



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

13 JANUARY 2026 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>Absent</i>	
Deborah Fennick	Member	<i>Present</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)

Estello Raganit, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:08pm and adjourned at 8:37pm.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the 28 October 2025 and 25 November 2025 meeting minutes.

RESULT:

APPROVED

DESIGN RECOMMENDATION: 205 Broadway

The Commission reviewed the written recommendation as completed by Staff. The Commission noted that one of the directions reads that the applicant should study the corner column and consider a consistent brick cladding for all columns of the building. This is something that needs to be provided, not simply studied, for consistency with the design guidelines that apply to this project.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATION: 6 Wheatland Street

The Commission reviewed the written recommendation as completed by Staff.

DESIGN REVIEW: 15 Elm & 2 Porter Street

The applicant team explained this is currently a five-unit building with two commercial spaces. The proposal includes removal of part of the back of the building to increase the outdoor spaces, plus a deck space in the front. The intention is to match the three floors with the setback on the front wall, and not keep the current façade, which comes up to the street. Native tree plantings are proposed. The goal is to unify the front of the building

while also modernizing the building. The Mobility Management Plan (MMP) has been updated, including adding accesses, bike ramps, bike storage and parking, items for the public way, and closed bike coverage. A current curb cut at the back patio will be removed as part of the project. The corner area will remain commercial, but the middle entrance unit will become residential.

Staff explained that there is not a design recommendation for this project in the file. The last submission for this project was a Planning Board item in 2022.

The Commission asked about an existing duct on the side street. The applicant team stated that this would be maintained pending a potential tenant. This could potentially be run inside the building, if needed. The Commission noted that this should be a design guidance item.

The Commission expressed concern with the submitted landscape plan. An appropriate plan including materiality, ground cover, the harvested rainwater proposal, and streetscape should be submitted. The green score should also be reviewed.

The applicant team reviewed three proposed façade options. The Commission suggested that material palettes be submitted for these options.

Following a motion by Member Fennick, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to continue the hearing for 15 Elm & 2 Porter Street.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

DESIGN REVIEW: 120-132 Middlesex Avenue

Member Arbaugh recused himself from this item.

The applicant team reviewed two proposed façade types, which are similar materials in different colors, as well as a definition at the base of the building and the penthouse. There is a two-story penthouse on top of the building. A glazed building façade is proposed to be continued over the lower of the two penthouse levels to reduce the proportion of the top penthouse level. The first façade type includes a combination of opaque metal panels, vertical metal fins, vision glass, and spandrel glass. The second façade type proposed along the west side and north sides, is almost all different types of glass, including spandrel glass areas which are opaque with insulation behind them and vision glass areas. Material specifications include white mica-colored metal panels, textured faux zinc finishes, and various glass types.

In terms of the two façades proposed, the applicant team explained that this is to help sweep around the corner of the building and articulate the faces of the building in different ways. The fins are looking to achieve relief and variability as the building reacts to sun and shadow throughout the day, in keeping with the design guideline requirements of depth within the façade.

The Commission discussed that there appears to be a monotone color palette proposed. A warmer, richer color could be introduced by cladding the hanging boxes in a different type of metal. This could also be potentially carried through the balconies.

Following a motion by Member Fennick, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to recommend the façade treatment presented.

Following a motion by Member Talun, seconded by Member Fennick, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) that the proposal meets the design guidelines.

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

- To propose warmer cladding material at the undersides and sides of the arcade area, hanging boxes and potential balconies
- No illumination of the external face of the penthouse
- Minimize the glare of the lighting on the face of the glass at the interstitial floors
- Curved glass on the second floor

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

DESIGN REVIEW: 101 Highland Avenue

This item was addressed concurrently with the item for 107 Highland Avenue.

The applicant team explained that two applications were filed, one for the YMCA Community Center building at 101 Highland Ave and the other for an all-affordable residential building at 107 Highland Ave. These are adjoining properties and the projects are being presented simultaneously. The City Council has already approved zoning changes for the properties to allow for this project. The project has been through the demolition review process with the Historic Preservation Commission, and no demo delay was imposed. The team has met with neighborhood groups and had a Neighborhood Meeting.

The applicant team explained that feedback received from the Commission at the last meeting involved the proposed massing. Amongst the three building designs presented, the team believes that the Cladding Option 3 was the desired choice. Regarding the massing, design, and character of the wing of the building that touches School Street, there was discussion around the detail along the first level, which includes a broad open design. There was discussion regarding the amount of variation and breaks along those façades and a request for additional information and study including a differentiation distinction for the main entry. For the primary Community Center YMCA façade, there was a request for additional study about the fenestration and the cladding, with an eye towards mitigating or reducing the overall look and feel of that scale. There was also a request for additional information on the landscaping.

