



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
KATJANA BALLANTYNE
MAYOR

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Urban Forestry Committee Meeting

**Thursday, May 15, 2025
MINUTES**

Pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2025, this meeting was held remotely

Meeting notes prepared by Marion Davis and Vanessa Boukili

Committee Members in Attendance: Tori Antonino, Marion Davis, Leah Grossman, Michael Hendrix, Joelle Renstrom, Dorothy Suput, Vanessa Boukili

Associate Members Present: Allison Bernard

Committee Members Absent: Calla Taylor, Doris Jenkins, Tree Warden (vacant), youth member (pending confirmation)

Others in Attendance: Malik Drayton, Holly Simione, Giuliana Minghelli

Call to Order: Grossman called the meeting to order at 4:36 pm.

1. Introductions / Housekeeping

a. Co-Chair nominations

Antonino said she would like to step down, while Grossman will stay on as Co-Chair. Both agreed that it is good to stagger the Co-Chairs' terms, so one leaves each year while the other stays on and helps the new Co-Chair. There were no immediate nominations, as Hendrix, Suput and Davis cannot step up in the near term. Boukili said Taylor seemed interested, but could only do this through the fall. It was agreed that if Taylor can do it, she would take over in June, and the matter would be revisited in the fall.

2. Resident Concerns



- a. Minghelli - here as a tree-loving citizen interested in the work of the UFC.
- b. Simone – chair of the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities, is here to follow up on a meeting with Antonino about street trees, narrow sidewalks and the challenges for people who are blind or have mobility difficulties (see next item).

3. Disability Commission Concerns around Sidewalk Accessibility

- a. Simone expressed concerns in particular about large trees restricting access on narrow sidewalks and tree roots protruding through sidewalks and creating hazards on walking paths in parks. Antonino agreed that these are real issues. Simone said she would like to partner with the UFC to help ensure that urban greening and park improvements do not conflict with accessibility. In particular, she spoke about ongoing work at Edward Leathers Community Park, where work is now being done and there is an opportunity to remove trip hazards. In general, Simone said, inadequate maintenance of sidewalks, trees and parks is a problem, and additional trees should not be planted if they make sidewalks even narrower.
- b. Boukili mentioned she leaves at least 3 feet of sidewalk space beyond tree pits and asked if this is enough to ensure accessibility. Simone said the minimum should be 48” (4 feet), and 5 feet where possible. She noted that in newly built areas, such as Union Square, there are beautiful designs with trees that still allow plenty of space for pedestrians and mobility devices. But in her neighborhood, in Ward 4, she said, her daughter, a wheelchair user, cannot get around on the sidewalks.
- c. Boukili noted that the problem of trees obstructing sidewalks has come up at meetings, and while accessibility is a concern, established trees are also protected by state law, and their removal requires a tree hearing, and if there are objections to the removal, it may not pass. She described collaborations with the Engineering Department on larger streetscape projects to create bump-outs and other features to create space for trees while also ensuring that sidewalks are accessible. On streets where no major projects are occurring, this is more difficult.
- d. Simone suggested having more joint UFC and Disability Commission hearings to discuss specific sites. Davis, Hendrix and Grossman also expressed support for collaboration to discuss potential solutions. Along with bump-outs, the use of rubber-based flexipave was mentioned; Simone said it can work well but is slippery when wet. Grossman provided a link for new accessibility guidelines for public rights of way: <https://www.access-board.gov/prowag/>
- e. Bernard expressed concern about trees being planted without enough sidewalk clearance per updated guidance. Several complexities were highlighted, however, including split jurisdictions and the fact that existing sidewalks are treated differently than newly built ones.
- f. Minghelli reinforced Simone’s earlier point about inadequate maintenance, which sparked a discussion about City departments being understaffed and under-resourced and about the potential for promoting more community stewardship to help fill some of the gaps. Bernard expressed a willingness to prune trees, for example. Boukili said contractors will prune newer trees if asked, and the City’s young tree training program covers trees for a few years. The City just started a routine pruning program for other street trees. Having volunteers do work normally done by unionized staff might be challenging, Boukili said, but she will look into it more. Suput and Davis

both said volunteers would likely be eager to help with various maintenance tasks, also including weeding of tree pits, for instance, if there was outreach and training.

