



City of Somerville
PLANNING BOARD
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

21 AUGUST 2025 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Absent</i>	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	<i>Present</i>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	
Lynn Richards	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 8:33pm.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the 17 July 2025 meeting minutes, as amended.

PUBLIC HEARING: 59 Bow Street

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this hearing to 4 September 2025, at request of the applicant.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 379 Somerville Ave

(continued from 7 August 2025)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this hearing to 4 September 2025, at request of the applicant.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: 44 White Street

The applicant team explained that a study on parking utilization was submitted, along with a memo to help understand the parking situation in this area of Somerville.

The Mobility Division explained that the applicant has applied for a Special Permit for parking relief to exceed the maximum allowed number of vehicle parking spaces. This project is in the MR4 district and located in a transit area. This is a residential project, and 0.5 vehicle parking spaces are currently allowed per dwelling unit. As this is a

three-unit building, the maximum requirement is 1.5 spaces. The Inspectional Services Department (ISD) has made the determination that one vehicle parking space is currently allowed under the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO). As this is located in a transit area, residents of the building are not eligible for on-street parking permits. The Mobility Division does not feel that a parking utilization study of the surrounding area is relevant to the determination of whether the parking maximum should be exceeded. The Division is in support of the applicant's request for a waiver.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to waive the requirement for a Transportation Impact Study (TIS) report for 44 White Street.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 199 Elm Street

(continued from 7 August 2025)

The applicant team explained that the proposed project is a four-story building on an MR4 parcel near Davis Square at 199 Elm Street. The proposed project includes a ground floor commercial space and three floors of residential apartments above, with a mix of unit sizes. The design began with the idea of preserving a mural and the lot line windows at the neighboring cafe, Revival. The building would then be stepped back to create a small entry courtyard in the front to give access both into the commercial space and the residential lobby. The upper massing was broken into three distinct pieces by splitting the building with a stair tower that includes a glazed blue brick. This helps break the scale of the building into apartment-sized pieces. The Board previously stated that it would like to see a public art or mural component on the building, as well as some articulation at the top of the building. The applicant team reviewed proposed options that incorporate these requests.

The Board thanked the applicant for taking its comments to heart in the design. The Board discussed that it would have liked a mural proposed on the large blank wall of the building as well. The applicant team stated the intention is for the mural to wrap around the building.

The Board asked about creativity for accessibility in the unit mix. The applicant team stated that the project is required by code for all units to be Group 1 accessible. In terms of Group 2 accessibility, it is challenging to make all of the conditions work within this small project. The financial costs to upgrading one unit to Group 2 may not be appropriate for the project, given the scale.

The Board also asked about the vault proposed in front of the building in terms of the nearby water table. The applicant team stated that the engineer for the project has not indicated that this could be an issue with the below-grade vault. The Board noted that placing the vault above ground would not be a de minimis change to the plan and would need to come back before the Board.

The Board discussed design option preferences, with a preference expressed toward option 1.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve, with the conditions as outlined in the Staff Memo and as discussed by the Planning Board, the Site Plan Approval to develop a general building in the MR4 zoning district.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve, with the conditions as outlined in the Staff Memo and as discussed by the Planning Board, the request to establish a residential housing use in the MR4 zoning district.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve, with the conditions as outlined in the Staff Memo and as discussed by the Planning Board, the request for a mechanical penthouse height exceeding the 10-foot maximum in the MR4 zoning district.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 74 Middlesex Ave

The applicant team explained that the request is for a Special Permit for the building identification signage, located on the north, south, and west building entrances at 74 Middlesex Avenue. This is a 15-story, 525,000 s.f. lab office building located in Assembly Square. The building achieved substantial completion in September 2024, and final construction on the neighboring civic space is wrapping up. The request is for three specific signage locations above the entry doors of the building. This is considered property identification signage, and do not technically comply with the wall signage requirements, which are meant to be tenant and occupant driven. All three of the signs are proposed to be the same, with a 5' diameter circle and lettering inside with the 74M address.

