



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

THOMAS GALLIGANI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Urban Forestry Committee Meeting

Thursday, September 18, 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, Vanessa Boukili, Marion Davis, Leah Grossman, Michael Hendrix, David Jackson, Joelle Renstrom (left at 5:59 pm), Suzanne Warner

Associate Members Present: Rob Vandenabeele, Allison Bernard

Committee Members Absent: Luca Choly, Doris Jenkins

Others in Attendance: Jaclyn Pillitteri, Anne Ryan, Alyssa Wilk

Call to Order: Grossman called the meeting to order at 4:35 pm.

1. Introductions / Housekeeping

- a. UFC members and Associate members introduced themselves.
- b. Boukili noted that youth member Calla Taylor had her last meeting in August, so the Committee is now short by a youth member. The vacancy will be posted shortly.

2. Resident Concerns

- a. Anne Ryan, a resident of the Cobble Hill Apartments, expressed concerns about the Somerville Redevelopment Authority's plans to reclaim some City-owned land that is now used for parking by Cobble Hill residents, which she said will result in trees being cut down to clear space for a new parking lot. She showed clusters of trees slated to be fenced off in December, and a walking path that would be closed off. She shared her calculations of the value that would be lost if the trees were cut, even though some are not in good shape. Ryan sought feedback from the Committee on the tools she had used and the results she had obtained.

- i. Boukili said that some of the trees are already in the City's tree inventory. Ryan's calculation of the cost of replacing the trees was found to be inaccurate due to the wrong unit having been used (trunk circumference rather than diameter). For context, Boukili explained that the City calculates replacement value at \$600 per caliper inch. Boukili said the tool Ryan used to calculate the trees' productive value, iTree, is helpful and widely used – though Ryan, Antonino and Boukili all agreed that the results were often disappointingly low. For illustration, Bernard calculated the productive value of a white pine with a 20-inch trunk diameter, and she found the estimated value of the ecosystem services it would provide over the next 20 years was just \$1,377 – half for air pollution removal, and the rest including stormwater management, carbon dioxide removal, and reduced energy costs.
- ii. Grossman asked Boukili to request an update from the SRA on this project, noting that she supports trying to preserve the trees “regardless of the dollar amount of value.” She also asked how the Committee can help advocate for this space and those trees.
- iii. Ryan noted that the City owns the land currently used for parking, but the new parking area is on privately owned land. Boukili noted that any tree over 8 inches would require a permit for removal. Hendrix asked whether the Committee could send a proactive notification to the SRA. Boukili said this would be possible and in line with past actions.
- iv. Antonino said it seemed important, if the SRA is forcing the management company to cut down some trees and build a new parking lot, other city officials should be informed and asked to intervene, including City Council members and the Disability Commission. Grossman asked Ryan to keep the Committee informed and offered to support in any way we can.
- b. Bernard raised a concern about Japanese knotweed growing out of the Lowell Street bridge over the MBTA tracks, noting how destructive it is. Grossman agreed that the invasive plant is a huge issue that is threatening both the ecology and many structures in Somerville and across the region. Boukili said the City maintains planted areas along the older parts of the Community Path, but not near the railroad tracks. Vandenabeele said the Committee should bring the knotweed problem to the MBTA's attention, and other Committee members agreed that this required urgent action, so Bernard drafted a letter while the meeting continued.
 - i. Near the end of the meeting, Bernard shared her draft letter. Several suggestions were made for edits and for more agencies to copy, including the Mass. Department of Public Utilities (DPU), Rail Transit Safety Division, the Mass. Department of Transportation, the City Council, and the City's Director of Mobility.
 - ii. After the edits, Davis made a motion to have the Co-Chairs send out the letter. Boukili seconded the motion. In a roll call, all voted to approve. Grossman said she would make arrangements to send out the letter.

Roll call vote to approve and have co-chairs send MBTA knotweed letter (motion – Davis, second – Boukili)

1. Yay: Jackson, Hendrix, Warner, Grossman, Davis, Boukili, Antonino
2. Nay: none
3. Abstain: none

Motion unanimously approved at 6:33 p.m. (7:0:0).

- iii. Committee also discussed the feasibility of planting more trees along the Community Path extension. Boukili said there are very few areas that can be planted and are at least 30 feet away from the tracks, the minimum set by the MBTA. While the City and the MBTA are negotiating a maintenance agreement, the MBTA has jurisdiction, so this limitation is unlikely to change, Boukili said. Others mentioned that shrubs and pollinator gardens could be good alternatives if trees are not an option. Boukili said a policy on art and plantings along the path is being drafted by the City.

