landscape required.	PSUF/PPZ	n/a	Started 2024, Ongoing
	Continue to steward the desire for nature in the city through ecological restoration projects and programs.	PSUF	Various	Ongoing
	Continue to remove and discourage invasive species in park construction, maintenance, and through educational campaigns.	PSUF	Various	Ongoing
	Continue to protect wetlands and riverfronts through the Somerville Conservation Commission review process.	CC	n/a	Ongoing

Goal 5. Ensure recreation programs and facilities meet the needs of residents today.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible Lead</b>	<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Proposed Completion</b>
<b>5a. Expand and improve facilities</b>	Continue to pursue, design, and build new recreation/community center.	PR/IAM	General Fund	Ongoing
	Work with DCR to renovate facilities at Dilboy (i.e.: pool, roof).	PR/DCR	General Fund	Ongoing
	Work with DCR to renovate facilities at the Blessing of the Bay boathouse.	PR/DCR	CPA/General Fund	Ongoing
	Expand quality wireless internet in recreation facilities.	PR	General Fund (unless at the GS Pool/Dilboy Stadium)	Ongoing
	Install AEDs at all athletic facilities.	PR	General Fund (unless at the Dilboy Stadium)	Ongoing
	Find facility with access to indoors and outdoors for comfortable recreation in all seasons, particularly for teens.	PR/IAM	General Fund	Ongoing
	Identify space and recreation options for senior recreation in all seasons.	PR/IAM	General Fund	Ongoing
	Explore opportunities for adding outdoor fitness equipment and interactive recreation equipment (NEOS, Ping Pong, Foosball, Corn Hole etc.)	PSUF/PR/DCR	CPA/General Fund	Ongoing
	Explore opportunities for new tennis and pickleball courts in Somerville.	PSUF/PR/DCR/DPW	CPA/General Fund	Ongoing
	Analyze location of water bottle fillers in open space network and explore opportunities for installation.	PSUF/PR/DPW	General Fund	Ongoing

<b>5b. Continue to improve equitable access</b>	Examine programming selection against community input and develop strategy to meet programming needs.	PR	General Fund	5/1/2025
	Promote PR programs to the public to increase awareness of City offerings.	PR/SOIA/Comms	General Fund	Ongoing
	Analyze barriers to access, especially for non-English-speaking or low-income residents. Work with relevant City departments to address these issues, including website improvements.	PR/SOIA/Comms		Ongoing
	Continue to host "open hours" at fields for teens to use with adult supervision to avoid conflicts with reserved field demands.	PR		Ongoing
<b>5c. Support City staff</b>	Increase staffing to meet community demands for programs.	PR	City Budget	Ongoing
	Increase PR transportation fleet to meet demands of programs.	PR	General Fund	Ongoing
	Establish clear responsibilities and strengthen communication between DPW, PR, State partners, and private developers.	PSUF/DPW/PR/State		Ongoing
	Continue to collaborate with other City departments to understand responsibilities and protocols in privately developed and maintained public open spaces.	PSUF/DPW/PR		Ongoing

In addition to the prioritized Goals, Objectives, and Actions, the Public Space and Urban Forestry division renovates and constructs parks. For a map of the parks to be renovated by PSUF in the next seven years, see Appendix A: 2024-2031 Action Plan Map. Appendix C describes the process of developing this list.

## Active Projects

1. Ken Kelly Park
2. Dilboy Auxiliary Natural Grass Fields
3. Henry Hansen Park
4. Somerville Junction Park

## 2025 Proposed Projects

1. ArtFarm
2. Central Hill Monument Restoration
3. John F. Kennedy Schoolyard
4. Mystic River Reservation/Blessing of the Bay Park (DCR and MyRWA)
5. Draw Seven Park (DCR)
6. Quincy Street Pocket Park Walkway and Planting Upgrade
7. Nunziato Dog Park Water Fountains Upgrade

## Seven-Year Plan - Potential Projects Through 2031\*

\*(exact timeline to be determined by Capital Investment Plan)

### Potential Full Renovation Projects

1. Perkins Playground
2. Woodstock Playground
3. Nunziato Dog Park
4. Florence Playground
5. Osgood Park
6. Bailey Park

### Potential Upgrade Projects

1. Trum Field Bleachers
2. Nunziato Field
3. Zero New Washington Street Park
4. Palmacci Playground
5. Lexington Park
6. Seven Hills Park

## Section 10: Outreach Report

### Overall Summary

This Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) update identified a wide variety of priorities from the community, City staff, and key stakeholders. This report will describe the findings from each individual outreach method and describe the patterns that emerged.

The outreach plan was developed with a few considerations in mind: we know that people who attend public meetings and participate in our surveys tend to be more homogenous than our city demographics. The OSRP gives City staff an opportunity to reassess our work and to set priorities based on concrete feedback. It is critical that we expand on our traditional outreach methods to reach beyond the typical voices to hear. We had some success with this and continue to identify ways that the process can be improved.

In brief, each outreach effort was done to answer the following questions:

- What is most important to residents today with regard to open space and recreation? How has this changed over the last seven years?
- Where are the gaps in our open space and recreation network?
- What barriers prevent residents from freely using and enjoying our existing open space and recreation amenities?

The feedback received from stakeholders directly informs the OSRP action plan (see Section 9), the park renovation/upgrade priority matrix (see Appendix C), and was shared with other relevant City departments to inform their own projects. While we are unable to make an action item from each individual comment (many are conflicting, in fact), we try to draw conclusions about what is broadly important to the community in 2023-24 across all of the feedback.

### Community Meetings

Three community meetings were held in early 2024 (two in person and one virtual). In total, around 45 people attended these three events.

At the in-person meetings, staff were present to represent Public Space and Urban Forestry, the Office of Sustainability and Environment, Parks and Recreation, and the Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities. They were there to facilitate conversations and hear feedback directly from the community.

After introducing the OSRP and its goals, community members were asked to think about barriers to access, maintenance, and general needs about four different topics:

- Natural and Restorative Spaces
- Climate Change Resiliency

- Play and Recreation
- Urban Agriculture

In the virtual meeting, staff presented the findings from the first two meetings and asked if the feedback resonated and if anything was missing.

### **Findings Summary:**

Five broad topics emerged in these conversations: open space, accessibility, nature in the city, comfort and climate resilience, and equity.

- Open Space:
  - Take opportunities to acquire new open space
  - Protect what we have
  - Prioritize variety
  - Create sense of connection between open spaces (signage, vegetation, safe routes)
  - Look for opportunities to increase passive recreation (don't forget grass)
  - Spaces for dogs
- Accessibility
  - Bathrooms
  - Accessible play structures
  - Seating for rest
  - Signage & increase awareness of open space amenities
  - Trash & cleanliness
  - Safe routes to parks
  - Ped-bike conflicts
  - Access to waterfront parks (roads and paths)
- Nature in the City
  - More trees
  - Vegetate areas between parks (streetscapes, etc.)
  - Increase capacity to maintain plantings (including trees)
  - Increase biodiversity and habitat
  - Prioritize projects that increase access to "natural" areas for people
  - Promote & develop incentives/programs to involve the public in planting on private property
  - Invasive species management
- Comfort & Resilience
  - Transform hot, paved surfaces to vegetation & grass
  - Increase shade between parks and in parks
  - Add more water fountains and water bottle fillers
  - Continue to use parks for stormwater capture
  - Increase biodiversity in plantings
  - Engage community in caring for vegetated spaces
- Equity & Process



- Learn from who we DON'T see at community meetings
- Take lessons from this planning process and apply to future design/outreach plans
- Include teens & tweens in public space planning
- Increase awareness of how community feedback turns into action
- Continue to analyze park and tree distribution across city
- Increase coordination with depts and commissions

## Survey

The official OSRP survey was released in November 2023 and was open until the end of January 2024. We received 708 responses and the results were analyzed by staff in the SomerStat office and Public Space and Urban Forestry division.

### Findings Summary:

- *The survey overrepresents ages 35-54, white people, wards 3 and 5, and households with children under 18.*
- *The survey underrepresents ages 19-24, people of color, and the lowest-income households. We cannot tell if high-income households are overrepresented.*
- *Most respondents ages 35-44 have children in their household, and most respondents with children in their household make above median income.*
- Respondents say Somerville needs more trails and walking paths, passive parks for sitting/gathering, and access to rivers. Community gardens and passive parks may be more important for EJ populations, and access to the Mystic may be more needed than Alewife Brook.
- Many groups use open spaces in similar ways (primarily for walking). Visiting playgrounds is, expectedly, much more common for households with children and respondents ages 35-54.
- Respondents with children under 18 in their household, respondents under 18, and non-white respondents may use the rec programs more often, but it's hard to tell.
- Respondents from wards 2 and 4 feel the least like they have access to nature; wards 6 and 7 feel the most like they have access to nature.
- Most respondents in all groups say Somerville needs more open space.

## Demographics Details

*Checked against ACS 2022 5-year estimates for Somerville. People who did not provide demographics are excluded from this analysis.*

Age

- Ages 35-54 are overrepresented
  - 55% of respondents vs. 24% of population
- Ages 19-24 are underrepresented
  - 2% of respondents vs. ~14% of population

#### Race/Ethnicity

- White people are overrepresented
  - 83% of respondents vs. 69% of population
- Asian, Black, and Hispanic people are underrepresented
  - 5%, 2%, and 5% of respondents vs. 10%, 4%, and 11% of population respectively

#### Income

- Somerville's median household income is roughly \$120,000, so 59% of respondents above median is not unexpected.
- Due to bucket alignment, we can't tell if high-income households are overrepresented.
- Lowest-income households (\$30,000 or less) are underrepresented.
  - 4% of respondents vs. 12-15% of population

#### Wards

- Wards 3 and 5 are overrepresented
  - 20% and 21% of respondents vs. roughly 14% of population each (relatively even split)

#### Children in Household

- 48% of total respondents report that they have children under 18 in their household.
  - This is high; keep in mind while interpreting results.
- 75% of respondents ages 35-44 have children under 18 in their household.
- 73% of the respondents with children under 18 in this survey make \$120k+.
  - This is high vs. 59% of total respondents.
- 80% of the respondents with children under 18 in this survey were white.
  - This is expected vs. 83% of total population.

## Open Space Questions

*Does Somerville need more open space?*

*(The options: yes, no, other)*

704 responses, 4 skipped

Overwhelmingly, respondents say yes (91%). It represents all groups. Only 4.8% said no.

The "other" responses (n=29) touch on a couple themes:

- **Fine with the amount, but enhance the spaces we have.**

- "...What the open spaces provide to residents in terms of experiences is an entirely other question. Of the 50+ park spaces in the city, only a small number offer a range of experiences (not just playgrounds and courts)."
- "Needs better and more variety of open spaces. Fine with current amount (it's a city after-all) - but most are geared towards kids activities."
- "Need is strong, but it would be lovely to have more community space and move away from car centricism. It would also be nice to have some larger areas that what is available."
- "What we have should be better maintained..."
- **Yes, AND enhance the spaces that we have to be more inviting or accessible.**
  - "The open spaces that we have need more access. For instance there is no access to the waterfront next to the Blessing of the Bay boathouse."
  - "Needs more open & public space that is free to exist in and is wheelchair accessible. Also with places to lie down (benches that do not prevent lying down) in shade and out of rain."
- **Enhance sidewalks and streetscapes with plantings and seating.**
  - "It needs more open space, but the space that it has such as sidewalks could be made significantly more inviting for pedestrians continuing to grow the tree cover, with pocket parks, and benches and shelter at bus stops."
  - "I would love to see more open space in Somerville, but more importantly, I would like more green/nature along roads and sidewalks to create better walks on the way to the open spaces"
  - "I think yes, particularly air cleaning green space around highways and roadways."
- **Yes, but not at the expense of housing ("quality," "affordable," "more").**
  - "I would love to see more green space but not if it comes at the expense of more housing!"

*Do you feel like you have access to nature?  
(The options: yes, no, other)*

701 responses, 7 skipped

Overall: 41% say yes, 47% say no.

It varies by ward:

The most "no" answers came from Wards 2 and 4. The most "yes" answers came from Wards 6 and 7.

27% of Ward 2 respondents feel like they have access to nature vs. 54% of Ward 7.

The "other" responses (n=85) touch on a couple themes:

- **Could be better.**
  - "I do feel like I have access to nature however I often have to travel far for it. I think there should be more nature even in urban areas."

- “Not enough access to nature. I've lived here as an adult for 23 years and feel like I'm slowly being boxed in and suffocated.”
- “I have access to nature via Matignon field near Teele square but worry that it will be taken away.”
- **I leave the city to connect with nature.**
  - “Yes, but I leave the city. My friends without cars have a more difficult time.”
  - “I am privileged to be able to access nature outside of the city, but I do not think Somerville has "access to nature" within city limits.”
- **Depends on where you are in Somerville and if you have a backyard.**
  - “I live close to the Mystic River (winter Hill near ten hills) and run across the River and through MacDonald Park weekly. So technically yes, but almost all of that nature is in Medford.”
  - “Yes but only b/c I live next to community garden”
  - “Very little. Foss park is the biggest spot near me, but the sight and sound of highway traffic does not make it feel like nature. The open space is nice but it is nearly all dedicated to sports fields, not nature.”
  - “I do when I leave Somerville and in my yard, but my yard is situated in a way that is unusual for the city.”
  - “I live close to the bike path so I can more easily access nature here. Aside from the stretch from Lowell to Davis Square, other areas of Somerville have less accessibility to nature. East Somerville, where my kids go to school, is especially in need to more nature!”
- **Different opinions on what feels like “nature.”**
  - “No. I consider "nature" to be a place where you can't see any man made structures. I am not aware of those spaces in Somerville. We are a densely populated city, so it's understandable.”
  - “Tiny tended pockets of green aren't Nature. but we need more of them, including every street in Somerville being fully tree-lined.”
  - “I have a small garden that attracts birds and squirrels and bunnies, so I have some access to nature, but nearby “ nature” not so much.”
- **Cars makes a difference.**
  - “Somedays were there is less traffic outside.”
  - “I have frequent/easy access to small green areas that are divided by highways & major streets. I drive to other towns for larger nature spaces.”
  - “I personally do because I live in Ten Hills, but my part of the city is cut off from so much of the rest of the Community and public transit options to reach the Mystic River area aren't great from across town.”

*How did Covid change your feelings about parks or use of parks??  
(Open-ended responses)*

535 text responses

The past seven years since the last OSRP update overlap with the emergence of COVID-19. We posed this question out of curiosity, but the answers are powerful.

Analyzing the open-ended responses revealed a few themes:

- COVID made me appreciate parks more (n=250)
- COVID caused me to spend more time in parks (n=104)
- COVID had no impact on how I use parks (n=73)
- COVID made it clear that we need more/bigger parks (n=61)
- COVID increased my need for time in nature (or increased how much I value time in nature) (n=25)
- COVID deterred me from using parks (n=14)

Notably, 70 respondents noted that parks became an important space for community and gathering. 38 noted walking and hiking as important components of their use of open space during COVID. This aligns well with the desire for areas for sitting/gathering and trails shown in the responses to the types of open space needed in Somerville.

*What do you do MOST OFTEN in our open spaces?*

*(Select up to three: visit playgrounds, sit and relax, social gatherings with friends/family, walking, use athletic fields, Parks & Recreation programs, visit splash pads, community gardening, other)*

708 responses

Takeaways:

Many groups use open spaces in similar ways.

No substantial differences were found between racial groups, wards, or income groups (that aren't explained by households with children).

Visiting playgrounds is, expectedly, much more common for households with children and respondents ages 35-54; other age groups rarely report common use.

Social gatherings with friends/family in open spaces are more common for younger people and less common for older people.

Other responses (n=84):

- 33 respondents noted dog socializing, dog walks, dog parks
- 20 reported bicycling including along the community path
- 12 noted using open spaces for fitness or running
- 4 said they use parks for bird watching and experiencing nature
- 3 noted play-related uses like tag and running around with friends
- And 2 noted passing through open spaces while running errands or commuting

Based on the responses written into the “other” field attached to this question, we made an error in leaving out dog walking from the options, but 33 respondents who wrote it in clarified that this is a significant use as well.

*How long do you spend in our open spaces (guess an average)?*

*(The options: between 0-10 minutes, 10-30 minutes, 30-60 minutes, 1-2 hours, 2-4 hours, other)*

708 responses

The majority of respondents selected either 30-60 minutes (33.6%) or 1-2 hours (37.3%). This data may be challenging to interpret because some respondents noted confusion about the question. They wondered if this was the number of minutes in a given unit of time (for example, how many minutes per day, week, year) or if it was the number of minutes per visit (as the survey intended).