The applicant team addressed the nonconformities of the request. Under Article 10.8 of the SZO, wall signs are not usually used to locate ground-story businesses. These signs are proposed to be adhered to the glass curtain wall above the entry doors, and wall signs are not supposed to be adhered to windows or any architectural element. The signs are proposed to provide property information and do not contain a business name or logo. This is technically not permitted under Article 10.8 for wall signs. The signs are proposed to be located at three separate entrances. Each tenant in a building is allowed to have one wall sign. These signs are not for tenants, but for building identification. The diameter of the circle that encircles the 74M lettering is 5' instead of 4', which is the maximum height of a wall sign per the SZO. The signage was already installed, as it was believed to be wayfinding, but ISD noted that the applicant should seek relief.

Staff explained that the recommendation is for signs that are closer to compliance at 4' instead of 5'. The Board asked if this is a de minimis change. Staff stated that, as the signs are nonconforming and require discretionary approval, they require the Board's review.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony. Seeing none, Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

The applicant team noted that it is difficult to change the design at this time, as the signs are already affixed. The applicant team requested discretion to leave the signs as they are.

The Board asked if the circle around the address could be removed in order to meet the requirements. The applicant team noted that the sign within the vestibule is backlit and would need to be redesigned if the circle was removed. The Board noted that it finds the signs to be de minimis.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve, with the Staff Memorandum modified to allow a 5' diameter, the installed, non-conforming wall signs in the Assembly Square Mixed-Use District.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 3 Craigie Street/675 Somerville Ave

The applicant team explained that the proposal is to demolish the existing structures on this site and build a new three-story, 14-unit building with commercial space on the first floor. No car parking is being proposed, and none is required. The applicant is seeking Site Plan Approval to construct a three-story general building in the MR3

zoning district, and a Special Permit for a residential housing use. The new building will be an all-electrical, mixed-use general building, featuring commercial space on the ground floor, and rental housing units. This project adheres to all criteria specified in the SZO, including 14 rental units to contribute to Somerville's housing stock. The project includes 7 two-bedroom units, 5 one-bedroom units, and two studios. Two of the units are designated as affordable and two will be accessible units, at Tier 1 and Tier 2. The applicant team stated that the proposal includes the filling of all the existing curb cuts which will increase pedestrian safety and will comply with the green score requirements. It will also remove the current motor vehicle use on the site. The proposed orientation of the building will allow for better cross-ventilation of the units. The project is pursuing a HERS certification for projects of under 12,000 s.f. of residential space to meet the standards of the Specialized Energy Code. The project will also promote the goals of the Somerville Pollinator Action Plan with pollinator-safe plantings.

The applicant team explained that the site is served by two bus lines and is within the half-mile radius to Porter Square. On the side of the building abutting 2-4 Ibbetson Street, there is an existing fire escape. There is a prescriptive easement to accommodate the fire escape. As this is a corner lot, it has a primary front on Somerville Ave, and a secondary front on Craigie Street. The building has a 10' setback abutting the NR district and a 20' rear setback abutting the NR district. There is also a zero-side setback abutting the MR3 district, but the applicant will provide the minimum setback required for the neighbor's fire escape and egress. The project includes 14,679 s.f. of development, with 11,969 s.f. of residential and 2,710 s.f. of commercial.

The applicant team stated that they received a preliminary load letter regarding the transformer and have started a conversation with Eversource. The proposed location for the transformer will allow it to be screened and open air. During the Neighborhood Meetings, there were several comments regarding the trash location. The neighbors at 2-4 Ibbetson Street expressed a desired location for a trash room on the Craigie St side of the building. This location would lead to issues with the commercial space depth being reduced beyond what is allowed, and a required curb cut. This location would require an 8'x8' roll-up door next to a residential entry, and the Urban Design Commission (UDC) noted that this would be frowned upon. The trash is instead proposed on the east side of the building, towards the second entry, which was approved by the UDC. The recycling area is proposed to have an enclosed system.

The applicant team also shared that the proposed bike parking complies with the SZO. There will be a bike room, with covered and secured spaces for residents with access from the lobby. There will also be two covered racks for visitors. In terms of the building's visibility from the corner, the applicant is proposing a glazed corner to minimize visual obstructions. The common space areas will include plantings, seating, and lighting. The ground floor units will also have private outdoor amenities. The UDC suggested adding a gate or fence behind the abutter's fire escape access to secure the site and this is shown on the plan.