4. Updates from City

a. City Tree Removals

Boukili - not many recent City tree removals, except emergency ones, but there has been some pruning. Two mostly dead trees were removed, on Aberdeen and on Vinal St. A large Norway maple was also removed at the West Branch of the Somerville Public Library. A hearing will be scheduled for a honey locust tree on Cross Street that has to be removed to make space for an accessible crosswalk. There are three honey locusts in a row on that street, and the canopy will not be significantly affected, she said.

b. Private Tree Removal Permit(s) and Exception(s)

Drayton - reported on private tree removal list. Not fully up to date, but close. There are about 19 tree removal permits in the pipeline, most of them covered by residential exemptions or eligible for other waivers. Some trees of heaven are also being removed. Drayton was asked to share UFC's new tree of heaven removal guidance with homeowners. Boukili stated she would send him the document.

c. Parks Tree Health Program

Drayton - this program is mostly wrapping up for the season and again mentioned the West Branch tree removal. After the stump is removed, the City will look to replant in that area. Altogether, the program did work in 10 parks across the city, and pruned over 200 trees. Boukili provided a link: <https://www.somervillema.gov/treehealth>.

d. Spring Tree Planting

Boukili - 51 trees were planted in five parks with volunteers organized by the Mystic River Watershed Association (including Suput and Davis). More volunteer opportunities will be organized in the fall. Street tree planting is still ongoing, with a goal of 175 total trees for the spring (about 125 still to be planted). While the spring planting season ideally ends June 15, it is likely to be extended.

e. Tree Preservation Ordinance Amendments

Boukili - ordinance amendments were discussed with the City Council at various meetings and have been approved in committee. Major changes include specific protection for trees during construction for both public trees and private property trees; changes to private tree removal permits, where owner occupants get a 90 percent waiver on replanting requirements (no longer 100 percent), and the term for the UFC youth member will now align with the academic year.

f. Civic Space Guide

- i. Public Space and Urban Forestry Division had finalized a civic space design guide for public spaces to help developers better understand what the City is aiming to achieve with newly created spaces. Document can be found at this link: <https://voice.somervillema.gov/pops>. There will also be a specifications book in the future.

- ii. Grossman asked to keep this item on the agenda, so UFC members could read the guide and discuss it at the next meeting.

g. Sourcing Plants without Neonicotinoids

- i. Antonino - asked for this topic at the request of Renee Scott of Green & Open Somerville. The city's Native Planting Ordinance calls for no more plants with neonicotinoids after 2026. Boukili said the City does its best to source plants without neonicotinoids, and it's more feasible with non-tree plants, but very few nurseries offer neonicotinoid-free trees. Unless the 2026 sunset clause is changed, Boukili said, the City will not be able to plant as many plants as it now does, especially trees.
- ii. Grossman said she was part of a task force from the Boston Society of Landscape Architects that had looked at this issue and identified nurseries, but only smaller ones are fully neonicotinoid-free. Very difficult to find enough neonic free plants at the necessary quantities for large projects. Alos, all the rootstock for trees tends to come from a single source in Oregon, and because it takes years to grow a tree, stock that is free from neonicotinoids may not be available for 5–7 years. (For an explanation of what neonicotinoids are and why they are harmful, Grossman recommended this podcast:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QD_mT5ITC5w.)

5. Ongoing Work Updates

- a. Outreach
 - i. There was a discussion about having a table at Carnaval on June 1, if a table could still be obtained.
 - ii. For the annual Arbor Day, two dates were proposed: June 12 or June 26. Boukili said she would send out a poll to pick a date.
 - iii. Suput and Grossman then spoke about their inventory of outreach materials available for tabling and other uses. Bernard and fellow UFC Associate Member Rob Vandenabeele are also creating talking points. There was a brief discussion about how best to make all UFC materials available to the public online, including memos approved and resources created. One option is a Google folder; another is to try to use the existing website. Outreach committee has interest in hosting own website. Boukili said she would speak with City staff about how best to handle this, but noted that updates to the website are easy to make if they are just sent to the City's web team. Suput invited other UFC members to join the outreach subcommittee's work if they wished.
 - iv. A final brief discussion focused on invasive species, how best to raise awareness of them and of effective ways to remove them, and potential use of existing resources, such as Earthwise Aware materials. Green and Open Somerville is also a useful partner. Grossman provided more links:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14MSAuiWMpCaJ51EYbCvYgoj8Fxo-tyUY/view>
<https://www.anecdata.org/projects/view/ewa-invasive-monitoring/pages/161>
<http://www.earthwiseaware.org>

- b. UFC Overview and Startup question answering – *tabled*

- c. Species Selection and Planting Protocol - *tabled*
- d. Somerville's Most Wanted Weeds - *see above*

6. Urban Forestry Related Job Postings and RFPs

- a. Many related jobs, did not go over them all, but includes Tree Warden, Tree Surgeon, Laborers. Link: <https://cityofsomerville.applytojob.com/>. Also an RFP for landscape Maintenance throughout city. Dozen different parks that are not part of the Horticulturalist contract.

7. Approval of Minutes from Previous Meetings - *tabled*

- a. February 20th, 2025
- b. March 20th, 2025

Adjourn: Meeting adjourned at 6:31 pm (Motion – Boukili, second – Grossman)