*What do we need more of in Somerville?*

*(The options: playgrounds, passive parks for sitting/gathering, trails and walking paths, athletic fields, community gardens, access to the Mystic River or Alewife Brook, other)*

708 responses

Respondents say Somerville needs more:

1. Trails and walking paths
2. Passive parks for sitting/gathering
3. Access to the Mystic River or Alewife Brook
4. Community gardens

By Ward:

Trails are the #1 need for all wards. Passive parks and access to rivers are primarily #2 and #3, though often close.

Community gardens rank #3 in Ward 7 only (perhaps due to relatively good access to Alewife Brook).

Wards with no river access (2, 3, 5, 6) and wards with the most Mystic access (1, 4) alike want better river access.

By Age:

Trails are #1 for all age groups except under 18 and have more interest in playgrounds and athletic fields.

People aged 35-44 say Somerville needs relatively more playgrounds (75% have children in their household).

Access to rivers is as or more important than passive parks for people ages 45-64 and 75+.

If you have children:

Unsurprisingly, respondents with children under 18 in their household say Somerville needs relatively more playgrounds and athletic fields than respondents overall.

By race/ethnicity:

Asian (n=29) and Black (n=10) respondents say Somerville needs community gardens, more than river access.

Black respondents also say Somerville needs playgrounds and athletic fields, more than trails.

Hispanic respondents (n=32) say Somerville needs more trails, passive parks, and river access equally.

Respondents of multiple races or another race (n=32) have the same order of priorities as the overall results, but community gardens are a closer #4.

Collectively, non-white respondents' priorities rank the same as the overall results (as white respondents) but with slightly higher proportions of votes for passive parks and community gardens.

By income:

Respondents with incomes of \$30,000 or less (n=20) and \$31,000-60,000 (n=47) tend to say Somerville needs community gardens more than those with above-median incomes, and more than river access.

Respondents with lower incomes also tend to say Somerville needs passive parks more than those with above-median incomes.

Takeaways:

More passive parks for sitting/gathering may be more important to (and/or more needed by) respondents with lower incomes, non-white respondents, and youth under 18.

More community gardens may also be more important to (and/or more needed by) respondents with lower incomes and non-white respondents.

More trails and walking paths are important to most groups, but more so to white and above-median-income respondents.

Better river access is important to wards with no river access and Mystic access alike, though Mystic River access may be more needed (based on less interest in river access in Ward 7 responses).

Other responses (n=118):

These responses were very wide-ranging and many of them are represented in the answers survey takers wrote for the next question. That said, here are the highest-ranking categories:

- 34 respondents said they need more dog-friendly spaces. Either off-leash areas, separate dog parks, or on-leash areas where dogs are allowed.
- 16 people said that planting more trees was very important.
- 8 asked for more nature-forward/natural spaces.
- 7 said they would like to see more vegetation across the city in general.
- 7 requested more tennis courts and 4 requested pickle ball courts.
- 5 noted the need for teen spaces.
- 5 expressed the need for bathrooms.
- 3 suggested the need for spaces that can be used in winter, rain, or at night.
- 3 asked for more basketball courts.
- 3 requested space for communal gathering.
- 3 expressed a need for more mobility-friendly play equipment or park spaces.

*What kinds of open spaces are missing in Somerville that you wish we had?*  
(Open-ended responses)

520 text responses

The open-ended responses to this question reinforce the findings in the multiple-choice options while adding nuance and additional categories.

The themes that emerged:

- Passive parks with unstructured or unprogrammed space were highly desired (n=75)
- Walking paths and trails were also highly desired (n=82)
- There was a strong interest in natural spaces or nature immersion suggested by terms like “nature,” “wild,” and “forest” (n=87)
- Shade (n=34) and trees (n=68) were mentioned many times
- An increase in plants, planted areas, and gardens (n=54)
- Residents requested amenities suited for passive sitting/gathering areas including the terms “picnic” and “seating” (n=57)
- A group of respondents requested larger parks (n=25) with mixed uses like Lincoln Park (n=28)
- Dog parks/dog-friendly spaces (n=43)
- Habitat for wildlife (n=30)
- Waterfront access/waterfront use (n=21)

Other things that were mentioned fewer times but are worth noting included more open space (n=19), spaces for teens/tweens (n=17), more pocket parks (n=16), quiet areas (n=14), programming or activating the spaces that we have (n=12), more community gardens (n=11), playground improvements (n=11), all-weather/all-season spaces (n=11), bathrooms (n=9), more equitable distribution of parks across the city (n=9), increased accessibility for persons with disabilities (n=7).



Requests for sports equipment or spaces were separated by sport, most often. The largest number of requests were for exercise equipment (n=14), followed by pickleball (n=13), tennis (n=12), generally more fields (n=12), pools (n=9), basketball (n=7), space for drop-in/pickup sports (n=6), and indoor space (n=6).

*Are there any barriers that prevent you from using or enjoying Somerville's parks or programs?  
(Open-ended responses)*

286 text responses

- Limited access (locked, don't know when available, programs fill up, hours don't match with my schedule) (n=64)
- Limited routes/safe routes to parks (non-car) (n=35)
- Distance (n=33)
- Communication gaps (n=24)
- No bathrooms (n=18)
- Parking limited (handicap or general) (n=16)
- Trash/waste (n=16)
- Limited accessibility for persons with disabilities (n=16)
- Too many people/crowded (some parks, community path) (n=16)
- Poor conditions (e.g.: pools, fields, drainage) (n=15)
- Exposed/no shade (some parks, also routes to parks) (n=14)
- Safety (e.g.: Chuckie Harris) (n=12)
- Not enough time (n=10)
- No spaces for dogs (n=10)
- Presence of dogs (n=8)
- Inclement weather & winter (n=8)

*Under 8: cost, lighting, seating, air/water pollution, lack of nature, noise, uninviting, water*

*Please provide any additional comments, concerns, or ideas that you'd like to share about open spaces and recreational programs.  
(Open-ended responses)*

239 text responses

There were a wide range of answers to this question, many of which are covered by the answers to other questions. Some additional common comments of note are below:

- Appreciation for the community path extension
- Increase open space acres
- Desire to see Matignon Field remain a public open space
- Desire for bleachers/seating at Conway Park
- More trees!

- Concerns about rats
- Requests to preserve Trum Field as open space
- Notes about an imbalance in open space across Somerville

## Optional Open-Ended Demographics Questions

*Do you or anyone in your family play sports in Somerville parks? If so, what do they play?*  
*(Open-ended responses)*

381 text responses including 80 nos and 301 non-“no” text responses

- 190 listed soccer
- 2 listed futsal
- 33 listed baseball or little league
- 2 listed t-ball
- 72 listed basketball or bball
- 28 listed tennis
- 15 listed pickleball or pickle ball
- 13 listed volleyball
- 42 listed frisbee or ultimate frisbee
- 11 listed track
- 18 listed run or running or jog or jogging
- 8 listed cross country
- 3 listed walk or walking
- 7 listed football
- 4 listed lacrosse
- 6 listed swim or swimming
- 6 listed hockey
- 3 listed ice skating
- 10 listed bike or biking
- 2 listed scootering
- 1 listed gymnastics
- 3 listed skating or rollerblading
- 3 listed skateboarding
- 6 listed kickball
- 9 listed parkour
- 3 listed catch
- 1 listed non-league free play
- 1 listed circus
- 2 listed splashing or splash pads
- 1 listed paddle games
- 1 listed hacky sack

*Do you or anyone else in your household have a disability or chronic health condition that affects access or enjoyment of Somerville's open spaces?*  
(Open-ended responses)

186 text responses, including 117 nos and 23 unspecific “yes” answers

The responses vary and are hard to summarize but around 15 answers described concerns related to limited mobility. Another 6 specified the desire for places to rest (seating or a place to lay down), 4 need vehicle access, and two requested soft walking/running surfaces. 5 respondents said they need a bathroom nearby to be able to enjoy open spaces. 6 described respiratory concerns and 3 said they need water/shade for relief from heat and the sun. 4 noted autism and 2 the need for quiet spaces or areas with fewer people.

The unspecified “yes” answers represent needs, but it is not possible to identify if our parks and open spaces meet those needs.

## Recreation Questions

*How often do you participate in Somerville's recreation programs?*  
(The options: rarely, occasionally, sometimes, often, very often, other)

696 responses, 12 skipped

Note: Findings about frequency of rec program use are more uncertain than other questions, depending on how respondents interpreted “rarely,” “occasionally,” “sometimes,” etc.

Most respondents rarely participate in Somerville's recreation programs.

In general, non-white respondents may use rec programs more than white respondents.

Black respondents may use rec programs more than other groups.

Respondents with children under 18 in their household likely use rec programs more frequently than overall.

Respondents under 18 may use the rec programs more often than other age groups.

Respondents ages 35-54 may also use the rec programs more often, likely driven by children under 18 in the household.

### Takeaways:

Findings about frequency of rec program use are largely uncertain, depending on how respondents interpreted the terms in the question.

No substantial differences were found between income groups or wards.

Respondents with children under 18 in their household, and respondents under 18, may use the rec programs more often.

Non-white respondents may use the rec programs more often.

Other responses (n=32):

- Never, but I'm new to town.
- Never, but I didn't know we had them.
  - "Never! Though to be honest I hadn't been aware of these programs."
  - "I was not aware of them but will now make a point to look at the offerings."
- Not me, but my kids do.
- Never, but would with better offerings.
- Never.

*What programs would you like Parks and Rec to offer?*

*(Open-ended responses)*

387 text responses

*If we could acquire a recreation center, what would you like to see inside?*

*(Open-ended responses)*

465 text responses

These results were shared with Parks and Recreation staff to analyze and use for future planning.

## Stakeholder Meetings

City staff met with many different internal and external stakeholder groups to understand their needs/priorities related to open space and recreational programming. This plan should act as a compliment to the work of other City departments. It should also take advantage of the vast amount of outreach and planning work done by other staff to make use of the knowledge held internally.

It also became clear through our survey and community meetings work that certain demographics were not well represented in that data. In particular, we wanted to ensure that seniors, immigrant communities, and teens had a voice. We accomplished that by attending meetings of different teen groups, attending events held by the Council on Aging and speaking with Council on Aging staff, and collaborating with SomerViva staff to understand what they hear from their community networks.

*Stakeholders:*

- OSPCD
  - Economic Development
  - Historic Preservation
  - Mobility

- Planning, Preservation, and Zoning
  - Public Space and Urban Forestry
- Parks & Recreation
- Department of Public Works
- ADA Coordinator, Adrienne Pomeroy
- Office of Food Access & Healthy Communities
- Capital Projects
- Engineering
- Environmental Health Manager, Colin Zeigler and Alicia Privett
- Strategic Planning & Equity Manager, Luis Quizhpe
- City Committees
  - Community Preservation Committee
  - Urban Forestry Committee
  - Conservation Commission
  - Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities
- Council on Aging
- Somerville Partnership for Young Children
- Teen Groups
  - Teen Empowerment
  - Groundwork Somerville Green Team
  - Somerville High School Environmental Club

## **Findings Summary:**

### Teen Groups:

- Age-friendly structures
- Areas separate from little kids (so they don't feel like creeps)
- Places to get lost
- Seating
- Assembly Square needs more parks (tiny, broken up)
- Some neighborhoods have more parks than others (distance barrier)
- Improve open space in the Mystic Housing Development
- Outdoor space adjacent to an indoor space
- Field use for open play (so they don't get kicked off)

### SomerViva: Office of Immigrant Affairs:

- Outdoor fitness equipment
- Parks near senior housing
- Seating & tables for flexible use
- BBQ/music outlets for public use

- Shade
- Plant giveaways
- Help kids learn about the environment
- Help immigrants to connect with local ecology
- “Where are amenities?”
- “Why would I use the parks?” (Good for your health, here’s what amenities there are, etc.)
- “What do you need to do to use the park for a party?” (To prevent conflicts when don’t know permitting rules)
- Translate event promotional materials
- Coordinate with SomerViva staff to get the word out and to help non-English-speaking residents to navigate surveys and public processes.

Council on Aging:

- Seating – especially around active recreation (playgrounds and fields)
- Railings
- Social gathering space, especially near senior housing
- ADA/wheelchair-accessible path for exercise
- Chess tables
- Shade
- Places they particularly enjoy: Ed Leathers, Stone Place, Foss Park

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## Appendix C: Parks Prioritization Matrix

In 2024, the Public Space & Urban Forestry (PSUF) Division conducted condition reviews of 11 parks in poor condition, along with 2 parks rated as "good" in PSUF's open space inventory but with safety or quality concerns. According to that inventory, 78% of Somerville open spaces are in good or excellent condition, 9 are in design or active construction, and 11 are in poor condition. The team, led by PSUF staff Jon Bronenkant and Alison Maurer, evaluated the 13 parks using a 2014 assessment model. The 2014 assessment scorecard includes categories for safety and security, accessibility, appearance, and equipment/serviceability. A new category for climate resilience was added. Each park was scored based on those categories and then grouped as either "renovate" or "upgrade."

The priority matrix below shows each group of parks ("renovate" followed by "upgrade") ranked high to low. The categories in the top row come directly from community and stakeholder feedback gathered during the 2023-24 public outreach process. The score is based on the rubric described in the "Ranking Methodology" table. Higher scores are given for qualities such as: hazardous/very poor conditions, location in an "Environmental Justice" area<sup>88</sup>, sites where multiple accessibility-improving or climate resilient features could be added, or sites that add a substantial amount of open space. The resulting scores directly inform the project priority list outlined at the end of Section 9.

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<sup>88</sup> See a description of "Environmental Justice" and its criteria as defined by the State here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/environmental-justice-populations-in-massachusetts>

## Park Prioritization Matrix – Renovate

RENOVATE	2024 Physical Condition	Condition	Adds open space acreage	Contributes to or potential for fitness/ wellness/ active rec	Potential for “nature” experience	Potential for accessible amenities (bathrooms, playground equipment, seating)	Economic Justice area	Amenity not w/in a 10-min walkshed	Potential for new cool/ comfortable features (shade, water)	Potential for stormwater features (capture / infiltration / reuse)	Score
ArtFarm	n/a	-	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	3	14
Perkins	2.2	2		1	1	1	1		2	1	9
Kennedy (front)	n/a	2	1			2		1	1	1	8
Woodstock	2.0	2		1	1	1	1	1		1	8
Nunziato Dog Park	1.5	3				1		1	2		7
Florence Playground	2.3	2		1	1	1	1			1	7
Osgood	2.2	2		1	1	1			1	1	7
Bailey Park	2.3	2			1				1	1	5

## Park Prioritization Matrix – Upgrade

UPGRADE	2024 Physical Condition	Condition	Adds open space acreage	Contributes to or potential for fitness/ wellness/ active rec	Potential for “nature” experience	Potential for accessible amenities (bathrooms, playground equipment, seating)	Economic Justice area	Amenity not w/in a 10-min walkshed	Potential for new cool/ comfortable features (shade, water)	Potential for stormwater features (capture / infiltration / reuse)	Score
Quincy St existing hazard	2.0	2			1	1					4
Trum Bleachers	1.8	3		1		1		1			6
Nunziato Field	2.2	2		1		1		1	1		6
0 New Wash	3.0	1			1	1	1		1		5
Palmacci	3.0	1			1	1			1		4
Lexington	2.8	1		1		1			1		4
Seven Hills	2.5	1			1	1		1			4

## Ranking Methodology

Need	Point Value
Physical condition: <2 2-2.4 2.5-3	3 = poor condition 2 = inadequate 1 = adequate
Adds open space	0 = No new square footage added 1 = 1/2 acre or less 2 = 1/2 to 1 acre 3 = 1+ acres
Contributes to or potential for fitness/ wellness	0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Multiple
Potential for “nature” experience	0 = No 1 = Yes
Potential for accessible amenities	0 = Not possible 1 = Yes 2 = Multiple
Economic Justice area	0 = No 1 = Yes
Amenity not w/in a 10-min walkshed	0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Multiple
Potential for new cool/comfortable features (shade, water)	0 = No additions possible or shade/water features already on site 1 = Yes 2 = Multiple
Potential for stormwater features (capture / infiltration / reuse)	0 = No stormwater features possible Capture only: small = .5 Capture and infiltration: small = .75 Capture only: large = 1 Capture and reuse: small = 1 Capture and infiltration: large = 2 Capture and reuse: large = 3

## Appendix D: Park Evaluation Overview and Results 2019-2022

DRAFT

## Summary of Park Evaluation Results: 2019, 2021, and 2022

Prepared by: Lisa Robinson and Alissa Ebel, Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities  
Department of Health and Human Services, City of Somerville

### Contents:

- I. Park Evaluation Overview
- II. Key Recommendations
- III. Summary of Information Gathered

### I. Park Evaluation Overview

#### What is the purpose of the Park Evaluation?

The goal of the Evaluation is to understand the use of Somerville parks, with a particular focus on equity in access to modern parks with engaging features for all residents. The Evaluation seeks to answer:

- Who uses the parks? During which times?
  - What is the perceived age, gender, race/ethnicity of park users?
- How active are people in the parks?
  - What features promote activity?
  - Which groups are most active?
  - Which parks need renovation or improvement, and what type of improvement?
- How do people use parks for unstructured recreation?
  - How does field permitting affect park accessibility for unstructured play?

