



City of Somerville
URBAN DESIGN COMMISSION
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

25 NOVEMBER 2025 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Sarah Lewis	Co-Chair	<i>Absent</i>	
Estello Raganit	Co-Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Frank Valdes	Member	<i>Present</i>	<i>Exited at 8:06pm</i>
Deborah Fennick	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Andrew Arbaugh	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Tim Talun	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Martin Pavlinic	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Lexie Payne (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Kit Luster (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Madison Anthony (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:07pm and adjourned at 9:42pm.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATION: 32-40 White Street

Following a motion by Member Valdes, seconded by Member Arbaugh, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the design recommendation.

DESIGN REVIEW: 205 Broadway

The applicant team explained that some of the landscape plans are being revised after comments regarding adding additional planting width on the drive aisle side. The exterior design of the building has also been refined. The major changes include a more refined identification of materials. The gray mass on the side of the building is cembrit, with an infill of another color of cembrit. The larger shadow boxes on the upper floor will be treated in a PAC-CLAD product and a ALUCOBOND product. There are also sunshades and glass railings called out on the plans. On the main corner of the building, it was determined that the previous iteration was a bit too commercial in its aesthetics, specifically the windows on the upper floors. Those windows have been reduced in size to give a bit more of a residential scale. To further develop that façade, there will be more detailing with the addition of the shadow boxes in a different color material. The brick on the corner was previously only to the first floor but has since been brought all the way up. The sunshades on the top level have been made less prominent. The main entry canopy articulation along the ground level has also been changed. The canopies at the residential entry points are kept at a lower level, with the commercial canopy at a higher level on the corner, to give more hierarchy to the ground floor level. In terms of column alignments on the upper floors, these have tried to be aligned as best as possible.

In summation, the proposed materials include a full bed brick at the base, a cembrit cementitious product, a few canopies and pre-made window boxes. The wrapping on the corner will be through body brick.

The Commission asked how the required glazing percentage at the bays impacts the ability to align the piers. In reviewing the corner, there is a pier expression on floors 2-4 that does not align with the pier at the ground level.

The applicant team explained that the alignment was difficult based on the programming and zoning requirements. The intention was to not have columns behind panels of glass.

The Commission noted that cantilevering the left side of the building seems unusual. There was a suggestion to bring that one corner down. The applicant team suggested a type of grounding such as a signal notifier to close the corner of the Broadway side off. The Commission suggested cladding the columns with brick similar to the rest of the building. The applicant team agreed.

The Commission asked about potential street trees. The applicant team stated that they have had issues with MADOT approving these along McGrath Highway in the past.

The Commission asked about the glass doors proposed to enter the transformer area. The applicant team stated that this would be changed to a grill door.

The Commission stated that they would like a condition that there be a formal review of the materials.

Following a motion by Member Valdes, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the façade for 205 Broadway.

Following a motion by Member Valdes, seconded by Member Arbaugh, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) that the design guidelines for 205 Broadway have been met.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the additional design guidance for 205 Broadway including:

- Further study of the corner column and potentially consistent brick cladding for all of the columns of the building.
- Consideration of street trees in coordination with MADOT and the City of Somerville.
- Updates to the door accessing the transformer vault to be replaced with a grilled door.
- Further study of alignment of the upper story piers and ground level pier.
- Prior to construction, there should be a physical review of materials by the Commission.

RESULT:	RECOMMENDED
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DESIGN REVIEW: 120-132 Middlesex Avenue

Member Arbaugh recused himself from this item.

The applicant team explained that this project has gone through a lengthy amendment process. This is a 19-story building, including a mid-level mechanical room and two mechanical penthouse levels. Of those 19 floors, 16 are proposed to be occupied by lab and office uses, as well as other active uses on the ground floor. The zoning height comes in at just under 260'. The overall GFA for lab, commercial, and office space is 596,000 s.f. with floor plates that are 35,000 s.f. One of the unique features of the building is that it is designed to host lab uses on all floors of the building. There are five and a half levels of below-grade parking spaces, with a count of 520 spaces. The building will be LEED Platinum certifiable. The preferred façade is a combination of vision glass and opaque glass. The façade on both the north side and the west sides consists of an alternating woven pattern. This façade wraps and masks the mid-building mechanical floor, and the lower of the two mechanical penthouse levels on top of the building. On all four sides of the building, there is a unique inner layer of diagonal structural bracing. Exterior balconies are proposed on the north and south sides.

