



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

5 NOVEMBER 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>	
Olivia Mobayed	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Ann Fullerton	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Zachary Zaremba	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Brian Cook	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	
Sisia Daglian	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Kit Luster (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Alvaro Esparza (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Josh Manion (Inspectional Services Department)

The meeting was called to order at 6:01pm and adjourned at 7:34pm.

Member Daglian sat as the Acting Clerk.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Vice Chair Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the 15 October 2025 meeting minutes, as presented.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Vice Chair Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (5-0-1), with Member Mobayed abstaining, to approve the 1 October 2025 meeting minutes, as presented.

PUBLIC HEARING: 36 Beacon Street (ZP25-000075) (ZP25-000084)

Member Daglian sat as a voting member for this case.

The applicant team reviewed the existing conditions of the site. There was a request from the Inspectional Service Department (ISD) to submit a dimensional site plan, including materiality. Also, lot coverage should include the footprint of the structure, any ground story building components, accessory structures, and any paved surfaces on the site. Permeable pavers do count towards lot coverage based on the runoff coefficient from their manufacturer. Even if a surface, such as the rear concrete walk, directs stormwater to infiltrate onsite, it would still be considered lot coverage. The drawings were updated to include all ground story building components, including footprints of all paved surfaces. The pavers were calculated at 0.33, as directed. ISD responded that this had been completed. The lot has an existing non-conforming lot coverage of 70.4 where there is a maximum allowed of 65 per Section 3.2.11.8.

A Hardship Variance for relief is also being sought from Section 14.1.7.B2 for further reducing non-conforming landscape and permeable area. No changes have yet been made to the plans for these items, as there is going to be further discussion regarding exactly what relief is being sought for. The proposal is for an additional 167 s.f. of existing lot coverage.

The Board noted that there was clarification from ISD that lot coverage includes building footprint and other non-permeable elements, such as the concrete walkway. The permeable area on the site should not be further reduced. As this is being proposed by the applicant, a variance is needed. The Board asked for a quantification of the square footage of permeable area proposed to be further reduced. The applicant team stated that the permeable pavers are 317 s.f. They drain into underground drywells which feed the hedges on the site. There is not a calculation of the concrete walk or the back area. The only footprint area being added is 167 s.f. of the rear stairs.

The applicant team explained that the previously presented stair area was determined to be only 7" of a requested hardship. This design remains unobtrusive, respectful, measured, and proportionate to the property, as much as the building codes will allow. 7" does not impact the rear abutter and is not visible to any of the abutters on the left side. If needed, the applicant team is happy to comply with this item.

Some Board members stated that the 7" is potentially not as concerning, but the encroachment on the setback was brought up during the last meeting and should maybe be addressed. In order to approve the Hardship Variance requested for lot coverage, it would be prudent for the applicant to give the change from the existing nonconformity in terms of percentage, because this is how it is conveyed in the ordinance.

Other Board members stated that they would like the deck to conform with the 20' setback. The Board also suggested matching the vinyl material on the stair skirt to the existing building for aesthetic continuity. There was discussion regarding the restoration of the historic front porch, with the applicant team explaining that the plan is to remove the plywood addition and chemically treat or sandblast the brick.

The Board discussed the Hardship Variance criteria. For Criteria 1, special circumstances relating to the shape of the parcel, this is a relatively narrow lot which has been extended towards the rear in the past; this does not leave much room for an external stair in the existing footprint. Similar adjacent lots do not have that characteristic. Criteria 2 is that literal enforcement of the provision where the subject land or structure is located would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, to the practitioner. The hardship would be financial because placing the stairs internal to the building would be complicated structurally. It is also a hardship to have a building that is not conforming to the Building Code and potentially creating a hazard for its occupants. For Criteria 3, that relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good, this parcel is not substantially visible aside from the immediate neighbors. While some neighbors mentioned concerns with flooding and water in their basements, this is not likely to be exasperated or affected by this proposal.