#### How are the Evaluations completed?

##### *What tools does it use to collect information?*

The Evaluation uses tools adapted from the System for Observing Play and Recreation in the Community (SOPARC) technique. This is a tested method of gathering information through observation of people in parks. The method has the advantage of making an evaluation more feasible and less disruptive to park activity because it does not require intercepting park users to complete a survey. The drawback is that demographic characteristics are reported as perceived by observers and not self-reported by people in parks.

In addition to park observation data, information in this report comes from:

- US Census American Community Survey: Race, Ethnicity, Age, and Gender of the Somerville population.
- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: Race, Ethnicity, and Income of the Somerville Public School population.
- The Office of Public Space and Urban Forestry: Park type classification.
- The Department of Parks and Recreation: permitting records for spring 2022.



## *Who collects the information?*

Staff members from the Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities (former Shape Up Somerville), graduate students in public health, and community volunteers have collaborated to complete the three evaluations summarized here. The Office of Food Access and Healthy Communities produced this summary and analysis. The Public Space and Urban Forestry Division (PSUF), Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, has provided input throughout the evaluation process.

## *When was the information summarized here collected?*

This information was collected over three years from 2019-2022. There was no evaluation in 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The timeframes for data collection in each year were:

- 2019: mid-September through mid-October
- 2021: mid-May through mid-June
- 2022: June through early July

## II. Key Recommendations

Several consistent themes have emerged over three years of evaluation. This section summarizes these themes and recommendations for improving park infrastructure, upkeep, and programming.

1. **People of color use the parks in Somerville. We should continue to work on creative ways to engage communities who use the parks in future design or other changes to park spaces.**  
Evaluations show that the perceived race/ethnicity of park users more closely matches the Somerville Public School (SPS) population, which is majority minority and about 50% low-income, than the general population.
2. **Offer more programming for older adults in parks.** Perceived older adults had lower levels of activity in 2021 and 2022 observations and were underrepresented compared to share population in some years, suggesting a need for more park programming aimed at this age group.
3. **Continue to build opportunities for young people who identify as female to be active in park spaces.** Perceived girls/women were more likely to be sedentary or only engaging in light activity compared to perceived boys/men, though the difference is less marked in the most recent year of observation.
4. **Prioritize upkeep and addition of features in parks near preschools and programming for children.** In addition to school-related park use, many childcare facilities rely on their local parks to provide outdoor recreation for young children. We should recognize this and work to keep up and improve parks near childcare centers.
5. **Provide opportunities for adults to be active while watching kids and conduct outreach to promote these opportunities.** Adults are frequently sedentary in parks, especially when accompanying young children.

## III. Summary of Information Gathered

This section summarizes the data collected over the three evaluations on number of park users, activity level, perceived race or ethnicity, perceived gender, and perceived age of park users.

# Park Evaluation Overview and Results 2019-2022

## How many people did we observe and in which parks (Table 1 & Figure 1)?

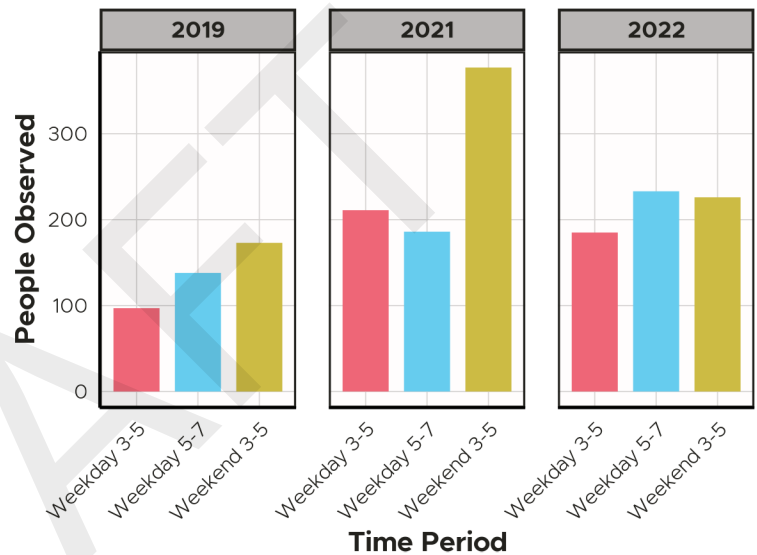
We observed a total of 21 parks over three years, 12 in 2019, 13 in 2021, and 13 in 2022. 5 parks were observed in all three years. Parks were chosen through a combination of renovation date and area income, with priority given to parks in neighborhoods with Environmental Justice populations\*.

\*Environmental Justice neighborhoods in Massachusetts are determined by meeting at least one of the following criteria: 1) annual median household income is 65% or less of the state's median household income; 2) minorities make up 40% or more of the population; 3) 25% or more of households identify as speaking English less than 'very well'; 4) minorities make up 25% or more of the population AND annual median household income for the municipality (in this case Somerville) is not more than 150% of the state's annual median household income.

Table 1: Parks observed and number of people observed, 2019-22

Park	Main Land Use Type	2019	2021	2022
Draw 7	Athletic Field	--	38	49
<b>Foss</b>	<b>Athletic Field</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>217</b>
Nunziato	Athletic Field	--	--	26
Junction	Passive	--	6	--
LouAnne David	Passive	--	--	36
MaxpacSquare	Passive	--	26	--
Partners	Passive	--	22	--
Prospect	Passive	--	--	55
Albion	Playground	63	63	--
Allen	Playground	1	--	11
Central Hill	Playground	14	--	44
<b>Chuckie Harris</b>	<b>Playground</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>31</b>
Corbett	Playground	--	--	19
Grimmons	Playground	36	31	--
<b>Hoyt</b>	<b>Playground</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>51</b>
Marshall	Playground	7	33	--
Mystic	Playground	26	23	--
<b>North</b>	<b>Playground</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>69</b>
Osgood	Playground	--	--	20
<b>Deanna Cremin</b>	<b>Playground</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>
Woodstock	Playground	9	--	--

Figure 1: Observations by Time of Day, 2019-22



Note: While Golden Source (PSUF Data) classifies Allen St as a community garden, only the playground portion was ever observed being used, and users reported it is regularly used as a play place for children from the nearby CAAS HeadStart. In light of these observations, we reclassified Allen as a Playground.

## How active are people in Somerville parks (Tables 2A and B & Figure 2)?

Playground primary use parks have highest activity level, largely due to active children. For example, Allen Street Playground was observed when a HeadStart class was using it for outdoor recreation.

Figure 2: Activity Level, All Years and All Parks

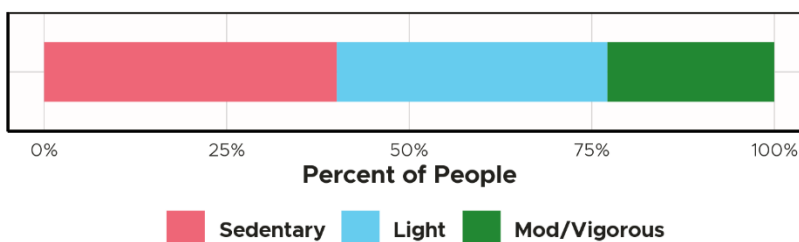


Table 2A: Parks with 25% or more moderate-vigorous activity

Park	Mod/Vig	Total	Percent
Allen	8	12	66.67
Corbett	9	19	47.37
North	77	180	42.78
Mystic	14	48	29.17
Foss	170	636	26.73
Chuckie Harris	19	74	25.68
LouAnne David	9	36	25

Table 2B: Parks with 50% or more sedentary activity

Park	Sed.	Total	Percent
MaxpacSquare	18	26	69.23
Nunziato	18	26	69.23
Junction	4	6	66.67
Prospect	33	55	60
Draw 7	44	87	50.57

While passive parks like Junction and Prospect Hill have high levels of sedentary activity, when a passive park is available to a group, it can easily be used actively. For example, Lou Ann David Park was observed just after the daycare ended at the Tufts Administration Building, leading to higher activity levels.

*What are the perceived ages of park users and how does activity level differ with perceived age (Figures 3 & 4)?*

Observations show that perceived older adults are underrepresented in parks, compared to their share of the population, and were much less active than perceived adults in 2021 and 2022, and than children and teens in all

Figure 3: Park users by perceived age, 2019-22

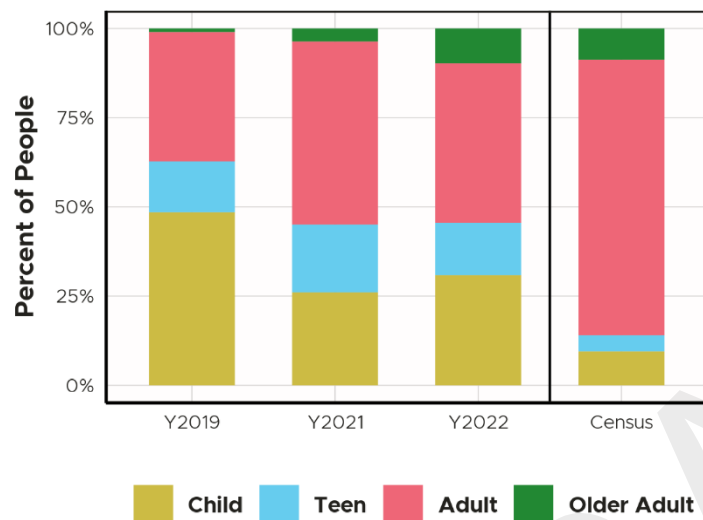
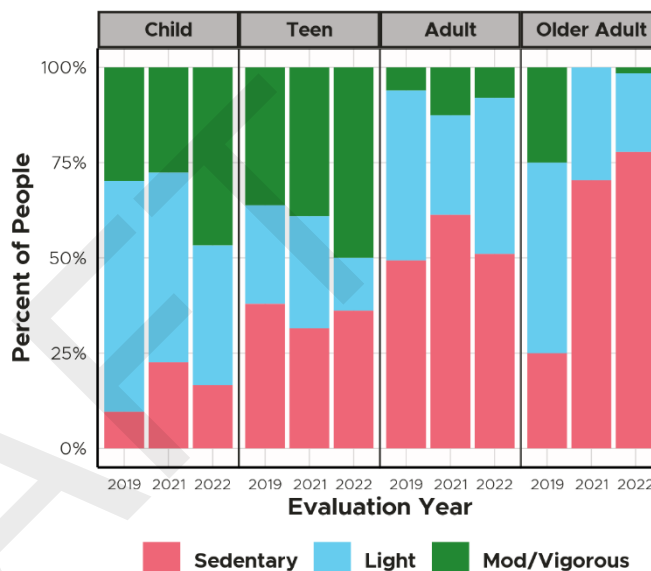


Figure 4: Perceived age of park users and activity level, 2019-



years. This points to an opportunity to offer more programming for older adults in parks. Perceived adults are also underrepresented in parks and have low levels of activity. Many observations noted adults sitting while children played actively, suggesting there may be an opportunity to build infrastructure that would encourage guardians to be active when accompanying children.

*What are the perceived races or ethnicities of park users and how does activity level differ with perceived race or ethnicity (Figures 5 & 6)?*

Perceived black and Latino/a/e residents are over-represented in public parks; perceived park demographics more closely resemble the demographics of the Somerville Public Schools, which are majority minority. Notably, Somerville Public School children are also majority low-income, suggesting the importance of investing in our parks to achieve our cities' goal of equitable access to active and healthy lifestyles.

The 2021 Park Evaluation also assessed attendance at community meetings and showed that representation in the park planning community engagement process did not typically reflect park user demographics. The analysis included a focus group with Spanish-speaking parents, who used parks but did not engage with the planning process because meetings are in the evenings, far from home, time-consuming, and offered primarily in English. As a result of these findings, the Public Space and Urban Forestry Division and other city partners are working to make the process more accessible and equitable.

Figure 5: Park users by perceived race/ethnicity, 2019-22

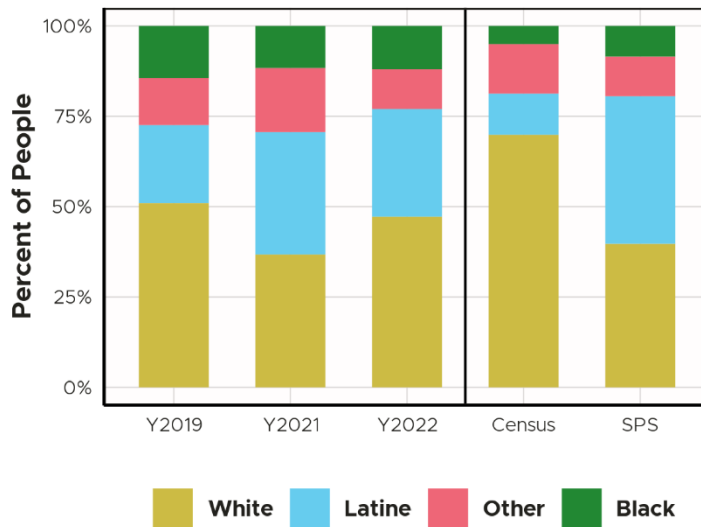
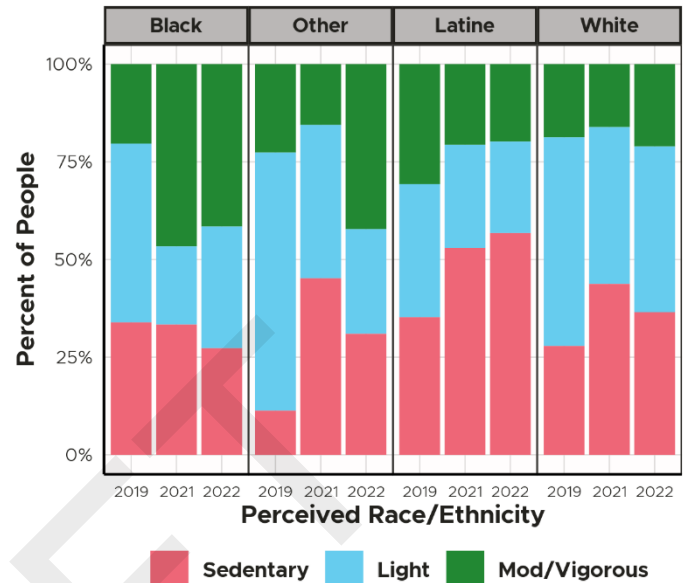


Figure 6: Perceived race/ethnicity and activity level, 2019-2022

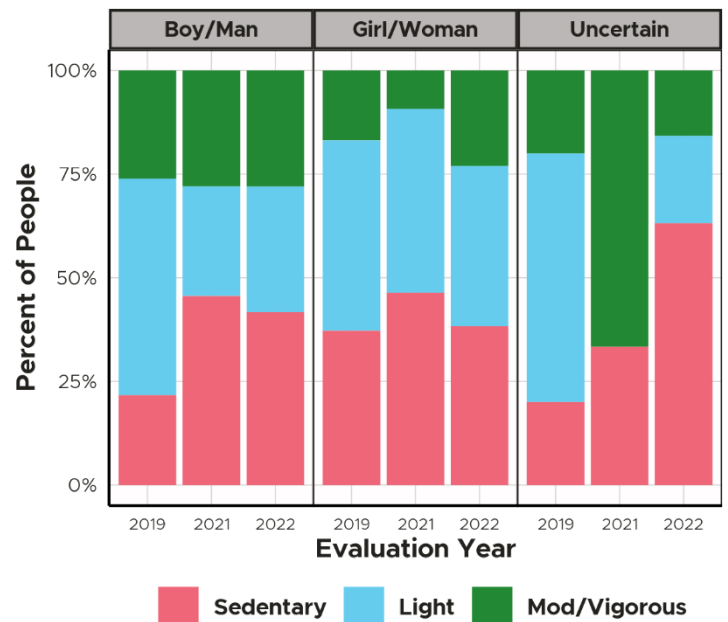


Note: Census questions distinguish race and ethnicity, asking residents to indicate both, e.g. Black Hispanic or White Hispanic. The Park Evaluation perceived Latine category is designed to capture anyone who would identify as Hispanic on the census, regardless of race. However, depending on the cultural competencies and experience of observers, folks who would identify as Hispanic and Black on the census may have been observed as Black.

*How does activity level differ with perceived gender identity (Figure 7)?*

2019 and 2021 found a disparity in activity level between female-appearing and male-appearing park users, although the difference was minimal in 2022 observations. These observations point to a need to continue to grow programming, policies, and messaging that support active recreation for all gender identities, especially among teens where the disparity is typically greater.