All of the massing options focus on variations of ways to address the corner of Middlesex and Cummings. In the preferred option, this is done by sweeping the Middlesex façade around the corner onto the Cummings side, with

the gentle curve resolving the oblique corner of the two streets. The three massing options each acknowledge the corner of Middlesex and Cummings in a different way. Option 1, the team's preferred option, has a curved façade at the corner of Middlesex and Cummings, and balconies in the southwest corner. It also has three basic façade types, which reinforce the massing to help make it legible, allowing the oblique corner from Middlesex to Cummings to become one continuous gesture, with a different façade type on the west and the north sides. Option 2 has a notch in the corner of the building at Middlesex and Cummings, and a projection at the north corner, this creates a sliver of the building that runs along Middlesex. Option 3 combines elements of the other two, with a notch and balconies in the southeast and north corner. It has a similar skin strategy, using one type to highlight the two vertical elements with the balconies, and another type on the remainder of the occupied floors.

In terms of the façade options, there are three basic patterns and materials combined in different ways. The preferred façade Option 1 has a vertical proportion which builds off the 33' structural module. This is very common for lab spaces. It will be subdivided into an 11' bay spacing that uses a combination of metal, vision glass, spandrel glass, and vertical fins to create a textured facade with relief. Façade Option 2 has a more horizontal expression, making the floor-to-floor scale of the building more legible, and using the same combination of materials as Façade Type 1. Façade Option 3 is also vertical in proportion but does not utilize the metal panel. It is a combination of vision glass, spandrel glass, and vertical fins.

The applicant team is working to enable a future multi-use path that will connect Middlesex Avenue and Mystic Avenue. In order to do so, the southwest corner of the building has been pulled back which will create visual continuity. The applicant team also worked with Staff to consolidate truck and car traffic to Middlesex Avenue in one curb cut.

In terms of the landscape plan, at the base of the building along Middlesex Ave, the plan shows large canopy trees in a diverse mix of native species. These will help to shade the sidewalk and add shade onto Middlesex to mitigate the heat island effect. The understory planting area will be a mix of shrubs, ground cover, and perennials at a variety of heights. There will be a permeable paver median strip to act as a buffer between the cars and the bike lane. There will be seating closer to the building and linear planters along the edge. Cummings Street has a narrower streetscape. There will be a blue bikes station on that side, and the street trees will be at more of an ornamental scale. Along Middlesex Ave, there will be a building overhang and the sidewalk will be fully accessible and made of pavement. The overhang area will have more of an upgraded specialty paving to activate the node. The bike lane will be protected and elevated.

The Commission asked if there is any seating proposed along the streetscape of Cummings. The applicant team stated that no seating is proposed along the narrower area.

The Commission cautioned about the amount of illumination coming from a glass and metal façade as it comes up to clad the first story of the penthouse. The Commission also asked about some of the materials. There was interest in seeing the specific materials proposed. The applicant team stated that the penthouse area will recede in a medium to light grey tone with a metal pattern.

The Commission discussed the massing options. Some Commissioners expressed a preference for the Option 1 massing but the Option 2 façade.

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to recommend Option 1 as the preferred façade option.

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Valdes, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to recommend Option 1 as the preferred massing option.

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) that the design guidelines have been met.

The Commission agreed to table the discussion on additional design guidance until a future meeting to allow the applicant time to submit a presentation on the specific materials.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

DESIGN REVIEW: 1154 Broadway

The applicant team explained that the property was permitted for a six-story hotel under the old zoning in 2018, and that approval has since expired. The applicant now proposes an eight-story hotel with 99 rooms, which is more than what the MR4 zoning district allows, but which is only two stories more than the previously approved six-story hotel from 2018. A hotel of smaller height is not financially feasible at this time. The applicant is seeking a Hardship Variance for height, number of stories, and other items.

From a footprint standpoint, the project has not changed significantly since the 2018 approval. An area has been recessed for an outdoor patio space. The proposal includes that a portion of Clarendon Ave, from the property line to Broadway, will become two-way in order for people to drop-off underneath the hotel and for the valet to then drive into the parking garage. There will be an approved transformer vault in one area, likely with three manhole covers. These will hopefully be blended into the proposed concrete. There are street trees proposed along the front of the site. The 8th floor is proposed to have a restaurant and outdoor terrace, with additional plantings on that level. The proposed project meets all the requirements of the Green Score. The garage will be valet only and contain 35 spaces for the 99 rooms. The ground floor level will have a lobby and a street-facing restaurant/café.

