



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

4 DECEMBER 2025 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	Present	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	Present	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	Present	
Michael McNeley	Member	Present	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	Present	
Lynn Richards	Member	Present	

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

The meeting was called to order at 6:01pm and adjourned at 7:52pm.

PUBLIC HEARING: 379 Somerville Ave
(continued from 20 November 2025)

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 15 January 2026, at request of the applicant.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: Zoning Amendments

- Mayor Ballantyne requesting ordainment of an amendment to Sections 10.10.3, 15.1.2, 15.1.6, 15.1.8, 15.2.1, 15.2.2, 15.2.3, 15.2.4, 15.3.1, 15.3.2, and 15.5.2 of the Zoning Ordinance to make pre-submittal meetings optional for most permits and to improve clarity and consistency.

Staff reviewed the requested amendment. This proposal would make pre-submittal meetings optional for Special Permits, Site Plan Approvals, Hardship Variances, Land Plotting, and Wireless Communications. The Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) would still require pre-submittal meetings as part of the application process for Subdivisions and Master Plan Special Permits. In 2024, 42% of pre-submittal meetings involved people familiar with the SZO or professionals in their field, such as design firms, architects, engineers, contractors, attorneys, etc. In 2025, this increased to 64%, and 17% of all pre-submittal meetings were from one law firm. Staff noted that the required pre-submittal meetings for all applications may have been a step too far and applicants will still be able to request a pre-submittal meeting if they would like one. Pre-submittal meetings are currently the first step in the pre-application process. This adds some time to the overall permitting process. This proposal will not take away any opportunity for the public to comment on a project.

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

There were no Board comments at this time.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to recommend adoption of this proposal to the Land Use Committee.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

PUBLIC HEARING: Zoning Amendments

- Mayor Ballantyne requesting ordainment of an amendment to Tables 4.1.13, 4.2.13, 4.3.13, 4.3.13, 4.3.13, 4.4.13, 5.1.14, 7.2.7, 7.4.8, 8.4.16 (c), and 9.1.1 of the Zoning Ordinance to permit Home-Based Child Day Care accessory uses and make corrections.

Staff reviewed the requested amendment. The State of Massachusetts amended Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40A, Section 3, which tells the City what needs to be permitted. The change added family childcare homes and large family childcare homes to be permitted in all districts where residential housing is allowed. This amendment makes changes to the Mid-Rise and High-Rise zoning districts.

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

There were no Board comments at this time.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to recommend adoption of this proposal to the Land Use Committee.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

PUBLIC HEARING: Zoning Amendments

- 12 registered voters requesting a Zoning Map Amendment to change the zoning district of 363 Highland Avenue from Mid-Rise 4 (MR4) to Mid-Rise 5 (MR5) and from MR4 to Mid-Rise 6 (MR6), and 110 Willow Avenue MR4 to MR6.

The applicant team explained that the proposal is to change the zoning map for 363 Highland Ave, along with the NSTAR facility at 110 Willow Ave, which is across Whipple Street from 363 Highland Ave. The applicant team has met with the Davis Square Neighborhood Council (DSNC) more than once, and they have been overwhelmingly in support of this map change. The applicant team was also before the Land Use Committee on 6 November 2025 and they were very supportive. The current zoning on the site is MR4 and Civic. The proposal is to change this to a combination of MR6, from Willow Ave to Whipple including the parking lot in front of it, and for Highland Ave to be MR5 due to it being more of a pedestrian street.

The applicant team explained that the developers have found that it is not viable to redevelop the existing site at the current four-story limit. This zoning map change would allow for more housing in Davis Square and will provide an ability for the utility to redevelop or sell its property, if it so chooses. Even if the map change is voted in favor of, the project would still need Site Plan Approval and a Special Permit.

Staff stated that the Planning, Preservation, and Zoning (PPZ) Division is supportive of this amendment.

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

Some Board members expressed concern regarding the proposed amendment to the 110 Willow Ave property. It was noted that the listing of this parcel as Civic was likely intentional, reflecting both its current use and its future

potential. There are very few parcels of scale in the City that can accommodate new green space, new utility infrastructure, and any number of civic functions. Changing the zoning of the 110 Willow Ave parcel from Civic to MR6 creates financial incentives that work against the City's ability to repurpose it for important planning and infrastructure uses. The applicant team stated that the email from the DSNC stated that at its 27 October 2025 meeting, the membership of the DSNC voted to provide a statement in support of the zoning change at 363 Highland Ave and 110 Willow Ave. The DSNC is supportive of the upzoning of the blighted 110 Willow Ave property, which will hopefully incentivize some more desirable development.

Other Board members spoke to the level of blight at the 110 Willow Ave property and the importance for the proposed upzoning.

Some Board members asked about potential ramifications from this proposal in terms of the utility use. The applicant team stated that the use is currently on the site and can continue to exist, whether or not the zoning is changed. The utility seems to have no intention of moving, but the proposal would allow for the site to be cleaned up.