Figure 7: Perceived gender and activity level, 2019-22



*How frequently are parks with fields permitted for specific uses and not open for unstructured recreation (Table 3)?*

Due to Somerville's limited acreage, field space is at a premium in the city. Fields are often permitted for specific group uses during peak times, limiting access to spaces for unstructured recreation. People were frequently observed working out and playing in fields during unpermitted times on weekends indicating a need for more unstructured field time. Additionally, permitted activity does not always occur as planned. For example, during our 2022 weekday observation of the Winter Hill Field from 5-7, it was permitted for Somerville Youth Soccer, but was open for a family who was playing there.

These observations suggest there may be a value in preserving some field time for unstructured access for the public. This intervention could consider adding lighting to create a welcoming and safe space. The 2019 Evaluation showcased several missed opportunities for recreation due to lack of lighting in mid-fall.

## How do people use our schoolyards (Table 4)?

Observations of our schoolyards show that many of these spaces are heavily used throughout the week, especially if they have facilities like fields and basketball courts. Investing in these spaces benefits both our youth and the broader community.

Table 3: Permitting of Popular Fields, April 1, 2022-  
June 18, 2022, Weekdays 5-8 PM

Field	Percent of Time Permitted
ESCS Field	100.0
Winter Hill Field	99.4
Capuano Field	95.8
Nunziato Field	75.0
Trum Diamond A	73.2
Trum Diamond B	58.9
Lincoln Park Field	50.0

Table 4: Schoolyard Use by Time Period, 2019-2022

Park	2019			2021			2022		
	Weekday	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday	Weekday	Weekend
	3-5	5-7	3-5	3-5	5-7	3-5	3-5	5-7	3-5
Argenziano	122	46	301	57	185	132	--	--	--
Brown	32	0	0	18	0	0	--	--	--
Capuano	51	28	74	42	60	30	27	29	11
East Somerville	58	61	27	93	25	30	69	16	18
Healey	57	11	6	26	9	2	--	--	--
Kennedy	8	1	15	52	17	8	47	13	28
West Somerville	33	0	5	20	0	0	0	5	34
Winter	40	33	17	30	16	9	71	17	55

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## Appendix E: Open Space Creation Task Force Strategy Memo, 2019

DRAFT

# **Open Space Creation Task Force Strategy Memo**

**August 9, 2019**

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Somerville is home to world-class, award winning open spaces from the new Lincoln Park to historic Nathan Tufts Park. These parks, playgrounds, plazas, gardens, and fields provide opportunities for Somerville's residents to play, relax, socialize, grow food, and commune with nature. They provide a wealth of benefits not only to Somerville's residents but also to the urban environment as they provide important ecological services such as stormwater management and pollinator habitat.

At the same time, as New England's most densely populated community, the percentage of land dedicated to open space in Somerville is small. In 2010, SomerVision, Somerville's comprehensive plan, established the goal of creating 125 new acres of publicly-accessible open space. From 2010-2019, 19.9 new acres have been created or are in the process of being created. Somerville is now in the process of updating SomerVision. In addition, several neighborhoods are slated for major redevelopment, creating a unique opportunity to partner with private developers to create more open space through privately owned public spaces (POPS). To make greater progress towards the SomerVision goal and to take advantage of new opportunities that come with redevelopment, Somerville needs a thoughtful strategy that grapples with the realities of open space creation and lays out implementable actions that will result in more open space for all residents.

The purpose of this strategy memo is to provide recommendations for what such a strategy should include. It is intended to inform the SomerVision Steering Committee's process in selecting goals and metrics related to open space creation, as well as City of Somerville staff as they are working to create new open space.

## **Open Space in Somerville: Our Reality**

Somerville currently counts 89 parks, plazas, gardens, and fields as open space, for a total of 162.99 acres. Seven of these spaces are privately owned public spaces (POPS), which total 5.76 acres. The eight largest spaces are owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which total 81.28 acres. So, while the City of Somerville owns the majority of parks (69 of 89), it only controls 47% or 75.68 acres of open space within the City.

Somerville is the most densely populated community in New England and almost all of Somerville was developed by 1930. Somerville is also very small in size- at 4.1 square miles. Fifty percent of today's housing stock was built between 1890 and 1910. According to U.S. Census records, Somerville's population reached its peak in 1930, with 103,908 residents. Somerville currently has around 80,000 residents. By 1900, only

52 acres (4.7%) of the city was dedicated to parks or playgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Because open space was not prioritized during this period of rapid development, many of Somerville's open spaces were created after most of the city was developed. As a result, most parks are less than half an acre in size and are scattered throughout the city in an irregular pattern. Some of today's parks were undeveloped house lots, while more sizeable parks are typically former schoolyards or other municipal lands that were converted to parks in the latter half of the 20th century, as public demand for open space grew and housing needs declined.<sup>2</sup>

Today, many of Somerville's residents are calling for more open space because of the health benefits it provides. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that only 25% of American adults are physically active at recommended levels and 29% engage in no physical activity. Only 27% of students in grades 9 through 12 engage in moderate to intensive physical activity. This lack of activity puts individuals at risk of obesity and the health risks associated with being overweight. A group of studies reviewed in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* documented that access to places for physical outreach combined with informational outreach led to a 48.4% increase in the frequency of physical activity and easy access to a place to exercise results in a 5.1% median increase in a range of health benefits related to physical activity.

Open space can also provide other health benefits. Community gardens provide both an opportunity for exercise and for growing healthy food.<sup>3</sup> Trees in open spaces also contribute to human health. Evapotranspiration can help reduce peak summer temperatures by 2 to 9 degrees Fahrenheit according to the EPA. Trees also filter pollutants out of the air.<sup>4</sup> Exposure to the natural world has also been linked to other health benefits such as shorter hospitalizations, improved mental health, and better concentration for children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).<sup>5</sup> Finally, open space can improve the social health of communities. Research has shown that residents with green common spaces are more likely to have stronger social ties than those with only concrete.<sup>6</sup>

As part of the SomerVision comprehensive planning process that began in 2009, Somerville residents engaged in a discussion about how much new open space they would like to see created in Somerville between 2010 and 2030. Staff proposed 50 new

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<sup>1</sup> Zellie, 58.

<sup>2</sup> City of Somerville, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Trust for Public Land, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Trust for Public Land, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Trust for Public Land, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Trust for Public Land, 17.

acres based on an analysis of what they believed was feasible given land and anticipated funding available. Residents advocated for a higher number and 125 new acres of publicly-accessible open space was adopted as the SomerVision goal. From 2010 to 2019, 19.9 acres were created or are in the process of being created, of which 5.76 acres are privately owned public spaces (POPS). A further 12.25 acres are planned based on neighborhood plans for Davis, Gilman, and Union Squares, Winter Hill, and expanding Somerville Junction Park. Developers are expected to create 3.7 of the planned acres. This means that an additional 92.85 acres need to be identified to reach the SomerVision goal.

**Table 1. Progress to Date Towards SomerVision Goal**

Open Space Acres Created Since 2010: Public Space + POPS									
Public		Zero New Washington	Quincy St.	North St. Veterans	Chuckie Harris	Symphony	Baxter	Path (Cedar/ Lowell)	Total
	Acres	0.64	0.12	0.09	0.41	0.21	5.45	2.35	9.27
POPS		Block 2A Plaza	Maxwell's Green	50 Middlesex	Partners	Milbrook Park			
	Acres	0.33	0.46	0.29	4.60	0.08			5.76
In Progress		ArtFarm	5 Palmer	35 Richardson	Path Extension				
	Acres	2.1	0.04	0.13	2.6				4.87
							Total	19.9	
							Remaining to 125	105.1	
Planned		Gilman Square	Winter Hill	Union Square	Davis Square	Somerville Junction II			
	City Share	0.25	0.25	7.55	0.50	0.85			8.55
	Developer Share	0	0.85	2.00	0	0			3.7
	Total	0.25	1.10	9.55	0.50	0.85	Total		12.25
							Remaining to 125	92.85	

Based on recent acquisitions and park renovation projects, the City of Somerville estimates that the average acquisition cost today is \$4 million per acre and the average cost for design and construction is \$2.2 million per acre. These costs are expected to increase rapidly as a result of the demand for land in Somerville and the strength of the construction market. With 105.1 acres of open space remaining to create, Somerville will need to mobilize a minimum of \$651,620,000 at today's prices to reach its 125 acre goal.

Each year the City of Somerville has limited funds to contribute to open space acquisition and creation. Somerville's budget comes from tax revenue and a minimum amount of local aid from the state. The vast majority of these funds are committed each year to pay for staff salaries and the ongoing costs of providing vital services such as public education, fire and police services, and maintenance of the streets, sidewalks, and existing open spaces. The City is also facing the consequences of deferred maintenance on its infrastructure, which is over 100 years old and deteriorating rapidly. The City's Capital Investment Plan (CIP) contains the list of critical projects that must go forward in order to maintain the level of infrastructure services residents expect. The 19 projects on this list are expected to cost over \$500 million and an additional 32 projects are currently unscheduled and unbudgeted on this list. The cost of improving the City's 25 parks that are in need of renovation over the next ten years is not included in this list nor is the cost of reaching the 125 acre goal.

In addition to using funding through its operating budget, the City can seek grant funding for open space acquisition through two sources. The City's Community Preservation Act (CPA) program raises approximately \$2 million each year to fund affordable housing, historic preservation, and open space/recreational land projects. To date, CPA funds have been used to acquire two parcels that total 0.17 acres at the cost of \$710,000. Currently 20% of CPA funds are allocated to open space, which totals approximately \$400,000 annually. An additional \$200,000 is available in flexible funds, though open space projects compete with affordable housing and historic resources projects for these funds. CPA funds are awarded through an annual competitive application process. The City can also seek funding through grants like the state's Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) program, which awards grants of up to \$400,000 and requires a 40% local match. The City has been very successful in receiving these grants which have been primarily used for park renovations, including Lincoln, Hoyt-Sullivan, and Prospect Hill parks. The City did use one year of PARC funding to acquire the land that is now Chuckie Harris Park.

Another strategy for creating new open space is partnering with developers to create privately owned public spaces, which are known as POPS. Somerville has the

opportunity to create a substantial number of new acres of open space through the creation of POPS as part of the development of the city's Transformative Areas, which are:

- Assembly Square
- Boynton Yards
- Brickbottom
- Grand Junction
- Inner Belt, and
- Union East.

Currently, the proposed zoning overhaul includes a 25% open space requirement for the Transformative Area overlay districts. In order to ensure that these POPS are successful, Somerville will need to learn from the experiences of other communities such as New York and San Francisco to ensure these spaces are designed with the community's needs in mind and are inviting spaces for all. Recommended strategies for creating successful POPS are included in the recommendations section below.

When City planners develop plans for new open space they seek both to ensure good urban design and to maximize the benefits of the open space for residents and the environment. There are four design principles that guide neighborhood planning, including the siting of open space:

- **Walkable structure:** Neighborhoods should be structured so residents can safely and easily walk to where they want to go, including open spaces.
- **Spatial enclosure:** People feel most comfortable when they are not in wide open spaces (think Boston's City Hall Plaza). Neighborhoods and individual open spaces should provide sufficient enclosure so people feel comfortable but not so closed in that it is not possible to see what is happening inside a park, which could lead to safety concerns.
- **Density and intensity:** Neighborhoods should balance the density and intensity of their buildings with their open space and other uses so that people neither feel overwhelmed by the space nor that the space is empty.
- **Variety and activity:** Residents want to be able to see and do a wide variety of things within their neighborhoods. This not only makes the experience of being in a space more enjoyable, but also safer as there are more people out and about on the street throughout the day and evening.

Given the limited space available in Somerville, parks planners seek to maximize the benefits each open space provides through maximizing the ecosystem services present. There are four ecosystem services<sup>7</sup>:

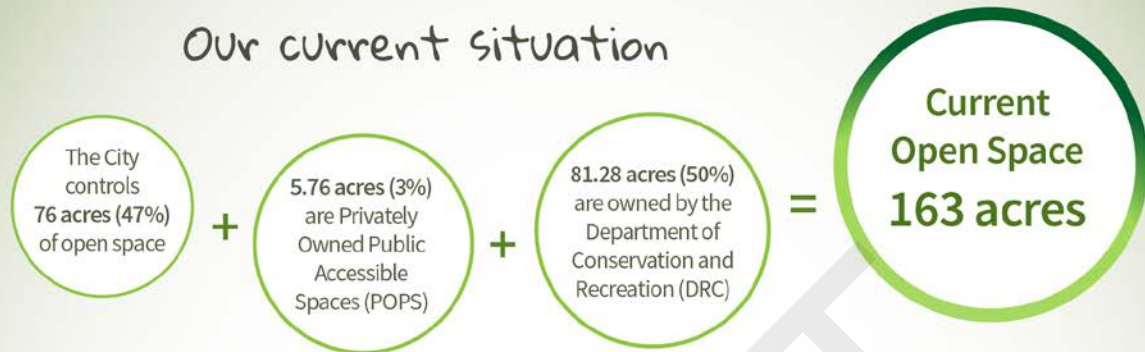
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<sup>7</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 57.

- **Food production:** Being able to grow food provides a wealth of benefits, as such, the City seeks to provide opportunities for those without access to their own yards to grow food. This includes traditional community gardens and innovative spaces such as ArtFarm.
- **Regulate natural phenomena:** Parks do a lot of work above and below ground. Where feasible, parks include underground chambers that help regulate the flow of stormwater. The tree canopy helps to regulate the surrounding air temperature, filter air pollution, and sequester carbon. Parks also support pollination by including host plant species for general and native pollinators.
- **Cultural services:** Parks offer a range of opportunities for residents to experience the natural world, exercise and play, and interact with their neighbors. Given the limited number of open spaces in Somerville, many of them offer multiple opportunities in one location. For example, Lincoln Park offers playing fields, playgrounds, a dog park, a skate park, Parkour equipment, a walking path, and community gardens.
- **Supporting existing natural processes:** By including green spaces and plants, open spaces support soil formation and retention, production of oxygen, nutrient cycling, water cycling, and habitat.

# Somerville Open Space

## Our current situation



100% of Somerville residents live within a 10 min walk of open space.

This map shows open spaces in dark green, and all areas within a 10 min walk in light green.

## SomerVision Goal

**Create  
125 acres**

Since setting this goal in 2010 we created 19.9 new acres of open space (6.19 City, 5.45 DRC, 5.76 POPS)

It costs roughly \$6.2 million to create 1 acre of open space

We need to mobilize over \$651 million dollars to create the remaining 105.1 new acres needed reach our goal.

# Open Space Creation Task Force: Members & Process

Somerville Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone convened the Open Space Creation Task Force (the “Task Force”) in December 2018 with the purpose of bringing together representatives from community organizations and City departments working on open space issues to develop recommended strategies for creating new publicly-accessible open space in Somerville. The members are:

1. Daniel Bartman, City of Somerville Senior Planner- Zoning & Urban Design
2. Edward Bean, City of Somerville Director of Finance
3. Amber Christoffersen, Mystic River Watershed Association Greenways Director
4. Michael Fager, Conservation Commission member; Community Preservation Committee chair
5. Stephanie Hirsch, At-Large City Councilor
6. Luisa Oliveira, City of Somerville Senior Planner for Landscape Design
7. Kat Rutkin, Groundwork Somerville Executive Director
8. Renée Scott, Green & Open Somerville Co-Founder
9. Sunayana Thomas, City of Somerville Economic Development Planner

The meetings were facilitated by Kristen Stelljes, City of Somerville Community Preservation Act Manager/SomerStat.

The group met from January to June 2019. The group had eight meetings over a total of 42 hours. These meetings included learning sessions to develop a common understanding around the issues related to open space creation and working sessions to develop the outputs documented in this strategy memo.

The final draft of this memo will be shared with the SomerVision Steering Committee, including the Public Realm and Natural Environment Working Group, the organizations represented on the Task Force, and will be shared publicly.

## Open Space Definition, Vision, Values, and Goals

### ***Definition***

The Open Space Creation Task Force adopted the following definition for open space: *Open space is any piece of land open to the sky that provides ecological, recreational, cultural, or social benefit, regardless of ownership or access.*



Task Force members recognize all types of open space, from playgrounds to private green roofs, provide benefits to Somerville's residents, both human and non-human. As a result, this document provides recommendations for programs that could support owners of private open spaces such as yards, internal courtyards, and rooftops to maximize the ecological, recreational, cultural, or social services these spaces provide. However, this report will focus on recommendations for creating publicly-accessible open space, including publicly and privately owned public spaces.