Design Option 1, the preferred option, contains elements that are familiar with the immediate abutting architecture, such as brick. There will be a large expanse of panel, and the Broadway façade could include a large mural. There will be a stone element on the ground level and insulated panels on the upper level. There will be brick detailing to highlight the windows. All balconies are proposed to be glass. The top floor level is set back from the lower floors. Option 2 shows an alternating pattern of color to brick, treating the building as six-story bays, and breaking up the corner piece with coloring. Option 3 looks to reduce the scale along the street to have it read as more of a four-story building. This will include a heavy cornice, set back upper floors, and brick carried up the corner element a bit further to break up the overall massing.

Massing Option 1 is the preferred option and is more utilitarian in some respects based on what needs to be achieved within the footprint from a room standpoint. Other massing options include a curved option, and an option that breaks the building into one- and two-floor increments while introducing some horizontal banding,

The Commission stated that the compliance with Passive House standards impacts the design. If gas is being brought into the building for the restaurant, then the roof has to be solar. This then impacts the green space on the roof, which impacts other items of the façade. The Commission asked for confirmation that Eversource has approved the buried transformer. The applicant team stated that there was approval from Eversource in terms of the six-story building. This letter can be submitted to the Commission.

The Commission noted that the proposed setback on Clarendon is not meeting the 12' curb standard. The applicant team stated that they are seeking a variance for the secondary front setback. The Commission stated that they would have a hard time supporting that variance. There does not seem to be a hardship that requires the narrower sidewalk. They also noted that the proposal is too vehicularly oriented.

The Commission stated that the applicant's landscape architect should be available at a future meeting. 8% of the total Green Score is weighted on one tree which is proposed to be planted 2' off the edge of the building with a plant bed that is too narrow to support it.

The Commission stated that the orientation of the building is strange, in that the primary face of the building is not parallel to the street. In terms of the height of the building, as this is a hotel building with shorter floor-to-floor heights, it is not very different from an MR6 commercial building height. There was concern expressed regarding the treatment of the top floor of the building. There is a cornice at floor 7 and the top floor that is expressed differently but not set back from any of the lower floors, except where the terrace is. Both the MR5 and MR6 have specific upper floor setbacks, and additional setbacks could be considered in order to differentiate the top floor.

Following a motion by Member Talun, seconded by Member Arbaugh, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to express concern regarding the application for a secondary front setback variance, and is not in support of the request.

The Commission continued 1154 Broadway to 23 December 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

Member Valdes exited the meeting at 8:06pm.

The Commission took a five minute recess.

DESIGN REVIEW: 6 Wheatland Street

The applicant team explained that the property currently has a two-story detached house on it. The property abuts the blank wall and loading dock of a commercial building at 273 Broadway. The property is approximately one block from the upcoming redevelopment of the old Star Market site on Broadway, which will transform the neighborhood with new large buildings, a park, civic plaza, and retail storefronts. The applicant is proposing a three-story structure containing five dwelling units. Along the street front, there will be steps coming into the entrance on the left side, and a ramp coming off the driveway for ADA access into the first floor unit. On the right side, the building is set back 10', which is required when abutting the NR zoning district. There will be a 10' driveway that extends from the street to the end of the building, and then towards the rear of the site. There will be four covered parking spaces and a fifth parking space that is not covered. There will be bicycle parking and trash storage, a room for a transformer, a lawn, and some landscaping at the rear of the site. The applicant will be seeking a Hardship Variance for the façade build-out in order to meet the 10' setback. The property needs an 80% façade build-out and is proposing 74.3%. The applicant is also seeking a Hardship Variance for the 5' landscape buffer at the right side of the site.

In terms of the building layout, unit 1 is a basement and first floor unit, approximately 1,800 s.f., with 3-bed and 2-bath. The second floor will be divided in half, with the front unit being a 2-bed, 2-bath, and the rear unit being a 2-bed, 2-bath, each approximately 1,100 s.f. The third floor will match the second floor, with two 2-bed, 2-bath units.