3. Somerville Avenue Bioswale Maintenance

- a. Antonino – wondering who is maintaining the bioswales now; which ones are still under contract; how often they are worked on; and what is happening to those that are no longer under contract. Boukili said the bioswales in the stretch from McGrath Highway to Union Square are no longer under contract and are maintained by the City, but they have “no clear home” within the City, as they fall between the Highway Department and Grounds, and Grounds does not have enough staff to do it. However, Boukili added, the City has requested bids for green stormwater infrastructure maintenance – with responses due on Sept. 18 – and that will include bioswales, tree trenches in different parts of the city, permeable pavement around some trees, and other infrastructure. As a result, these will be better maintained and no longer look messy. Weeding and infill planting will be done as needed.
- b. The new bioswales in Spring Hill are still under contract, and discussions have already been made with the vendor about the weeding needs. Boukili will contact project manager to encourage work completion before the seeds set.

4. Updates from City

a. City Tree Removals and Upcoming Public Shade Tree Hearing

- i. Jackson said there were no upcoming public tree hearings. He shared a short list of tree removals and said most were dead or severely damaged. He briefly provided details for each of the trees on the list. After Jackson mentioned one tree of heaven (ailanthus) that was being removed would have the stump treated with herbicide, a discussion ensued on the use of herbicides. Boukili said the City’s policy is to not use herbicides, but does occasionally use it on a case-by-case basis for specific applications, like tree of heaven. Jackson said it is prudent to “keep being very tight-fisted” with it.

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

- i. Drayton provided an overview of recent private tree removal applications, along with some violations issued by the City. The largest application

involves the assisted-living facility at 259 Lowell St., which has proposed to remove 10 trees. Drayton said the application was being heavily scrutinized, and the City might try to save two sweetgums in particular. The applicant has proposed to replace the removed trees with 23 new trees of 3 caliper inches each. Antonino asked Drayton to encourage the property owners to use all native species.

- ii. Based on the updated Tree Preservation Ordinance, the City is to charge owner-occupants \$60 per inch for removal (or equivalent tree replacement). However, waivers are still granted in circumstances where the tree removal is warranted, such as when a tree is affecting the foundation of a house.

c. Fall Tree Planting

- i. Boukili said that in the spring, the City planted 165 trees, and given the target to plant at least 350 trees per year, at least 185 trees would be planted in the fall. Most will be with the contractor Wagon Wheel, and others will be planted by volunteers through the Mystic River Watershed Association, likely at the East Somerville library and along Great River Road in Assembly Square, with corporate groups. Boukili said she also hoped to plant about 15 trees along the Community Path where it can be done, near Maxwell's Green, and she was getting final approval from the MBTA. Once the approval comes through, she said, she will put out a call for volunteers to help plant those trees.

5. Ongoing Work Updates

a. Outreach

- i. Somerstreets
 - 1. Monster Mash on 10/19 - Boukili asked whether the Committee would be able to set up a table.
 - a. Antonino, Davis and Warner said they could volunteer.
 - 2. Antonino also mentioned HONK! and said several green-oriented groups, such as the Somerville Community Growing Center and the Somerville Garden Club, would be marching together under a "heal the Earth" theme, and she asked whether the Committee would join them.
- ii. Antonino made a motion to do this, Grossman agreed, and in a roll call, all agreed to formally join the groups and put the Committee logo on the banner.

Roll call vote to approve adding UFC logo to Honk banner (motion – Antonino, second – Grossman)

- i. Yay: Jackson, Hendrix, Warner, Davis, Grossman, Boukili, Antonino
- ii. Nay: none
- iii. Abstain: none

Motion unanimously approved at 6:05 p.m. (7:0:0).

- iii. Harvest Fest Groundwork Somerville 10/4/25 – Michael and Tori available. Boukili will sign up.
- iv. Boukili to send champion tree list from Bernard for review at next meeting

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

c. Species Selection and Planting Protocol (SSAPP) - *tabled*

d. Somerville's Most Wanted Weeds

- i. Boukili will share document with UFC for review and edits at next meeting

6. Urban Forestry Related Job Postings and RFPs

- a. Boukili noted that the City's tree crew was down to one person, and though a foreman job was posted, there was a second vacancy as well.
- b. Grossman asked Boukili to briefly pull up a list of RFPs to make the Committee aware of opportunities to contribute, such as the RFP green infrastructure maintenance.

7. Approval of Minutes from Previous Meetings

- a. August 21st, 2025

Roll call vote to approve August meeting minutes (motion – Grossman, second – Jackson)

- iv. Yay: Jackson, Hendrix, Warner, Antonino, Boukili, Grossman
- v. Nay: none
- vi. Abstain: Davis

Motion unanimously approved at 6:38 p.m. (6:0:1).

Adjourn: Meeting adjourned at 6:38 pm (Motion – Grossman, second – Hendrix)