## ***Vision***

One of the first tasks of the Task Force was to create a shared vision to articulate their hopes for Somerville's open space. The Task Force's vision is:

*Somerville residents access a network of open spaces that provides a vibrant range of options within a safe, easy walk from their front door. Whether residents want to commune with nature, engage with neighbors or local culture, play boisterously, grow food, or share a quiet moment, there is open space for every mood and activity. Open spaces also support our natural environment. Somerville's open spaces provide visitors with a healthy environment that is cool, air that is breathable, and healthy trees and soil that can absorb stormwater. Open spaces allow residents to coexist with the natural world and the plants and animals that make up a healthy ecosystem.*

## ***Values***

The SomerVision refresh expanded upon the values established in the original SomerVision document. The SomerVision 2040 values are as follows:

- *Protect* and foster the **diversity** of our people, culture, housing and economy.
- *Celebrate* the unique character of our neighborhoods and the strength of our **community** as expressed in our history, cultures and vibrant civic engagement.
- *Invest* in the **growth** of a resilient economic base that is centered around transit, generates a wide variety of job opportunities, creates an active daytime population, supports independent local businesses, and secures fiscal self-sufficiency.
- *Promote* a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces car dependence, and is **accessible**, inviting and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders.
- *Build* a **sustainable** future through climate leadership, balanced transportation, engaging civic spaces, exceptional educational opportunities, improved health, varied and affordable housing options, and the responsible use of our natural resources.

- *Affirm* our responsibility to current and future generations through continued **innovation** in business, technology, education, arts and government.

The Task Force's goals support these values by focusing on providing equitable, safe access to Somerville's open spaces for all residents. Creating new open spaces will strengthen the unique character of Somerville's neighborhoods and their social fabric by providing opportunities for residents to meet and interact with each other. Maximizing the ecosystem benefits of open spaces supports a sustainable future where all of Somerville's residents can enjoy the health and ecological benefits that their open spaces provide. Somerville's open spaces are innovative in their use of best practices in green infrastructure, promoting play and active lifestyles, and fostering social interactions. As a result, Somerville's open spaces have become a model for other communities.

## **Goals**

To achieve this vision, the Task Force recommends the following goals, which are discussed in greater detail below:

1. Increase new publicly-accessible open space
2. Increase the number of athletic fields to meet the demand for youth recreation hours
3. Increase the number of community garden plots
4. Provide a range of publicly-accessible open spaces within a 5 minute (0.25 mile) walk of every residential parcel in Somerville
5. Provide equal access to high quality open space across the city
6. Maximize the ecosystem benefits that open spaces provide to residents and the natural world

The Task Force sees the first goal and its related strategies below as the highest priority for open space creation. The other goals and their related strategies are designed to support the creation of open space that is equitably distributed and that provides high quality spaces. As a result, the remainder of the report is divided into two sections: Adding to Our Open Space and Creating High Quality Open Space.

## **Adding to Our Open Space**

The primary goal proposed by the Task Force is: *Increase new publicly-accessible open space*. The specific numerical target for this goal will be established by the SomerVision Steering Committee. The Somerville community set the goal of creating 125 new acres of open space in Somerville by 2030 during the first SomerVision process. While

progress has been slow, the City of Somerville remains committed to this goal. At the same time it recognizes that it may not be possible to reach 125 new acres by 2040 because it will take time to mobilize the over \$652 million needed to reach this goal. If members of the SomerVision steering committee reconsider the 125 acre goal, the Task Force encourages them to have these discussions with all stakeholders- open space advocates along with affordable housing advocates and those who want to see commercial development prioritized.

For each goal, the Task Force created recommended indicators to measure progress towards the goal. The recommended indicators for the *Increase new publicly-accessible open space* goal are:

Indicator	2019 Baseline
Number of new acres of publicly-accessible <sup>8</sup> open space, disaggregated by ownership (city, state, and POPS).	0 (19.9 acres have been created from 2010-2018)
Annual amount of capital investment in open space by the City of Somerville disaggregated by purpose (acquisition, renovation)	Total=\$12,326,044 <sup>9</sup> Acquisition=\$710,000 (5 Palmer, 35 Richardson) Renovation= \$11,616,044 (4 completed in calendar year 2018- Argenziano, Lincoln, Winter Hill, Hoyt Sullivan)

To achieve the goal of creating new publicly-accessible open space, the Task Force recommends a range of implementation strategies. This section is divided into two components: strategies to create new open space and strategies to support the creation of high quality, equitable open space. The summary section provides a list of all of these strategies with proposed groups responsible for their implementation.

### ***Open Space Creation Implementation Strategies***

The Task Force recommends the implementation of the following strategies to create new open space:

<sup>8</sup> Publicly-accessible = An open space is considered publicly-accessible, if for at least part of the day, any member of the public can access it. For example, a schoolyard is publically accessible during non-school hours but a typical community garden and one athletic field are not because they are locked and only those with a plot/permit are allowed.

<sup>9</sup> Figures provided for calendar year 2018, as calendar year 2019 has not been completed.

**1. Develop an open space acquisition plan that identifies parcels for acquisition:**

In order to effectively plan for the creation of new open space, the City of Somerville needs to create an acquisition plan that identifies potential opportunities for acquisition and prioritizes them based on the benefits they would provide the community. The prioritized list of parcels will allow the City to develop an annual open space acquisition budget. The plan should also identify necessary staffing to ensure that progress is made in acquiring new parcels.

**2. Develop at least 60 acres of new open space in the Transformative Areas:** The Transformative Areas provide the greatest opportunity for the creation of new open space in Somerville. Through a planning exercise, the Task Force explored the amount of the Transformative Areas that could be converted to open space while still maintaining good urbanism and recommends creating a minimum of 60 new acres of open space as part of the development of these areas.

**3. Prioritize proper siting of open space in neighborhood planning:** Ideal locations for open space in the Transformative Areas and other neighborhoods are established through the neighborhood planning process. As new neighborhood plans are created for neighborhoods such as Assembly Square, Brickbottom, and Winter Hill, City planning staff should prioritize the proper siting of open space in the neighborhoods to maximize open space in balance with other community priorities, including the creation of affordable housing and commercial development.

**4. Integrate open space into affordable housing and community organization sites:** To create new open space while also bringing it to populations that have some of the greatest demand for open space, projects to develop new affordable housing and locations for the provision of community services should integrate the creation of new open space into their sites.

**5. Convert excessive street space and underutilized parking lots to open space:** Though these interventions would not on their own add large amounts of additional open space, they would create new open space opportunities throughout the city and could incorporate features that would help mitigate the effects of climate change by helping to manage stormwater and provide shade. In addition to their open space benefits, these spaces could also contribute to traffic calming.

**6. Purchase mid-block access outright or through easements to increase pedestrian access to open space:** Some residents can see a park or playground from their front doors but have to walk a relatively long way to reach it because they need to

walk around their block. Creating more mid-block access points for our open spaces could not only potentially create more publicly accessible open space through the creation of the paths themselves but also make our open spaces more accessible to more people and provide safer routes to our parks and playgrounds.

**7. Explore back of sidewalk tree programs and secure front yard easements along streets to create Commonwealth Avenue style tree boulevards:** While not providing traditional open space, creating tree boulevards would provide new green space for all of the public to enjoy and would help to mitigate urban heat island effects by providing added shade. Environmental justice neighborhoods should be prioritized for these interventions. A back of sidewalk tree program could include the City of Somerville distributing trees to residents to plant in their front yards along the sidewalk. Securing an easement involves creating a legal agreement between the Somerville Conservation Commission and a homeowner guaranteeing that trees could be planted and maintained in their front yards. The easement program could be particularly appropriate for the Transform Areas when new street grids are created.

**8. Solidify efforts to create land trusts in Somerville:** Local advocates are currently working to create a community land trust that is focused on creating more affordable housing in Somerville and has left the door open to be able to create new open space. Groundwork Somerville recently changed their bylaws to allow the organization to hold real property interest, enabling it to hold the perpetual conservation restrictions required for land purchased with Community Preservation Act funds. Both organizations could help increase the speed at which new open space is created by increasing the number of organizations working together on our creation goal and by mobilizing funding that is not available to the City of Somerville.

### ***Financing Open Space Creation***

Since the initial launch of SomerVision, Somerville has gained 15.03 acres of open space and additional 4.87 are underway, for a total of 19.9 new acres of open space. To reach the 125 acre goal, funding needs to be mobilized to create an additional 105.1 acres of open space. The City of Somerville estimates that today it takes \$6.2 million to create a new acre of open space- \$4 million for acquisition and \$2.2 million for design and construction. This is based on data from the last five years of parks renovation projects and the purchase prices for the recent Community Preservation Act open space acquisitions. Assuming these numbers, the Somerville community will need to mobilize over \$651 million to reach the 125 acre goal. Land values and construction costs are rapidly increasing, so it is expected that the cost for creating new open space will increase significantly over time.

Through the neighborhood planning process, a further 12.25 acres in open space is planned and the City is constantly monitoring parcels for acquisition that totals roughly five acres at any given time. That means that in addition to mobilizing funds, Somerville will also need to identify 87.85 acres of land to be converted to open space. Many of these acres will come from the Transformative Areas. The Task Force encourages City planners to strive for a goal of 30% open space in the Transformative Areas, which would create 60 new acres of open space, leaving an additional 26.85 acres to be located in existing neighborhoods.

In addition to working with private developers to create POPS, the City of Somerville will need to prioritize investing in open space creation to also increase the number of publicly-owned open spaces in Somerville. Currently, the City of Somerville has limited funds to invest in open space. The annual City operating budget is \$250 million and less than 10% of that amount is discretionary after paying for salaries, debt service, and other necessary expenses. There are many priorities competing for these funds.

**Table 2. Time to raise funding to create 1 acre:**

<b>Annual investment</b>	\$500,000	\$750,000	\$1 million	\$1.5 million	\$2 million	\$3 million	\$5 million
<b>Years to save \$6.2 million</b>	12.40	8.27	6.20	4.13	3.10	2.07	1.24

Because the City's primary source of revenue is property tax, it increases its budget through new growth- both property owners who make improvements to existing property and the creation of new buildings, both residential and commercial. As Assembly Square, Union Square, and the Transformative Areas develop, they will generate new revenue that could be put towards open space.

In 2017, the City of Somerville hired TischlerBise to explore the fiscal impacts of different land use types to inform the proposed zoning code overhaul. The fiscal impact analysis explored the revenue generation potential and the operating and capital costs associated with the provision of public services. "While fiscal zoning is illegal, the analysis can help inform an appropriate mix of land uses knowing that some land uses are "contributors" while others may be recipients."<sup>10</sup> The study found that while mixed-use developments and non-residential land uses generate net fiscal revenue, residential units generate a net deficit of \$840 per unit. This is a result of the services residential

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<sup>10</sup> *TischlerBise, 1.*

units receive, including school services, and the residential exemption owner-occupied units receive on their property tax. A summary of the results is in the table below.

**Table 3. Annual Net Fiscal Results by Land Use Type**

<b>Land Use Type</b>	<b>Neighborhood Residential (per unit)</b>	<b>Mixed-Use Residential (per unit)</b>	<b>Retail (per 1,000 sf)</b>	<b>Office (per 1,000 sf)</b>	<b>Hotel (per room)</b>
<b>Annual Net Fiscal Impact</b>	<b>-\$840</b>	<b>\$337</b>	<b>\$1,352</b>	<b>\$3,142</b>	<b>\$7,964</b>

The result of this study suggests that in addition to meeting the SomerVision goal of having a job located in Somerville for every resident of working age, integrating a mix of commercial uses into new development will lead to greater revenue that could be used to pay for new open space, as well as other significant needs in the city, such as affordable housing.

The City of Somerville Finance Department has developed a long range forecast that estimates revenue and expenses over the next ten years, drawing on projections of new development and the costs of providing excellent services to residents. For the first time, investment in open space acquisition has been added as an item in the City's long range forecast. The version below was shared with the City Council on June 26, 2019. Over the next ten years, the Finance Department estimates the City will be able to invest \$9.1 million from the City's operational budget in open space creation.

In addition to general funds, the City has two primary sources of grant funding for open space acquisition: the state's Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) program, which awards grants of up to \$400,000 and requires a 40% local match, and the local Community Preservation Act (CPA) program. The annual CPA revenue is around \$2 million and 20% has been allocated to the open space/recreational land category over the last two years and 10% has been allocated to the flexible category. This means that around \$600,000 could be available for open space acquisition funds each year. However, there are typically demands for funds for renovation of existing open spaces beyond the annual open space budget and other affordable housing and historic resources projects also compete for the flexible funds.

Below the Task Force recommends increasing the CPA surcharge from 1.5% to the maximum of 3%. Doing so would double the amount of funding available for open space/recreational land. Assuming that the Community Preservation Committee, which manages the CPA funds, allocated half of the funding available in the open

space/recreational land category over the next ten years, CPA funds could contribute an estimated \$4 million to land acquisition.

Combining the City of Somerville general fund contribution of \$9.1 million and the \$4 million in CPA funds, would result in \$13.1 million available for new open space from our current fiscal year, FY20, to fiscal year FY29. Using the estimate of \$6.2 million per acre for acquisition, design, and construction, using only City resources, an additional 2.11 acres could be created over the next ten years. At this pace, it would take 498 years from today to reach the 125 acre SomerVision goal, using only City funding. If you assumed that from FY30 onwards, the City kept the pace of investing \$2 million a year in open space creation, that would reduce the time from FY20 to reaching the 125 acre goal of 329 years. This suggests that it is essential to mobilize other sources of funding, such as requiring developers to create privately owned public spaces, shifting from using PARC funds for renovation projects to acquisition projects, and engaging other partners that could tap into other sources of funding such as a community land trust.

**Table 4. Estimated long range municipal contributions to open space creation**

Source	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	Total
General Fund	0	0	500,000	750,000	850,000	1,000,000	1,500,000	1,500,000	1,500,000	1,500,000	9,100,000
CPA	200,000	200,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	450,000	4,000,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>200,000</b>	<b>200,000</b>	<b>950,00</b>	<b>1,200,000</b>	<b>1,300,000</b>	<b>1,450,000</b>	<b>1,950,000</b>	<b>1,950,000</b>	<b>1,950,000</b>	<b>1,950,000</b>	<b>13,100,000</b>

Because the high land values and rising construction costs in Somerville and the ambitions of our goals require such a substantial amount of funding, the Task Force is proposing strategies that will increase the funding available for open space creation by going beyond traditional funding sources and suggesting the creation of new community organizations that could support fundraising efforts. None of the proposed strategies alone will solve Somerville's open space financing needs. A full toolbox needs to be assembled in order to increase the speed at which open space is created. The strategies proposed by the Task Force for financing open space acquisition are:

**1. Create a linkage fee that will support the creation of new publicly accessible open space:** Linkage fees are charges paid by developers to ensure that new development in a community benefit its residents. Somerville currently has linkage fees that support affordable housing and workforce development. Adding a linkage fee for open space would increase the pace at which the City of Somerville could raise funds to acquire new open space.



**2. Increase the Community Preservation Act surcharge from 1.5% to 3%:** Funds for the Community Preservation Act (CPA) program come from a surcharge on property tax. In 2012, Somerville adopted a 1.5% surcharge with an optional City match. Given the many competing demands for discretionary City funding, including repairing our aging infrastructure, traffic calming, providing immigrant services, and affordable housing, the City has not been able to maximize its optional City appropriation since the first two years of the program. Increasing the surcharge from 1.5% to the maximum of 3% would double the amount of revenue that could be reliably generated. It would also have the benefit of increasing the match rate from the state, which provides a higher match rate to communities that have invested the maximum of 3% locally. The state match rate has been declining in recent years as the funding for the state CPA trust fund has remained flat while more communities have adopted CPA, including larger communities such as Boston and Springfield. Fortunately, the match rate for CPA will increase in fiscal year 2021 as a result of legislation just passed to permanently increase the registry fees that fund the CPA state trust fund. In addition to benefiting the creation of new open space, additional community investment in CPA would also benefit the other two CPA eligible categories- affordable housing and historic preservation.

Increasing the surcharge would require the passage of a ballot measure by the voters of Somerville. There are two pathways to putting a CPA question on a ballot: by City Council vote (90 days before a city election or 120 days before a state election) or by submission of a petition signed by at least 5% of the registered voters and filed with registrars (42 days before a city election and 67 days before a state election).

**3. Explore using District Improvement Financing for the creation of open space:** District Improvement Financing (DIF) allows municipalities in Massachusetts to commit all or a portion of the tax increment for new developments to fund improvements in the established district. Somerville currently has a DIF in Union Square. Land acquisition is one of the allowable uses of DIF funds, which are generated through posting a bond.

