



City of Somerville
ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

18 JUNE 2025 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Susan Fontano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Anne Brockelman	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Ann Fullerton	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Zachary Zaremba	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Brian Cook	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	
Sisia Daglian	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Stephen Cary (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Kit Luster (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 6:42pm.

Member Daglian sat as the Acting Clerk. Members Cook and Daglian sat as voting members.

PUBLIC HEARING: 56 Webster Avenue (ZP25-000025)

(continued from 14 May 2025)

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Member Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this hearing to 16 July 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 374A Medford Street (ZP25-000040)

The applicant team explained that the proposal is to lease 374A Medford Street to open a bakery/café/coffee shop. This will be a Brazilian-style café, with some Brazilian dishes included. This storefront is attached to a two-family house. The business was last a pizzeria but has been vacant for some time. The property is located in the Neighborhood Resident (NR) zoning district, and the Small Business Overlay district, and so requires a Special Permit. There will not be any other work to the building exterior, other than signage and painting. There is no parking on site, and no parking is required. The business is approximately 600 s.f. and will be used for takeout. There is not any seating within the building. The city's Economic Development division determined that the proposed improvements will help activate the ground floor spaces and façades, and dramatically increase the visibility and attractiveness of the former vacant ground floor commercial space; it will improve the interplay of ground floor space and civic space by enhancing the appearance of the site's existing ground floor commercial space by repainting the façade; it will improve the building signage and wayfinding around the site by installing new dedicated commercial signage on the site's façade; it will improve the attractiveness of the existing commercial space at the property, and improve site access for pedestrians and bicyclists by providing an attractive destination for such users in the form of an attractive ground floor commercial café space. The Economic Development division had no objections or conditions to applicant's proposal in its current form. The proposed use meets the goals of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) and the SomerVision 2040 Plan as it fills a long vacant storefront. It will serve residents and businesses in the area and provide a unique food option. It will provide additional tax revenue to the city, enhance the businesses near the Gilman Square T Station, and promote a small,

family-owned business. A very positive Neighborhood Meeting was held, and people expressed excitement about this opening and activation of the space.

Chair Fontano opened public testimony.

The Board asked about how trash from the site will be managed. The applicant team explained that a company will be hired to remove trash from the site one or two times per week.

The Board asked about the proposed hours of operation. The applicant team stated that this will be handled by the license for the business.

The Board stated that this proposed business meets the two Special Permit considerations regarding the Comprehensive Plan and existing policy plans, and the intent of the zoning district.

Chair Fontano closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Member Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve a Special Permit, with the conditions as enumerated in the Staff Memo, for 374A Medford Street (ZP25-000040).

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 142 Cross Street (ZP25-000019)

The applicant team explained that this is an MR3 parcel, two lots in from McGrath Highway, at the corner of Cross Street and Alston Street, and bound by the MBTA Green line on the North side. The applicant is seeking a Hardship Variance for the minimum façade build out. The site currently contains an existing one-story structure that occupies the majority of the site, and which is not in great condition. This structure has been approved by the Historic Preservation Commission for demolition. This lot is adjacent to an NR zoning district, and lots in the MR3 district require a 10' setback from NR lots. There is a zoning stipulation that requires a 12' curb setback from both fronts, with the building needing to be setback 12' from the curb on Alston Street, and 12' from the curb on Cross Street. Due to these setback regulations, the proposal is not able to meet the minimum façade build out on Alston Street. The proposal contains a 13' 6" façade build out, where just under 15' facade build out is required. Zoning requires that 65% of the Alston Street lot line façade be built out and the proposal is only able to meet this at 58.6%. In order to meet the façade build out, the applicant would have to violate either the curb setback on Cross Street or reduce the right-side setback from Alston Street to approximately 8' 6". The applicant team is proposing intensive streetscape updates as part of this project, including two new street trees, pervious pavers as part of the furnishing zone of the sidewalk, a ramp on the right side leading to long term bike parking, and an entrance into the rear of the building. The proposal does not deviate from the aesthetic of the neighborhood, as this property is surrounded by a series of three- and four-story structures. The proposal aims to be complementary to the neighborhood.

With regards to the conditions required to grant a variance, the applicant team stated that the first condition is that special circumstances exist relating to the soil conditions, shape, or unusual character of an existing structure, but not affecting generally the zoning district in which the land or structure is located. This lot is an irregular shape and, due to the pie shape which faces Alston Street, literal enforcement of the zoning code would not allow a structure to be developed by-right on this lot. The second condition is that literal enforcement of the provisions of this ordinance for the district where the subject land or structure is located would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, to the petitioner or appellant due to said circumstances. The existing structure on this property is not in great condition. The intention is to provide housing on this lot, as the MR3 district is seeking housing. The applicant is proposing a structure that complies with almost all of the zoning requirements of the

MR3 district. Not allowing a variance for the façade build out would be detrimental financially for the applicant. The third condition is that desirable relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good and without nullifying or substantially derogating from the intent and purpose of a specific district in this ordinance or the ordinance in general. The proposed development is compliant with all other zoning regulations and is in keeping with the intent of the neighborhood. The applicant team is seeking to create a simple three-story, three-family structure.

Chair Fontano opened public testimony.

The Board noted that the existing structure is right at the lot line. The applicant team explained that the proposed structure will move back from this lot line. The Board stated that this would allow the sidewalk in that area to be widened on both sides.

The Board asked about the second criterion regarding the hardship. The Board questioned if something else could be built on this site, if the variance is not approved. The applicant team stated that the existing structure sits vacant and needs significant repairs. Redeveloping the lot in any way would require variances due to the façade build out.

In response to a question from the Board, Staff noted that there are no other contiguous MR3 parcels to this lot. The applicant team is seeking relief from the secondary façade build out. The applicant team cannot meet this as they are respecting the 10' requirement from the NR district, which is intended to reduce the impact of MR3-sized buildings on the Neighborhood Resident districts.

The Board asked about the height of the proposed building. The applicant team explained that this is proposed to be 32' from grade to the top of the roof, with an additional 10' above this for the headhouse. In regard to the abutting property to the right, the applicant's firm is working with the property owner to develop an addition to their structure. That abutter has not seemed to have any objections to the project as presented.

Chair Fontano closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the Hardship Variance for 142 Cross Street (ZP25-000019), with the conditions as listed in the Staff Memo, dated 12 June 2025.

RESULT:

APPROVED

NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. To review a full recording, please contact the Planning, Preservation & Zoning Division at ZoningBoard@somervillema.gov