The applicant team explained that the massing of the building will be broken into two blocks, allowing for northern and southern exposure for all units for better light and air circulation. There will also be a green roof. The primary building material is a face brick, in a copper tone, with two color accents - jade and coral. The accents will be fiber cement panels. The windows will be varied to create an articulation, and the frames will provide a subtle color. The awning will be a thin metal extrusion, supported by the balcony above. The proposal is to locate the signage on this awning.

The applicant team also explained that the owner of a nearby car wash said that he was supportive of the project but was concerned about residents in the new building complaining about the 24-hour car wash across the street. There is also an existing MBTA commuter rail nearby. The car wash is approximately 60 decibels, and the commuter rail is approximately 85. The building will include triple pane glazing in the bedroom areas, which will reduce the sound. The building will also follow best practices for acoustic design. The applicant team reviewed the structure and the thickness of the balcony elements, to ensure that the detailing comes across, and reviewed how the windows interact with the flooring, due to the thickness. At the ground level, the goal is to really create an outdoor communal space and amenity. The area also contains the outdoor bike parking, and the enclosed trash areas. The private patio spaces for the ground-level units will be divided with low fences. Along Craigie Street there

will be a planter along the façade of the building to bring greenery to the streetscape and create some visual separation.

The Board noted that the current use of this site is a gas station. There are likely underground storage tanks and there was no discussion regarding how these will be removed and as well as Brownfield testing. The applicant team explained that the tanks were removed in 2018 with an LSP present to test the soil. A report demonstrating that the soil was clean will be submitted.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Crystal Huff (Ward 5) – spoke in support of the project. She stated that she would be happy to no longer see a parking lot on this site and, instead, housing. She noted that, as this is within the MR3 district, the building can only be three stories tall and is not required to have an elevator. However, there is very little housing in Somerville that is both affordable and accessible. She requested for one of the affordable units to also be accessible. She suggested a revision to the bike parking room in order to consider an adaptive bike parking option.

Lisa Bedford (10-12 Ibbetson Street) – spoke in favor of the design and stated that the applicant team incorporated items heard from the neighborhood.

Aaron Weber (32 Summit Avenue) – stated that this is a transit-oriented, low parking, modestly sized project proposed by a local family. This will move the site from an automotive use to a transit-oriented housing development, which should be supported by the City.

Kenneth Leitner (675 Somerville Avenue) – stated that the proposal will lead to a loss of sight and air flow for the abutters from their windows facing the property. There is no landscape buffering proposed in the alleyway between the two properties. All of the trash is proposed to be located closely to the abutter's property. It is unclear what the plan for snow removal is. There is also concern with water being pitched toward the abutter's property.

Seeing no additional public comments, Chair Capuano closed public testimony.

The Board asked why the proposed tree plantings are ones that will soak up pollutants. The applicant team explained that these types of plants are incorporated in all of their projects to ensure that the plantings will be productive and forward-thinking. This could help with pollutants from abutting properties or groundwater. The Board noted that the landscaping could be used to mitigate runoff from the impervious cover of the site. The applicant team explained that permeable pavers and pea stone will be used in the design to help infiltrate water.

The Board stated that there may be an increase in rideshare access to the site and there could be consideration regarding this. The applicant team stated that the City currently retains control of the curb cuts on site for metered parking. The Board asked about loading for the commercial use. The applicant team explained that it worked with the City to designate some of the meters during the day as loading and pickup/drop-off.

The Board expressed concern regarding the diversity of units being offered. The Board stated that it would like to see a three-bedroom included and, if not a three-bedroom unit, then potentially making the accessible units affordable as well. The applicant team explained that the affordable units are usually determined after a discussion with the Housing Division. The three lower level units will be ADA compliant. A three-bedroom unit could be accommodated, though this may make the affordability aspect more difficult. The Board asked about the rental strategy for the unit. The applicant team stated that these will be market-rate units. The interest is to hit below this price point, if possible. The Board stated that it seems important to improve the proposed diversity of the housing stock for the project or to find a way to keep the rents low.

The Board stated that it would like to hear additional creative ideas regarding trash storage, based on the abutter's concerns.

The Board also asked about additional electric considerations in terms of conserving energy. The applicant team stated that the design is energy conscious, including many passive strategies.

The Board agreed to leave the written public comment period open until 9am on Friday, 29 August 2025.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this hearing to 4 September 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Board Administration Open Discussion

The Board agreed to table discussion on this item to a future meeting.

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 PlanningBoard@somervillema.gov