**4. Work with developers to create privately owned public spaces (POPS):** Creating open space in the Transformative Areas presents the opportunity to have private developers create open space as they develop other projects in these areas. Because privately owned public spaces (POPS) create open space without costing existing taxpayers, they are a very appealing strategy for creating new open space in Somerville. At the same time, this approach should be balanced with efforts to increase the number of publicly owned open spaces because of the trade-offs that exist with POPS. For example, the cost of creating these privately owned publicly open spaces will be passed on to future residents through higher rents to new residents and businesses. POPS also need to be carefully planned in order to ensure they feel

welcoming to all and provide amenities that neighbors need and want. As a result, the Task Force is recommending that the City develop clear guidelines for the development of POPS in Somerville and a communication plan, including signage, so that residents know where POPS are and that they are welcome to take advantage of these spaces. The Task Force also encourages the City to have private developers turn over open space they create to the City while continuing to support maintenance so the City can more effectively ensure public access to these spaces.

**5. Encourage the creation of a community foundation and friends groups for the city's open spaces:** Community foundations help residents invest in their community and raise funds through donations and other gifts to support community priorities, which could include the creation of new open space. In addition, the creation of friends groups for individual open spaces or Somerville's open spaces as a whole, could tap into other sources of funding for open space. A local example is the Friends of the Community Growing Center, which maintains, operates programming, and raises funds for the Community Growing Center. As a governmental entity, the City of Somerville cannot access some types of grant funding. Creating new non-profit entities in Somerville that can access these funds could increase the opportunities for generating funding beyond asking taxpayers to support these efforts. See the section on community roles for further discussion.

**6. Encourage private gifts in support of open space creation:** Individuals can leave funds and property to the City of Somerville or non-profit entities in their will or while they are still living. Residents should be made aware of the opportunities and be encouraged to consider them as they plan their personal philanthropy and for their estate.

### ***Prioritizing Parcels for Acquisition***

While at any given time there may be several different parcels that could be acquired for new open space, the Task Force realizes that funding may not be available to acquire them all at once. To help in decision making about which parcels should be prioritized for open space, the Task Force proposes the following key questions should be considered when deciding whether or not a parcel is a good candidate for new open space and when prioritizing among different potential parcels for acquisition:

1. Does the parcel fill in an open space access gap in the neighborhood?  
Consideration should be given to access gaps by type and use needs based on neighborhood demographics. Parcels should be given higher priority if they fill in an access gap in an environmental justice neighborhood.

2. Does the parcel provide the opportunity to add a needed open space type or feature? Currently there is a need for new athletic fields and community gardens, but these needs could evolve over time.
3. Does the parcel add area to an existing open space?
4. Is there a partnership opportunity to create and/or maintain open space on the parcel? For example, is there a developer or non-profit that could help fund the project? Does the parcel contribute to another project that serves a vulnerable population such as an affordable housing development or the home of an organization that provides social services?
5. What is the anticipated cost per square foot of the parcel?
6. What are the opportunity costs of converting the parcel to open space? For example, could the site also be used for affordable housing or commercial development? Is there an opportunity to combine these uses?

These questions should be paired with a physical site analysis that explores the feasibility of placing open space on the site. The analysis should explore: topography, solar analysis, local context, existing vegetation, potential for stormwater capture, need for environmental remediation, etc.

### ***Community Roles in Acquiring New Open Space***

The City of Somerville and private developers have been responsible for the creation of all new open space since the launch of SomerVision in 2012. While local government and private developers will continue to generate the largest amounts of open space in Somerville, progress will happen faster if the number and type of organizations working to create open space in Somerville expands to include non-profit partners and a community foundation.

For example, Northampton works with multiple non-profits and a community foundation to acquire open space. The Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts accepts donations from private individuals that are pooled together to purchase large parcels of land. Northampton also purchases open space with Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding. This funding comes with a requirement to perpetually preserve the land as open space. The City of Northampton partners with the Kestrel Land Trust and Mass Audubon to hold the restrictions on larger parcels. However, they also work with the Friends of Northampton Parks and Recreation, which holds restrictions on smaller properties, such as neighborhood parks. The Friends also raise funds for open space.

In addition, the City should consider expanding the role of the Conservation Commission to play a role in land acquisition, which is allowed for in their governing

statue. For example, in Northampton, the Conservation Commission receives CPA funds to make purchases under \$20,000. This fund has mainly acquired conservation and agricultural preservation restrictions and small park parcels.

Below are the Task Force's recommendations for roles for open space acquisition in Somerville. The summary section of this report recommends organizations to involve in each of the recommendations included in this report, which is more extensive than the list provided here.

### ***Local Government Entities***

*City of Somerville:* The City of Somerville should take the lead in community efforts to expand access to open space. This will include developing a plan for which parcels should be acquired to meet the goals recommended in this report as well as establishing the guidelines and policies necessary to ensure POPS created by private developers address the open space needs of the neighborhood as well as meet Somerville's high standards. The City should actively invest in its land acquisition fund as well as maximizing the optional City appropriation to the Community Preservation Act fund while Somerville is a 1.5% surcharge community. The City should also hire a staff person or assign an existing staff person to reach out to the property owners of parcels that would be good candidates for conversion to public open space. This would help build relationships with these owners so they will consider selling their property to the City or donating it as open space when they are ready.

*Community Preservation Committee:* The Community Preservation Plan, established by the Community Preservation Committee currently prioritizes the acquisition of new open space. To date, CPA funds have supported the acquisition of 0.17 acres of open space. The Community Preservation Committee should continue to prioritize the acquisition of open space and contribute funds to the City's open space acquisition fund. The Community Preservation Committee could also work to integrate open space components into the other areas it funds- affordable housing and historic resources. The existing Committee could also be an asset in developing the campaign to gain support in increasing the CPA surcharge.

*Conservation Commission:* The role of the Conservation Commission should be expanded so the body could play a role in land acquisition. They could take on the program to acquire easements to create pathways through neighborhoods that could increase access to open space, establish tree boulevards, or to create community gardens in side yards.

## ***Existing Non-Profit Organizations***

*Groundwork Somerville:* Groundwork Somerville is currently partnering with the Community Preservation Committee to hold the conservation restriction on land purchased with Community Preservation Act dollars. As part of taking on this role, the organization amended their bylaws to allow Groundwork to hold real property interest. Groundwork could consider expanding their role in the city to including land acquisition and open space creation. As a non-profit organization, they would be able to access grant funds the City of Somerville cannot access as a government and some people may be more comfortable donating land to a non-profit.

*Mystic River Watershed Association:* MyRWA, based in Arlington, focuses on open space along the Mystic River and Alewife Brook Parkway. They are working closely with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation to renovate open space along the river, including the Blessing of the Bay Boathouse Park. Where possible they should seek to expand the open spaces along Somerville's waterways.

*Community Land Trust:* Community members are developing a community land trust that is focusing on developing new units of affordable housing. They have expressed a desire to also support the creation of new open space. They could build on the real estate expertise they are gaining to support open space creation in conjunction with the creation of affordable housing.

## ***Potential New Non-Profit Organizations***

*Community Foundation:* The role of a community foundation is to raise local funds to support local projects. They can connect residents who want to invest in their community and are interested in pooling their resources with other residents to support work that is meaningful to them with projects in need of funding. A community foundation could help raise funds for open space in ways that the City or other non-profits could not. Somerville residents would likely be willing to contribute towards the acquisition of new open space. A new community foundation would give them a mechanism for doing so.

*'Friends' groups:* Somerville parks lack traditional 'Friends' groups that help with stewardship of parks, including maintenance and fundraising for improvements. The Friends of the Community Growing Center is a notable exception. Friends groups could be formed to improve and expand existing parks and could be formed to help create new parks. They could also be formed with a mission of supporting open space in a neighborhood or across the City. For example, the mission of the Friends of

Northampton Parks and Recreation is “to engage in fundraising and support, maintenance, labor and development of current and future recreation facilities, and to encourage interest and promote athletic and recreational activities and facilities in the city of Northampton.”

## **Creating High Quality Open Space**

While the mandate of the Task Force was to focus on how Somerville can create new open space, through the course of its conversations, its members recognized that other goals are also important to work towards to ensure that the open space created is high quality and addresses the needs of the Somerville community. Accordingly, the Task Force recommends the following supportive goals:

- Increase the number of athletic fields to meet the demand for youth recreation hours.
- Increase the number of community garden plots.
- Provide a range of publicly-accessible open spaces within a 5 minute (0.25 mile) walk of every residential parcel in Somerville.
- Provide equal access to high quality open space across the city.
- Maximize the ecosystem benefits that open spaces provide to residents and the natural world.

The Task Force sought to identify indicators that would provide a holistic view of the state of open space in Somerville with a focus on the creation of open space that provides equitable access to all Somerville residents. Proposed indicators to measure the progress of each of the five supportive goals are below. While the Task Force is proposing some supportive goals and indicators, it recognizes that it did not fully explore, and therefore is not proposing, indicators related to open space design and use of specific parks. The Task Force recognizes the value of having this information and encourages the City of Somerville and the SomerVision Steering Committee to explore adopting additional measures such as activity within public parks, their physical condition, and the Gehl Quality Criteria to track the use and quality of parks once they are created. The City should also considering developing partnerships with universities and researchers to regularly measure air quality and urban heat island and consider how the results from these studies should impact the creation and design of open space.

**Goal 2: Increase the number of athletic fields to meet the demand for youth recreation hours.**

Somerville's youth and adults who play team sports are currently underserved by the athletic fields in the city. The Task Force encourages the City to expand field capacity so that all teams that want to permit a field will be able to do so. The data suggests that the City can accomplish this by continuing with current plans to open the new Lincoln fields in 2019, expanding the playing time at Dilboy Auxiliary with the addition of lights, and creating a new athletic field as part of the new Somerville High School campus.

Indicator	2019 Baseline
Number of new athletic fields disaggregated by size	0
Number of athletic fields with expanded capacity disaggregated by size	0
Number of hours requested for athletic field time that do not receive a permit	3,000
Number of hours of permitted athletic field time	9,034

### **Goal 3: Increase the number of community garden plots.**

The Somerville Conservation Commission currently manages 232 garden plots in 12 gardens. These plots are available to Somerville residents who can keep their plots as long as they remain Somerville residents and are actively using their plot. Community gardens are each managed by a volunteer community garden coordinator. Eight of the 12 garden managers have shared their waitlist with the Conservation Commission. Combined there are 122 unique individuals on their waitlists. The Task Force believes that all residents who would like to have the opportunity to grow their own food in Somerville should have that opportunity. At the same time, they encourage the City and the Conservation Commission to explore new models for future community gardens that allow residents who do not have plots to also enjoy these spaces, as most of them are locked.

Indicator	2019 Baseline
Number of community garden plots managed by the Conservation Commission	232
Number of unique individuals on community garden waitlists	122 (8 of 12 gardens reporting)

**Goal 4: Provide a range of publicly-accessible open spaces within a 5 minute (0.25 mile) walk of every residential parcel in Somerville.**

Standards used to determine how much open space a community needs has changed over time. In the 1980s organizations such as the Trust for Public Land and the National Parks and Recreation Association proposed standards of 6 and 10 acres per 1,000 residents respectively. However, both organizations have moved away from these recommendations as they recognized they are not feasible for many communities, particularly urban communities that have already been fully developed. As a result, both organizations have shifted instead to encouraging communities to consider access to parks within walking distance from home. They have partnered with the Urban Land Institute on a campaign to ensure everyone lives within a 10 minute walk of home. Somerville has already reached this goal. The Task Force is suggesting that Somerville adopt an even more ambitious goal of providing access to a range of parks within a five minute walk of home to all residents. The Task Force recommends measuring access to playgrounds because of the importance of play and active movement to children's development and to passive spaces because of the connections they provide to the natural environment. See the appendix for maps depicting the walkshed for each of the indicators below.

Indicator	2019 Baseline <sup>11</sup>
Percentage of Somerville residential parcels within a 5 minute walk of a publicly-accessible open space (all types)	94.4% (11,487/12,163)
Percentage of Somerville residential parcels within a 5 minute walk of a publicly-accessible playground	63.1% (7,675/12,163)
Percentage of Somerville residential parcels within a 5 minute walk of a publicly-accessible passive space	74.0% (9,000/12,163)
Number of publicly-accessible dog parks in Somerville	5
Number of publicly-accessible parks with skateboard elements in Somerville	2

<sup>11</sup> The City of Somerville is currently refining its GIS data to ensure that all landscape use types are accurately reflected in the GIS layers for each park. As a result, the access numbers for the playground and passive uses may increase once all of the use types are reflected in the GIS open space layer.



**Goal 5: Somerville residents enjoy equal access to high quality open space across the city.**

The Task Force firmly believes that all Somerville residents deserve equitable access to high quality open space to which they can safely and easily walk. Based on the 2010 U.S. census data, 55.5% of Somerville's land area is located in an environmental justice area.<sup>12</sup> Currently, 73% of Somerville's parks overall and 76% of the City's parks listed as being in poor condition are located in environmental justice areas, of which five of the twelve are in an active design process to renovate the park (see appendix for a list of parks in poor condition). While these numbers suggest that there is equal placement of parks and that current issues with the equitable access to quality parks are being addressed, there is not currently data on whether all of Somerville's residents can safely and easily walk to their neighborhood parks. For example, residents in the Mystic neighborhood are close to the Healey School, but have the climb challenging sets of stairs to access the school yard. They are also close to the Blessing of the Bay Boathouse and Park but need to cross under I-93 to access the park and river. To better understand access to safe routes to parks, the Task Force is recommending, in alignment with the Vision Zero Action Plan, the implementation of a Safe Routes to Parks program, which includes conducting a safe routes audit for each of Somerville's parks. The goal of the Safe Routes to Parks program is to "ensure that people can walk, bike, or roll to a park or green or open space in a way that is convenient, comfortable, appealing, and safe from traffic and personal danger." This is measured through a walk audit that looks at sidewalks, street crossings and intersections, driver behavior, safety, comfort, park appearance, and park features.<sup>13</sup>

Indicator	2019 Baseline
Number and percentage of open spaces listed in poor condition  (Numerator: Number of open spaces listed in poor condition; Denominator: Total number of open spaces)	# = 17 % = 19% (17/89)  (with an additional eight in active design; when these are complete = 10%)

<sup>12</sup> Environmental justice areas are census block groups where 25% or more of residents are minorities, 25% or more are non-English speaking, or the median income is less than the state median. A block group is considered to be an environmental justice area if it meets one, two or all three of these criteria.

<sup>13</sup> Safe Routes to School National Partnership.

<p>Number and percentage of open spaces in environmental justice areas</p> <p>(Numerator: Number of open spaces in environmental justice area; Denominator: Total number of open spaces)</p>	<p># = 65 % = 73% (65/89)</p>
<p>Percentage of open space listed in poor condition located in an environmental justice area</p> <p>(Numerator: Number of open spaces in poor condition located in an environmental justice area; Denominator: Total number of open spaces in poor condition)</p>	<p>% = 76% (13/17)</p> <p>(with six in active design; when these are complete = 41%)</p>
<p>Number and percentage of open spaces that pass a Safe Routes to Parks audit.</p> <p>(Numerator: number of open spaces that pass a Safe Routes to Parks audit; Denominator: total number of open spaces in Somerville)</p>	<p>New indicator: baseline needs to be established</p>
<p>Percentage of open spaces that do not pass a Safe Routes to Parks audit located in an environmental justice area</p> <p>(Numerator: Number of open spaces that do not pass audit located in an environmental justice area; Denominator: Total number of open spaces that do not pass audit)</p>	<p>New indicator: baseline needs to be established</p>
<p>Number and percentage of open spaces that meet the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.</p> <p>(Numerator: Number of open spaces that meet ADA requirements; Denominator: Total number of open spaces)</p>	<p># = 89 % = 100% (89/89)</p>

**Goal 6: Somerville’s open spaces maximize the ecosystem benefits they provide to residents and the natural world.**

Somerville’s open spaces need to serve 80,000 people, their dogs, and the natural world. The City’s parks planners should continue to work closely with residents to determine the right mix of uses for each new park and to incorporate as many features as possible that support natural phenomena and processes, including pollination, as well as plan for the changing climate.

Creating open space that supports native pollinators is vitally important to human health and the health of local ecosystems. Bees, butterflies, bats, and birds are essential to food production systems. Plant choices can have significant impacts on the health of these populations. There is currently little known about what native pollinator species are present in Somerville and the health of these populations. The Task Force calls for first establishing what species are present in Somerville or could be if we created more habitat for our native pollinators. Based on the results of these surveys and research being done by community organizations in partnership with pollinator experts, the Task Force calls for the development of a community-wide plan to support the health of our existing pollinators and encourage additional pollinators to make Somerville their home.

Indicator	2019 Baseline
Information on the range of ecosystem services <sup>14</sup> for each park are listed on the City’s website	No
Number of public parks and POPS that include native pollinator host plants	New indicator: list of relevant native pollinator host plants to be developed following pollinator species survey and plants selected for appropriateness for a public park
Number of private residences and buildings on the City of Somerville pollinator friendly yard map	New indicator: list of relevant native pollinator host plants to be developed following pollinator species survey and plants selected for appropriateness for private yards
Number and health of bee and butterfly species found during annual survey	New indicator: baseline needs to be established

<sup>14</sup> Food production, regulating natural phenomena, cultural services, and supporting existing natural processes)

## Implementation Strategy Recommendations for Supportive Goals

To achieve the recommended goals to support the creation of high quality, equitable open space and make progress on the proposed measures, implementation strategies are proposed below for each of the goals that will support the creation of high quality open space.