Some Board members spoke about the previous comprehensive zoning overhaul. This was a multi-year, multi-stage process involving every neighborhood group and elected officials to make sure that there was an idea as to what the comprehensive plan should look like, parcel by parcel. The only other area zoned MR6 in Davis Square is Ciampa Manor and the only other MR6 area in the City is in the heart of Union Square. This amendment would be a significant diversion from a multi-year process that engaged hundreds of people to come to a compromise. This is an owner-led zoning proposal, which leads to some concern, as the owners knew they purchased an MR4 parcel. This civic space property was done intentionally. This site is zoned in a way that it could potentially be integrated into the community path as a civic space.

Some Board members noted that the MR4 designation was potentially decided on ten years ago and places evolve and change over time. Other Board members noted that this is a parcel that would have been captured in the original iteration of the Davis Square Neighborhood Plan. The 2019 zoning was supposed to be updated to reflect the additional and ongoing discussion regarding the appropriate level of density for much of Davis Square. The changes to density should not happen on a piecemeal map change basis, because this is work that should be comprehensively done. There was a request for Staff to reconsider the Davis Square Commercial Area Plan as it draws a small circle and could be expanded upon.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted (5-1), with Chair Capuano against, to make a negative recommendation on this amendment, noting that the Board is in favor of MR6 zoning for the 363 Highland Avenue parcel, if this were to be resubmitted without the map change to 110 Willow Avenue.

RESULT:	NEGATIVE RECOMMENDATION
----------------	--------------------------------

OTHER BUSINESS: Chapter 91 Approval – Pedestrian Bridge at Draw Seven Park

It was noted that, according to the applicable regulation, the Board would have had 45 days since receipt of the submission by MADOT to make a specific recommendation. This time period likely lapsed 45 days from 19 August 2025.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to acknowledge that the Board has received the materials submitted by the Commonwealth in support of the application for the Chapter 91 bridge.

RESULT:	MATERIALS RECEIVED
----------------	---------------------------

PUBLIC HEARING: 152-158 Broadway

The applicant team explained that the request is for a Special Permit under Section 9.1.7.D to open btone FITNESS, a boutique Pilates fitness studio, in approximately 2,100 s.f. of the newly constructed, ground floor commercial space at 158 Broadway, which is part of the larger mixed-use development that was recently built. This has been a vacant space since it was constructed. The proposed use falls under the definition of a Formula Business.

The Board asked how many other Pilates studios there are in East Somerville or Union Square. The applicant team stated that there are not many around this area and this business will be much more approachable in terms of pricing.

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

There were no Board comments at this time.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to approve, with the conditions laid out in the Staff Memo, the request to establish a Formula Business principal use in the Mid-Rise 5 zoning district.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 44 White Street

(continued from 20 November 2025)

The applicant team stated that the plans have been revised to include nine (9) bike parking spaces, as previously discussed. Five (5) of the spaces will be located in the bike room and four (4) will be outside of the building.

The Board reviewed comments from the Mobility Division, which stated that it does not have the authority to review non-compliant bike parking as part of the application. Any review of non-compliant items would need to be done through a Hardship Variance. As the applicant has met the minimum requirements for long-term parking, they can choose to provide additional short-term parking, which may make it easier to provide additional spaces.

Some Board members stated that this project is being presented as one for a weekend-away-type car use. However, this is inconsistent with what is envisioned for this area and is also inconsistent with what the Board has strived for in new neighborhood planning. This project is the epitome of a location that needs zero parking. Other Board members noted that the spaces as proposed, with four (4) outside the building, are different from nine (9) spaces located inside the building.

Staff noted that the revised plan was not submitted prior to this evening and has not been reviewed for zoning compliance by the Inspectional Services Department (ISD). The Zoning Review Planner has stated that any new spaces need to be compliant with the zoning regulations. The applicant team stated that this is correct. It was explained that the five (5) indoor spaces maxed out the bicycle room in terms of long-term bicycle parking spaces. Those spaces are zoning compliant in terms of the percentage of tandem bicycle spaces and spaces not at ground level. In terms of being zoning compliant for short-term bicycle parking spaces, these all need to be at ground level and have some type of physical barrier to any vehicles. These spaces were not able to be accommodated for inside the garage and so were placed outside the building.

The Board stated that this revised plan needs to be reviewed for zoning compliance prior to a vote. The Board asked about outlets for e-bikes in the indoor bike parking area. The applicant team stated that there will be outlets at each indoor bike parking space. The Board noted that it may be difficult to carry e-bikes up two flights of stairs.

There was discussion regarding transportation fluency to allow for both bike and car trips as needed. Options that allow for the greatest number of choices should be considered.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 18 December 2025.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Board Administration Open Discussion

The Board agreed to continue this discussion to a later date.

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