The applicant team explained that, since the last meeting, a response was received from Eversource regarding the vault design. The second-story vault in the façade has been removed, and the building will instead utilize the vault in a different part of the project which is not available from the street. In terms of the character of the façade, and how it connects with City Hall, there is some detailing over the entry with the bay window. Moving up School Street towards Highland Ave, the scale of the windows has been broken down to a more residentially scaled window feel. The glass railing at the top has been changed to a picket railing. There will be a transition from a varied terracotta façade to a more simplified and composed façade language along School Street. The primary, level 1 façade is a major component of the overall massing of the building which unifies the volumes above and provides for an open, inviting glass façade along the base. The distinctive swoop opens up the building and guides people to either the YMCA or the residential entry. Towards each end of the façade, projecting metal fins grow in depth and width to reinforce the movement. This then overlaps with the fritted glass at the Aquatic Center in the middle of the building, which allows for a level of privacy and light. There will be a cleaner entry into the building, including benches and the associated canopy elements.

The applicant team stated that there was also a set of questions regarding differentiation between the YMCA building and the residential building. An alternate entry design was studied which has a more solid character to it, but this seemed to be too far out of character with the rest of the building. In terms of the primary YMCA

community center façade, the proposed terracotta cladding type has a lot of interest and utility, but there were questions regarding the scale of the windows and the up and down movement. These items were studied and it was determined that the preference was a mixture of larger and medium-sized openings of different sizes and formats to create a patchwork across the building. This will modulate movement across the façade and allow for various uses, as well as help create an active façade. The upper levels of the building were also studied and options were modeled out.

The Commission asked about the materiality of the 101 Highland Ave affordable housing building. The applicant team explained that there will be a glass storefront base, metal panel swoop, and Hardie panel. There will be some recessed detailing around the windows and a panel which would also be painted for a uniform look across the top.

The applicant team reviewed the proposed landscape design, which includes rectilinear elements, light-colored pavement to limit heat island impacts, and linear furnishings. A wooden swoop bench will respond to the swoop of the building. There are planting designs for both the front and back of the building which emphasize the use of flowering perennials and pollinator plants. A 30" American Elm on the corner will be preserved. Any trees proposed to be removed will be replaced with additional street trees. Amenity spaces are proposed on the ground level and an amenity deck is proposed over the four-story garage entrance portion, to allow for programming around the perimeter of the building.

The Commission noted that the massing is quite interesting. There were comments that the proposed fenestration may be too playful and random. There could be more unification for the four-story element and the main building. The design is successful in not dividing the street level. There could be an intentionality to the variation proposed.

The Commission asked about the dark vertical reveal lines. The applicant team explained that the façade design guidelines note that, for façades longer than 200', there should be a clear vertical break along the façade. The idea behind the proposed massing and the swoop is all about movement and a rhythm across the façade.

The Commission stated a three-story study would have been nice. The four-story building still feels like an appendage. Breaking the cornice line could make it distinct and allow for a terrace at a lower floor. The façade gradient shown for the ground floor does not seem echoed throughout the design. Mullion width could be considered to make this more apparent.

The Commission expressed concern regarding the 3' wide planter box providing the height necessary along the frontage. Some of the other planters along the ground floor could either be expanded or eliminated.

The Commission discussed studying the curving of the corners of the top two floors to reduce the apparent mass, but also to make the architectural concept more three-dimensional. This may also make the track more functional. The applicant team stated that this was not studied as sculpting the corners would go beyond the maximum setbacks for zoning.

The Commission agreed to address and vote on the 107 Highland Ave project but to hear an additional presentation regarding the 101 Highland Ave project, including a primary study regarding a revised terracotta façade, the Highland Avenue side and how it turns the corner, and any update to the School Street facade which the design team chooses to make.

Following a motion by Member Fennick, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to continue the 101 Highland Avenue project to 10 February 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

DESIGN REVIEW: 107 Highland Avenue

This item was addressed concurrently with the item for 101 Highland Avenue.

Following a motion by Member Talun, seconded by Member Fennick, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend the preferred massing option for 107 Highland Avenue.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Talun, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend the preferred façade option for 107 Highland Avenue.

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Fennick, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) that the project at 107 Highland Avenue meets the design guidelines.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend the additional design guidance to expand or remove the plant bed in front of the entry at 107 Highland.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

DESIGN REVIEW: 359 Lowell Street

The applicant team explained that the existing building is a two-story, mixed-use structure. The proposal is to add two more floors in order to make it a 15-unit residential building. The proposal includes lofts, a basement office, and limited fenestration due to tight property lines. The façade options were reviewed.

The Commission stated that the proposed roof space will allow for space and planting ability. A landscape architect's review of the plan was suggested. There is room for additional species diversity. It is unclear how some of the raised planters will be accessed.

The Commission noted that it is hard to evaluate the façade alternatives without a site plan context submitted. The City's zoning has a minimum fenestration requirement that should be considered. This project may need to be worked on with Staff.

Following a motion by Member Talun, seconded by Member Fennick, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to continue 359 Lowell Street to a later date.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Website Membership List Update

Staff stated that the website membership list has been updated.

OTHER BUSINESS: 2026 Meeting Attendance

Staff reminded Commission members to respond to Staff with their availability for 2026 meetings. The Commission acknowledged this reminder.

NOTICE: These minutes constitute a summary of the votes and key discussions at this meeting. A recording of these proceedings can be found online here: [Agendas, Minutes, & More.](#)