### Goal 1: Increase New Publicly-Accessible Open Space

*1. Allow for creation of green roofs, courtyards, and forecourts:* While green spaces in private residential developments may not be public, they still provide substantial environmental benefits. So while the Task Force recommends the City's efforts focus on creating new publicly-accessible open space in Somerville, it encourages all efforts to increase the amount of green space in Somerville.

*2. Engage the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to plan and design public space improvements in partnership with the City:* DCR owns a higher percentage of open space in Somerville than the City of Somerville does and several DCR owned open spaces are listed as being in poor condition and are in environmental justice neighborhoods. As a result, the City of Somerville needs to work closely with DCR to make improvements to the DCR owned open space in Somerville and to seek opportunities to increase the amount of open space along the Alewife Brook and Mystic River.

*3. Allow private homeowners to open up their yards to community gardens:* The proposed zoning overhaul would allow private homeowners to open up their yards to their neighbors by providing garden plots. The Task Force is supportive of this effort and encourages the City to advertise this new opportunity to encourage residents to share their yards for community garden uses. The City should also consider subsidizing water for the program.

*4. Create City-sponsored programs and incentives for residential and/or commercial owners to provide more green and open space:* In order to encourage Somerville's residents and businesses to green their own spaces, the City of Somerville should create a range of programs and incentives to celebrate efforts to green private spaces. These efforts should encourage the use of host plants for native pollinators. These incentives could include:

- *Greenest Street* in Somerville contest to encourage neighbors to work together to create green spaces that could serve as pollinator corridors on their blocks.

- *Native pollinator host plant give-aways* to help residents get started in creating native pollinator habitat in their yards.
- *Walking tours* of pollinator-friendly gardens to allow people to teach others about what they have done to create pollinator habitat in their yards.
- *Create a map* on the City of Somerville website that will allow private property owners to add their open space to the list of pollinator friendly sites.

*5. Develop fee for service programs that help residents and businesses make their green space more pollinator friendly:* Community organizations such as Groundwork Somerville and Green & Open Somerville that are already working to create more pollinator habitat in the city could develop programs to support the effort of residents and businesses to make more green space on their property and make that green space friendly to native pollinator species. Organizations could use these programs to generate revenue to support both the pollinator habitat program and their other programs.

*6. Plan and budget for effective maintenance of current and new open space:* Somerville's open spaces are unique- each with their own features and plant palettes. Their designs have become increasingly complex over the years as green infrastructure and native plantings have been integrated into the designs of each of the city's new parks. As a result, the maintenance of Somerville's open spaces now requires more time and specialized skills than in the past. The staffing levels and expertise within the Department of Public Works, which maintains the City's parks, needs to be increased to effectively maintain the City's existing parks and to be able to take on the additional work of new open spaces. Some strategies to support funding for open space maintenance include:

- *Increasing the budget and staffing* for open space maintenance as new open spaces are created to keep pace with the growing demands on the Department of Public Works.
- *Partnering with developers* to ensure ongoing and efficient maintenance of open space created through redevelopment. For example, the developer who is creating the new open space at the former Powder House School will be responsible for maintaining the new park for a set establishment period so the necessary care and attention needed for the new plantings to flourish can be provided.
- Using the *Business Improvement District (BID)* approach to generate funds for maintenance. BIDs allow property owners to vote to accept an additional levy that supports improvements within the established district. BID funds could

generate additional funds from commercial properties that could be used to improve and maintain nearby open spaces.

- *Working with community partners* to maintain open spaces. For example, the City of Somerville could engage the Groundwork Green Team to support the maintenance of open space while also providing employment for youth.

## **Goal 2: Increase the number of athletic fields to meet the demand for youth recreation hours**

*Provide opportunities for open play on the city's athletic fields:* The Task Force recognizes the great demand for athletic field playing time for the city's organized youth and adult sports teams and the need to manage how our natural grass fields are used to maintain safe playing conditions. It also recognizes the value of having open spaces to play catch, fly a kite, run with abandon, or twirl in circles on the grass. Therefore, the Task Force encourages playing fields to be left unlocked when not in use by permitted sports teams. It also encourages factoring in the need for opportunities for open play when planning for the amount of fields needed in the community in addition to the needs of the city's organized sports teams. The hours that parks are available for open play should be posted so families can know when they can make use of the fields.

## **Goal 3: Increase the number of community garden plots**

*Find ways to include more public accessibility in community gardens:* Community gardens provide wonderful opportunities for residents to be able to grow their own food and be part of a community. At the same time, the existing approach to community gardens in Somerville can feel exclusive as those without a plot are locked out and waitlists are long because gardeners can hold their plots for their lifetimes. The Task Force encourages the City to explore innovative approaches to designing community gardens that allow more residents to benefit from them.

## **Goal 4: Provide a range of publicly-accessible open spaces within a 5 minute (0.25 mile) walk of every residential parcel in Somerville**

*Install signage noting when schoolyards and fields can be used by the public:* In a community as small and dense as Somerville, open spaces often need to serve multiple purposes for multiple populations. In Somerville, schoolyards are open to the public after school hours and athletic fields can be used when not permitted. To help the public understand when they are able to use the facilities, signs should be placed at the City's schoolyards and fields with information about when they are available for use and how to reserve them, if applicable.

## **Goal 5: Provide equal access to high quality open space across the city**

*1. Implement a Safe Routes to Parks program as called for in the Somerville Vision Zero plan:* Residents cannot fully enjoy the city's open spaces if they cannot safely walk, bike, or roll to them. The Task Force is aware of challenges accessing some of the city's open spaces safely. For example, to reach the Dilboy complex, one must cross Route 16. To comprehensively understand how accessible open spaces are to residents, the Task Force proposes the City of Somerville implement a Safe Routes to Parks program and improve the accessibility of its open spaces based on the results.

*2. Prioritize creation and maintenance, as well as balancing of type, of open space in environmental justice areas:* The Task Force encourages the City of Somerville and its partners to ensure that its most vulnerable residents have access to high quality open space. As a result, the Task Force proposes that when the City of Somerville has the opportunity to create new open spaces and renovate existing open spaces it priorities those opportunities within environmental justice communities. Part of this prioritization should include providing access to a range of open space types.

## **Goal 6: Maximize the ecosystem benefits that open spaces provide to residents and the natural world**

*1. Work with experts to develop a list of host plants for native pollinator species that would count towards a pollinator friendly designation and develop a plan for supporting native pollinator habitats:* In order for the efforts to create habitats that are friendly to native pollinators described above to be effective, the City of Somerville and community organizations need to learn more about the pollinators that are currently present in Somerville, the health of these populations, and pollinator species in surrounding communities that could expand to Somerville if given the proper conditions. Surveying pollinator species and their health will require working with entomologists and biologists who are experts in pollinators native to Massachusetts. Once there is greater understanding of local pollinator populations, a plan should be developed to support the health of the city's native pollinators.

*2. Develop citizen science programs to monitor the health of Somerville's bee and butterfly communities:* Once the presence and health of local native pollinator species has been determined, community organizations should work to develop citizen science programs that will teach residents, especially youth, about local pollinators, and train them to survey existing populations to track their health over time. These organizations

should partner with the City of Somerville to regularly refine strategies for supporting the health of native pollinator populations.

*3. Include as many ecosystem benefits as possible within each park, including designing for residents at all stages of life:* City of Somerville parks planners should continue to maximize the ecosystem benefits that each open space in the city provides. This work should include considering the needs of residents at all stages of life and ensuring that within each neighborhood there are open spaces that will appeal to young children, teens, young adults, families, and seniors.

*4. Design open spaces with climate change in mind:* The Task Force encourages the City of Somerville to design parks that take air quality, stormwater infiltration, and urban heat island into consideration. The Task Force encourages the City to develop relationships with university partners who can help monitor air quality and urban heat island effects on a regular, ongoing basis.

*5. Design open spaces that will be well used and well loved:* In addition to serving the natural environment, Somerville's parks should be designed to meet the needs of residents. Many people in the city do not have access to a yard, so the city's open spaces provide residents with the opportunity to spend time outdoors and access all of the benefits of doing so. One way of measuring the success of open space designs is the Gehl quality criteria of protection, comfort, and enjoyment. Regular assessments of the use of open space should be done and the results should be used to inform the design of new parks and the renovation of existing parks.

## Summary

To summarize the Task Force's recommendations on creating new publicly-accessible open space, the tables below lists the related strategies and proposed institutions to be responsible for implementing the recommended strategies.

### Implementation Strategies

Recommendation	Organizations Involved
1. Develop an open space acquisition plan that identifies parcels for acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Economic Development, Planning &amp; Zoning, Public Space and Urban Forestry Divisions</li></ul>



2. Develop at least 60 acres of new open space in the Transform Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning and Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Divisions</li> <li>• Somerville Redevelopment Authority</li> <li>• Private developers</li> </ul>
3. Prioritize proper siting of open space in neighborhood planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning and Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Divisions</li> </ul>
4. Integrate open space into affordable housing and community organization sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning and Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Divisions</li> <li>• Somerville Planning Board</li> <li>• Somerville Affordable Housing Trust and the Community Preservation Committee</li> <li>• Somerville Community Corporation, Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH), Community Land Trust, and other affordable housing developers</li> </ul>
5. Convert excessive street space and underutilized parking lots to open space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Mobility, Planning &amp; Zoning, and Public Space and Urban Forestry Divisions</li> </ul>
6. Purchase mid-block access outright or through easements to increase pedestrian access to open space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning and Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Divisions</li> <li>• Somerville Conservation Commission</li> </ul>

7. Purchase front yard easements along streets to create Commonwealth Avenue style tree boulevards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning and Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Divisions</li> <li>• Somerville Conservation Commission</li> </ul>
8. Solidify efforts to create land trusts in Somerville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groundwork Somerville</li> <li>• Community Land Trust</li> </ul>

### Funding Strategies

Recommendation	Organizations Involved
1. Create a linkage fee that will support the creation of new publicly-accessible open space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Mayor's Office</li> <li>• Somerville City Council</li> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning Division</li> </ul>
2. Increase the Community Preservation Act surcharge from 1.5% to 3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somerville City Council</li> <li>• City of Somerville Mayor's Office</li> <li>• City of Somerville Finance Department</li> <li>• Community Preservation Committee</li> <li>• Community advocates</li> </ul>
3. Explore using District Improvement Financing for creation of open space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Finance Department</li> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Planning &amp; Zoning Division</li> </ul>
4. Work with developers to create privately owned public spaces (POPS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Economic Development, Planning &amp; Zoning, Public Space and Urban Forestry Divisions</li> <li>• Somerville Planning Board</li> </ul>

5. Encourage the creation of a community foundation and friends groups for the city's open spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community advocates</li> </ul>
6. Encourage private gifts in support of open space creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City of Somerville Finance Department</li> <li>• City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning &amp; Community Development- Public Space &amp; Urban Forestry Division</li> </ul>

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Somerville residents currently have access to award-winning open space within walking distance of their front doors. One hundred percent of residents live within a 10 minute walk of open space in Somerville. The national average is 54%. While this achievement is definitely something to celebrate, the community recognizes the need to create significantly more open space in order to meet the needs of residents and the natural environment. The Open Space Creation Task Force met over six months to learn together about zoning, municipal finance, urban and open space design, ecosystem services, and much more and use this shared learning to make recommendations as to how the City of Somerville can increase the amount of open space in Somerville as well as ensure equal access to high quality open spaces across the city. The result of this shared learning and discussion is captured in the pages of this report. The Task Force hopes that both the City of Somerville and the SomerVision Steering Committee will find the recommended strategies and measures both practical and implementable as well as inspirational, encouraging new and creative ways to create open space with more partners than are currently involved.

This report will be shared with the City of Somerville administration and organizations that are represented on the Task Force: City Council, Conservation Commission, Community Preservation Committee, Green & Open Somerville, Groundwork Somerville, and the Mystic River Watershed Association. If requested, the Task Force will present the findings and recommendations from this report to these institutions.

The Task Force will also share this report with the Public Realm & Natural Environment Working Group of the SomerVision Steering Committee. This working group is tasked with writing the chapter of the SomerVision 2040 report on the public realm and natural environment, including open space creation, and will be participating in discussions on

what measures and targets related to open space should be included in the SomerVision report. The Task Force welcomes the opportunity to share their learning and recommendations with the Working Group.

The Task Force challenges the City of Somerville and its boards and commissions, community organizations and advocates, and all of its residents to consider what steps they each can take to turn the recommendations within this report into a reality- from purchasing new acres to choosing to depave a portion of a backyard and plant host plants for native pollinators. It is only in working together that the open space vision articulated in this report will be achieved:

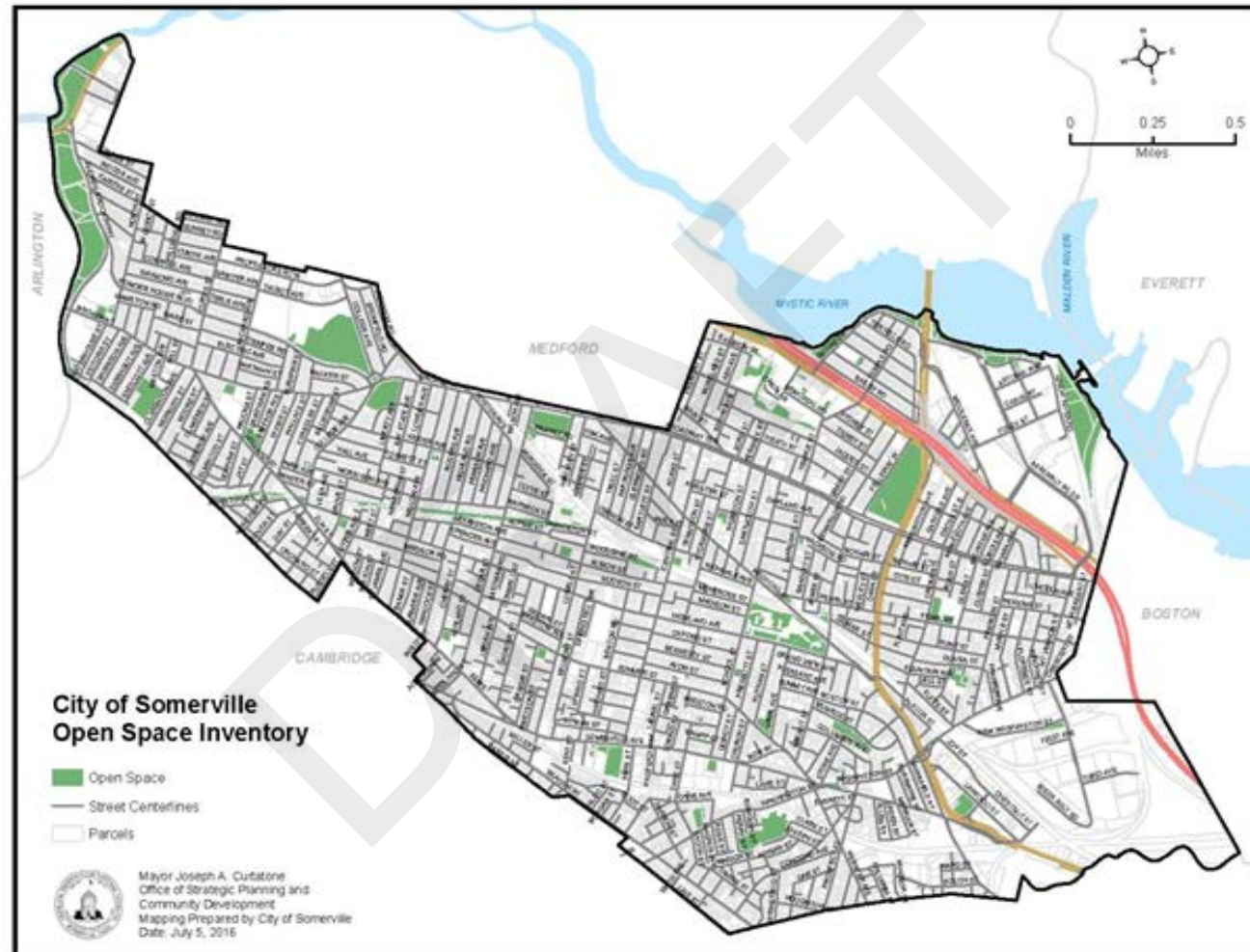
*Somerville residents access a network of open spaces that provides a vibrant range of options within a safe, easy walk from their front door. Whether residents want to commune with nature, engage with neighbors or local culture, play boisterously, grow food, or share a quiet moment, there is open space for every mood and activity. Open spaces also support our natural environment. Somerville's open spaces provide visitors with a healthy environment that is cool, air that is breathable, and healthy trees and soil that can absorb stormwater. Open spaces allow residents to coexist with the natural world and the plants and animals that make up a healthy ecosystem.*