Façade Option 1 proposes to clad the ground floor with a cementitious siding in a blue color. The upper two floors will be a lighter color, in a cementitious shingle material. This option has casement and fixed window assemblies. The base and second and third floors will be broken up with some mid-bands. Façade Option 2 shows the ground floor clad with a dark-colored thin brick and the upper stories clad with cementitious siding, in a Hardie iron gray color. The inset balconies and areas between the windows are clad with a larger exposure siding in an accent color. This option includes a different casement-style window broken up into three with simulated lights. Façade Option 3, the preferred option, breaks up the front-facing façade and adds a taller element to accentuate the entry point, clad with a larger exposure of cementitious siding. The second material is a smaller exposure siding with the same large exposure siding between the windows. This includes a PVC cornice wrapping at the top of the building and an accent material siding wrapping into the covered parking area. The taller massing at the front of the building will accentuate the entry, with the massing breaking up towards the rear of the site on the left side.

The Commission stated that the plan looks to have less planting than what may typically be seen and more information on the Green Score would be good to see. The Commission recommended that the applicant review the Somerville Pollinator Action Plan for some additional species to expand the planting palette. Additional information regarding the edge condition on the driveway north in terms of the grade differentiation is needed. The ramp is currently ending in the driveway, and it would be nice to see it go toward the sidewalk instead if possible.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to recommend Option 3 as the preferred façade option.

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Arbaugh, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) that the design guidelines have been met, with the understanding that the applicant team will be seeking a Hardship Variance.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to approve the additional design guidance, including:

- That the applicant team will confirm the transformer needs.
- That the applicant team will consider an expansion of the planting palette per the Somerville Pollinator Action Plan guidelines and recommendations.
- That the applicant team will clarify the hardscape where it meets the sidewalk edge.
- That the applicant team will study the ramp and the paving material in the transition zone.

RESULT:	RECOMMENDED
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DESIGN REVIEW: 101 Highland Ave – YMCA

The Commission reviewed both buildings for this applicant team concurrently.

The applicant team explained that this project has been filed as two applications, one for a new YMCA building community center at 101 Highland Ave, and the other for an all-affordable residential building at 107 Highland Ave. The City Council has already approved the zoning amendment for the properties to allow for this project. The applicant team has been through the demolition review process with the Historic Preservation Commission, and no delay was required. The proposal will replace the current YMCA with a modern facility, plus create affordable housing.

The adjacent uses primarily include homes and apartments along one side. While along Highland Ave, there is a mix of commercial and residential homes and apartments. This is located in an MR6 zoning district and the zoning requirements for the site were reviewed.

The community center will be entered into from Highland Ave. This entry will include a double-height glass lobby space that immediately connects to the circulation spine. The ground level will contain support spaces and the Aquatic Center, which is also double height. Along School Street, there will be the required frontage and an entrance to the below-grade employee parking. Along Highland Ave, the residential entrance to the building is set back off the street, allowing for some dimensionality for the residential entry and the healthy food program. The overall disposition of the affordable units includes one-bedroom, studio, and compact/micro units. As the building steps back, it affords space for an outdoor track and additional sports, fitness, and flexible programming, with community spaces above.

The YMCA community center is not required to have three massing options, but the residential building does. Option 1 shows a diversity of movement through a multi-use massing with complementary but distinctly separate massing moves. In this option, the glazing turns and opens onto 95 Highland at the corner. It also includes a squared-off cornice top at the roof. The residential building includes a small façade step to differentiate the massing of the residential building from the community center with expanding façade breaks that move across the buildings. Option 2 has a delicate sliding massing motif, gradually expanding across the façade. This will have sliding boxes for the residential building and the community center building which expand and overlap through the façade. The massing motif will move up Highland in one direction and down Highland in the other, culminating in a double-height lobby. This is also expressed along the roofline of the building. Option 3, which is the preferred option, includes a unified massing concept running across both buildings. This serves to not only unify the façade across the residential and community center buildings, but also create a clear base, middle, and top. This creates a motif that is dynamic and meant to reflect the energy, while also creating moments of a tension and compression in the middle block. The motif is echoed across the cornice line of the building.