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

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Vice Chair Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) in the matter of ZP25-000075, to approve a Hardship Variance, noting that the criteria discussed, as required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, have been satisfied.

Given those criteria that have been satisfied, the Board approves the Hardship Variance with the following conditions:

- That the decision be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- That a digital copy of the recorded decision stamped by the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds be submitted to the Planning, Preservation, and Zoning Division for the public record.
- That a modification be made from the plans that have been filed for the Hardship Variance, such that the flat portion of the decks at two levels do not encroach on the 20-foot rear setback.
- Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Vice Chair Brockelman, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) in the matter of ZP25-000084, to approve a Hardship Variance, noting that the criteria discussed, as required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, have been satisfied.

RESULT:	APPROVED WITH CONDITIONS
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PUBLIC HEARING: 156-158 Summer Street (ZP25-000098)

Member Cook sat as a voting member for this case.

The applicant team explained that the building at 156-158 Summer Street was built in 1924 by the applicant's grandfather. In terms of the electrical power on the site, notice was received from the insurance company, and a plan was instituted to upgrade the electrical with Eversource. This is a four-story building which has little room on the left, right, and rear sides. There is also a grade issue on the site, with the property falling off from right to left. There is a retaining wall at the left of the building. Eversource will not allow a transformer on a site with this type of grade issue. If the building cannot be insured through an upgrade to the electrical system, there could be a loss of the mortgage. This would lead to a financial hardship. The originally proposed location for the transformer would not have met the requirements of Somerville or Eversource. The new electrical building will be located in the front right of the building in the basement. The proposal is to place a green transformer on the front exterior of the building and block it with evergreen shrubs. Eversource is okay with the proposed location.

Chair Fontano opened the public testimony.

The Board asked if there has been any consideration to placing the transformer underground. The applicant team explained that there are existing utilities on the right side of the building. The new electrical room will be located on the right side as well. The transformer needs to be located as closely to this as possible. Placing the transfer underground would be a much longer process and may not allow the insurance deadline to be met.

The Board noted that this is a much more densely populated area than the average street in Somerville. Also, the building across the street has an existing transformer in front of it.

The Board asked the approximate dimensions of the transformer. The applicant team stated that the pad will be approximately 6'x6' and the transformer will be slightly less than this. It will be similarly sized to the one across the street. The Board asked about the clearance in front of the transformer in terms of screening it with plantings. The applicant team stated that shrubs will not be allowed in front of it. The intent is to blend it in as much as possible.

The Board asked about a letter from Eversource confirming the proposed location. The applicant team explained that Eversource did not feel comfortable filing a permit until this was approved by the Board. The Board expressed some concern about moving forward in good faith without a permit from Eversource.

A member of ISD explained that the relief would remain the same if the transformer was required by Eversource to be situated differently within the front of the property. The Board would likely want to see a revised site plan, if this was the case.

Seeing no public comment at this time, Chair Fontano closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Daglian, seconded by Member Zaremba, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) in the matter of ZP25-000098, to approve a Hardship Variance, noting that the criteria, as required by the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, have been satisfied. The criteria include that:

- The special circumstances relating to the shape, or the unusual character of the existing structure, such that the existing structure occupies most of the lot, leaving very little setback in the sides and the rear.
- Literal enforcement of the provisions of this ordinance, where the subject land or structure is located, would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, such that not being able to install a

transformer in the front yard setback would create considerable hardship for the owner, financial and otherwise.

- Regarding that desirable relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good, the transformer location will be shielded with shrubbery from the public way to the best of the owner's ability.

Given those criteria being satisfied, the Board approves the Hardship Variance with the following conditions:

- That the decision be recorded with the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds.
- That a digital copy of the recorded decision stamped by the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds be submitted to the Planning, Preservation, and Zoning Division for the public record.

RESULT:	APPROVED
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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