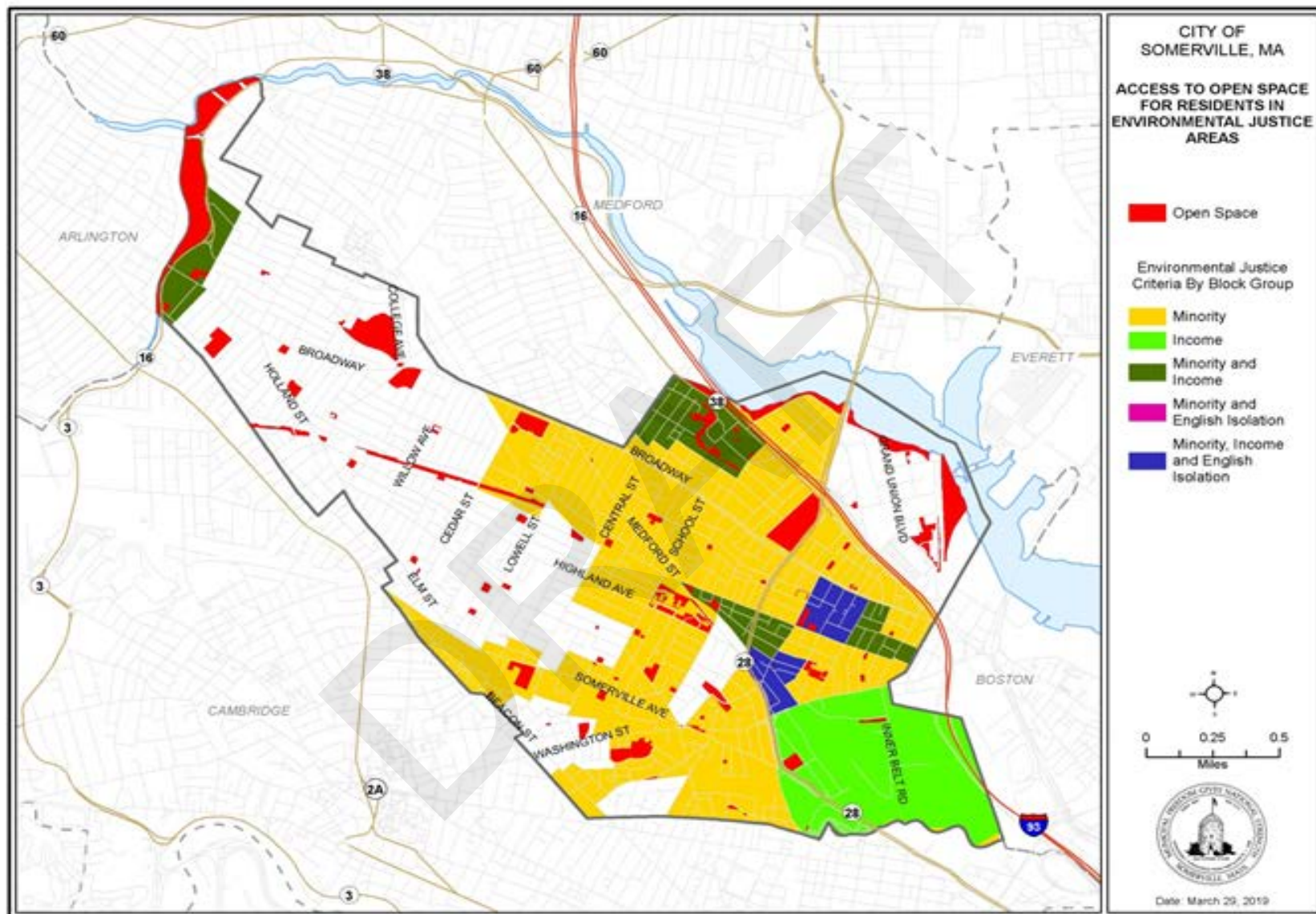
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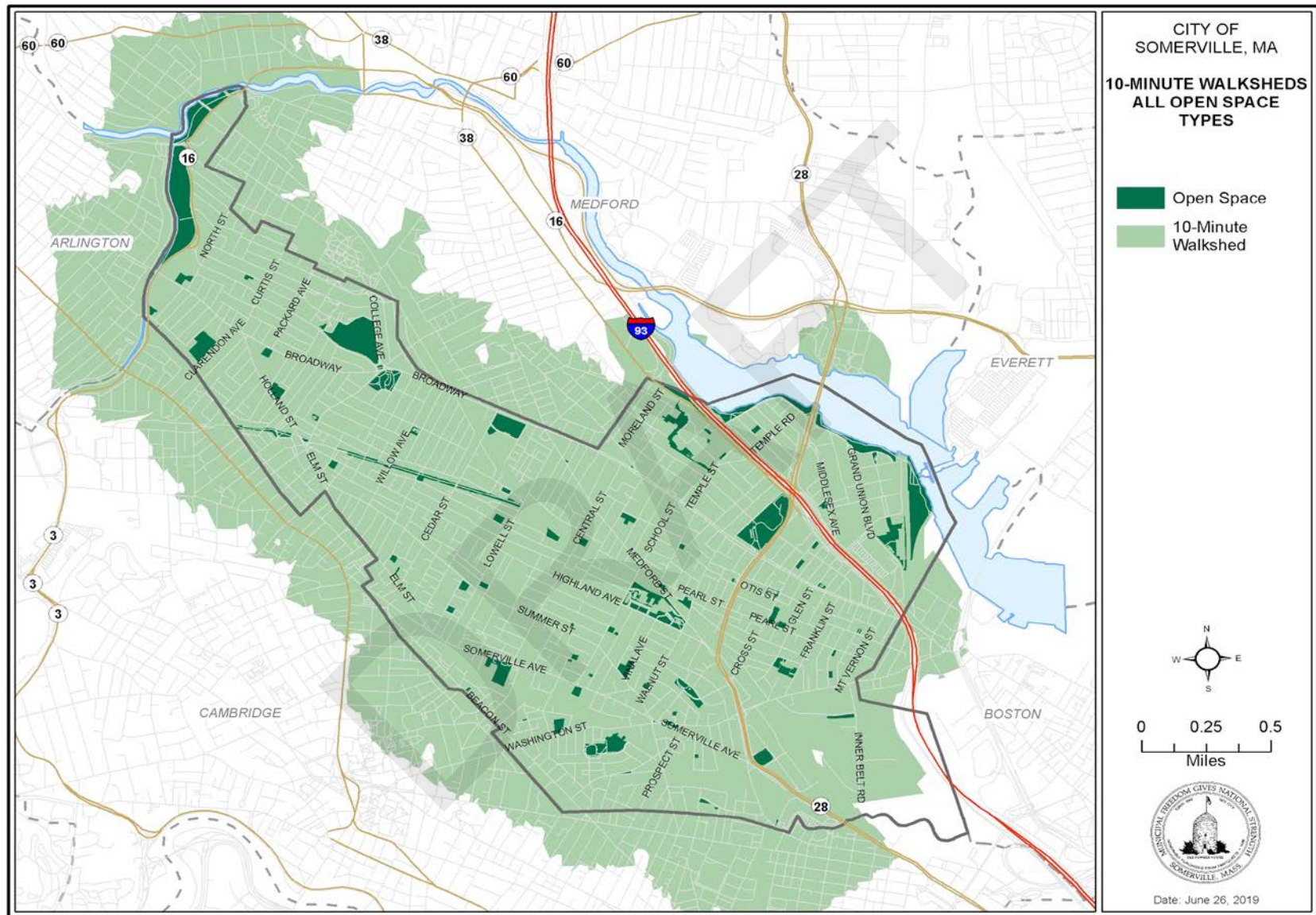
## Appendix

### Open Space Maps

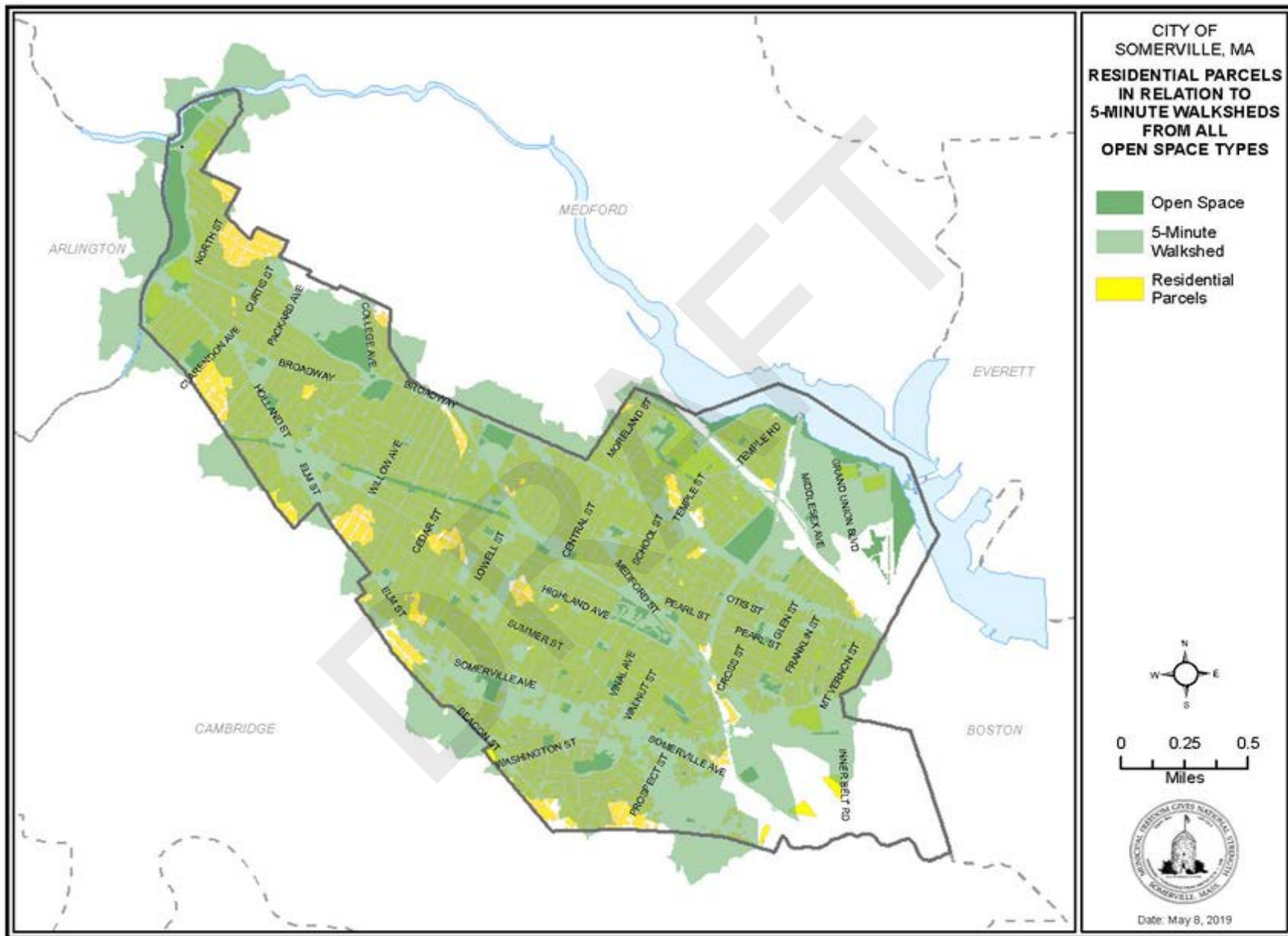




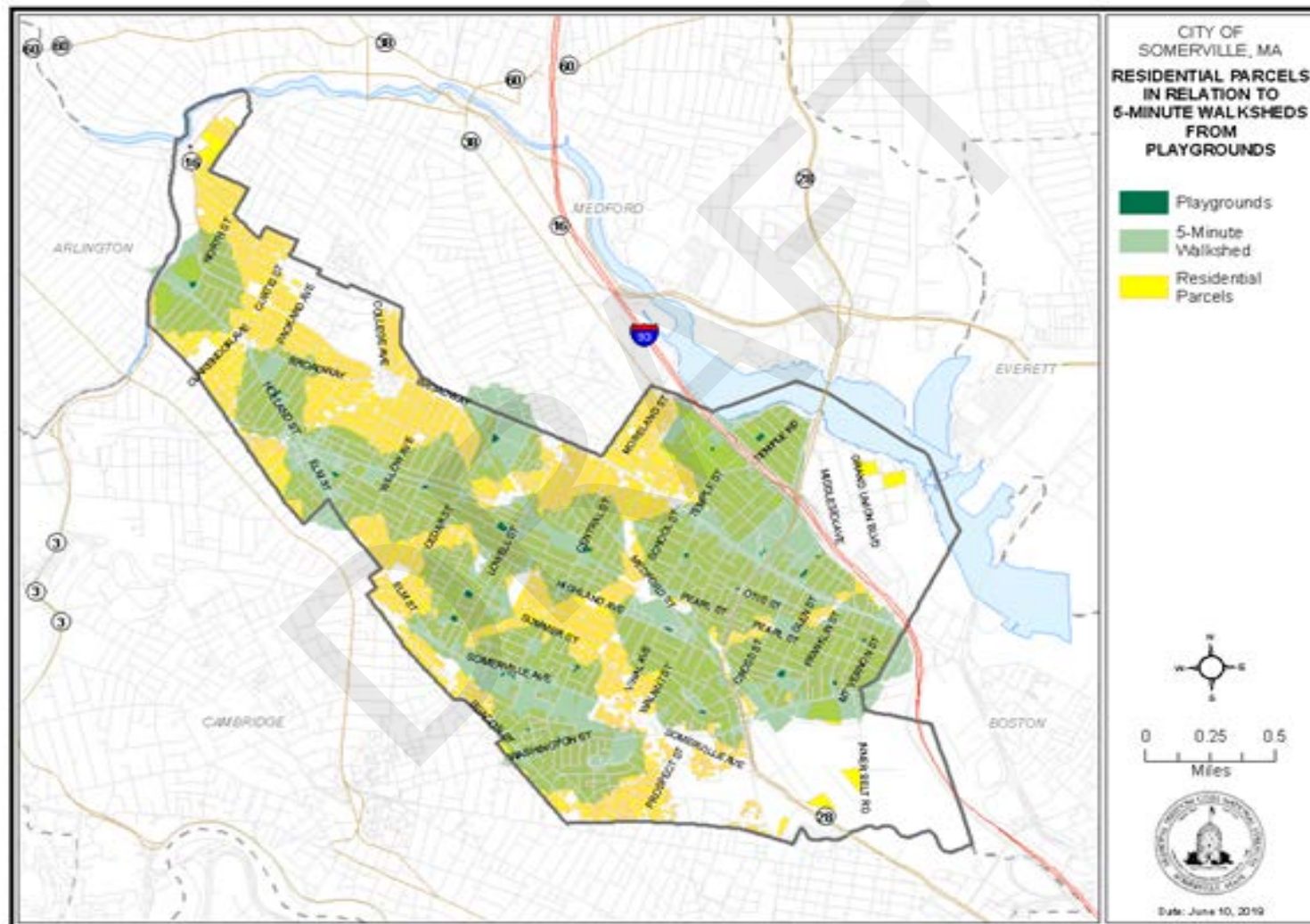














## Existing Open Spaces in Poor Condition

Open Space	Owner	Environmental Justice Area	Renovation Status
ArtFarm	City of Somerville	Yes	Design being finalized
Avon Street Community Garden	Somerville Home	Yes	Unscheduled
Bailey Park	City of Somerville	No	Unscheduled
Brown Schoolyard	City of Somerville	No	Design underway
Cummings Playground	City of Somerville	Yes	Unscheduled
Dilboy Auxiliary Fields	DCR	Yes	Design underway
Draw 7 Park	DCR	No	Design funding underway
Edgerly Schoolyard	City of Somerville	Yes	Unscheduled
Florence Playground	City of Somerville	Yes	Unscheduled
Foss Park	DCR	Yes	Partial improvements planned
Hansen Park	City of Somerville	Yes	Design being finalized
Harris Playground	City of Somerville	Yes	Design being finalized
Mystic River Reservation/ Blessing of the Bay Park	DCR	Yes	Design underway
Osgood Park	City of Somerville	Yes	Unscheduled

Tufts Community Garden	Tufts University	No	Unscheduled
West Somerville Community Schoolyard	City of Somerville	Yes	Design underway
Veterans Memorial Cemetery	City of Somerville	Yes	Unscheduled

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