In terms of the façade options, the Façade Option 1 is a brick masonry with a gradient rhythm brick rain screen moving across the façade. Façade Option 2 is a glass fiber reinforced concrete, with a large format rhythmic façade and a flexible jointing pattern. Façade Option 3, the preferred option, is a terracotta profile to create a fabric that allows for different types of openings to adjust and carve away at the cornice line. This is a modular system, with different widths and configurations to obtain a weave and texture across the façade, with clear breaks along the face of the building. The glass will be turned around the corner partially, but not all the way to the back to the building. The building will step back twice to create some relief along Highland Ave. The façade fins will gradually get deeper when moving across the façade to accentuate and give character to the taut, glassy façade. These will eventually dissolve and turn into a glass frit, allowing for light and visual privacy for the ground-level aquatic center.

There is an element of historic preservation associated with the project. The applicant team has been in front of the Historical Preservation Committee and will be preserving seven primary building elements. These will be displayed in prominent areas in the new building. The most important being a tablature which will be recreated and reproduced in a similar size and format and hung inside the main lobby.

At the main entrance to the YMCA along Highland Ave, a small plaza will be created with a sculptural bench, providing some seating for pickup and drop-off. A sidewalk and furnishing zone are also proposed along the Highland Ave frontage, designed per Somerville's guidelines, with a 6' furnishing zone and 6' wide sidewalk. There will be a small, planted buffer between the building and the sidewalk with low growing shrubs and perennials. There is one substantial street tree that the applicant team intends to save, while the rest of the street trees along Highland will likely be replaced with new street trees. Bike racks are proposed in the furnishing zone. The double door to the residential building will be set back off the sidewalk with a small entry plaza. The west side of the site will be fully paved, facilitating egress and access to the rear yard, which is a shared open space for residents. This area will have some seating built in, and there will be some screening for the neighbors. There will be a fence and gate at the top of a set of stairs to separate the residential zone from the YMCA space. The YMCA space is programmed similarly to the residential area with some limited built-in bench seating to allow for flexibility. There will be a narrow paved pathway providing accessible egress and fire access to the north side of the building. Along the School Street frontage, there will be a vehicular entrance to the parking garage. The applicant team will maintain the existing sidewalk to keep continuity. The applicant team is proposing a fence on all three sides of the building that abuts neighbors. A multi-use roof deck, with a track, benches, and planters are also being proposed.

The Commission asked if the first façade option includes any brick recycled from the original building. The applicant team stated that this is not being proposed at this time.

The Commission noted that the dogleg down School Street feels that it is being designed by zoning instead of logic. It would be nice to see this area be made to feel more friendly and scaled down. It would be nice if zoning could allow for additional programming space at the front of the civic building. The window patterning could be a bit more regular, due to the proposed swoop of the building. Some Commissioners expressed a preference for Façade

Option 2. The Commission suggested that the portion of the building facing School Street could be three-stories, with a reveal between it and the main portion of the building. Also, due to the transformer location, there will be approximately two stories of blank facade, both facing 95 Highland and School Street. This area would benefit from the same level of detail and refinement as the main body of the building. The Commission expressed some concern with the continuous strip of glass proposed along the aquatic center. There may be too much similarity between the entrances of the residential building and main YMCA building. A different treatment could be considered. There could be additional refinement at the base of the building to help differentiate components in the swoop motif. The Commission noted that the track on the upper portion of the building feels a bit constrained in some areas and carrying the curve around the corner could help with that while softening the building. The applicant team noted that there could be some issues in terms of zoning with this suggestion, but it could be further examined.

In terms of the massing options, the applicant team stated that Option 2 likely allows for the most variation. This could be adapted into Option 3, which has a rhythm of façade breaks built into the base and also expressed at the top of the building. This would work to refine the top of the building and calm down the massing.

The Commission stated that the plan is trying to show some design variety on the building front, but the streetscape feels very regular the entire way. There could be an opportunity for those two to speak to each other a bit more directly.

The Commission discussed the following design guidance, including the scaling down of the School Street dogleg, detailing and fenestration of the building with the same level of detailing as the main body, giving the residential building entrance differentiation in character, articulating details between the ground floor of the buildings per the design guidelines, softening and reducing the apparent mass of the upper stories, and providing more details on materiality and planting along the streetscape. There was agreement that the massing Option 3 would be preferred, once adapted as discussed. It was noted that the vote on the massing only relates to the residential building.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to continue 101 Highland Ave and 107 Highland Ave to 23 December 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

DESIGN REVIEW: 107 Highland Ave – YMCA

This item was addressed concurrently with the previous agenda item and continued to 23 December 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

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 UrbanDesign@somervillema.gov.