



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

10 FEBRUARY 2026 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Sarah Lewis	Co-Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Estello Raganit	Co-Chair	<i>Absent</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), Josh Eckhart-Lee (Office of Sustainability & Environment); Elyse Belarge (Office of Sustainability & Environment)

Sarah Lewis, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:06pm and adjourned at 7:39pm.

OTHER BUSINESS: Introduction to the Office of Sustainability & Environment

Staff presented information about the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE). There was a presentation regarding the Climate Forward Plan, which includes 77 actions across five topic areas and the integration of climate regulations into the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO). There was discussion regarding ongoing efforts to update the SZO to align with the Specialized Stretch Energy code. Staff discussed updates to Somerville's sustainability initiatives, focusing on addressing State preemption concerns and enhancing sustainability goals. They highlighted a gap analysis conducted with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and Tufts University, which identified areas for updating zoning code and engineering regulations. Additionally, there are efforts to encourage fossil fuel-free construction, including permit streamlining and incentivizing oversized electrical capacity to prevent transformer-related issues. The team plans to compile recommendations from the gap analysis and align them with priorities from other departments before launching a broader public engagement campaign in the spring of 2026. Commissioners are invited to provide input on sustainability concerns.

The Commission noted ways that it could help integrate sustainability into early-stage project reviews, such as revising design guidelines to consider solar orientation and embodied carbon. The intent of the Green Score and what is actually being produced could be further considered.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATION: 107 Highland Avenue

The Commission reviewed the written recommendation as completed by Staff.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATION: 120 Middlesex

The Commission reviewed the written recommendation as completed by Staff. The Commission noted that one of the recommended notes is for the use of curved glass at the second floor. It should be clarified that this was as

shown in the rendering presented. The Commission was not asking for curved glass across the entire second floor. Also, some updates to the template and spelling of certain names were requested.

DESIGN REVIEW: 101 Highland Avenue

The applicant team explained that the project was before the Commission on 25 November 2025 and on 13 January 2026, for two applications, one for the 101 Highland Ave Community Center YMCA building and the other for the 107 Highland Ave affordable housing building. On January 13th, the Commission unanimously approved the design and massing for the affordable housing building at 107 Highland Ave. The design for 101 Highland Ave shows the double-height aquatic area stacked below the double-height basketball court which has an interior track that bisects the space. There will also be a double-height lobby space, with childcare on the third floor, and a fitness center on the fourth floor.

The applicant team noted that updates to the plan sought to refine the façade and reduce the overall window count. There are fewer windows proposed overall, which better balances out the façade. The new design introduces larger windows into the larger spaces of the basketball court and the aquatic center. The façade, in its refined form, is intended to respond to the character, mission, and concept behind the building. This active and dynamic façade is intended to evoke a sense of playfulness and fun which is inherent in the building. The material palette and the use of terracotta is directly intended to mark this building as a civic building, part of the Civic Corps along Highland Avenue. It is important for this building to have its own identity which expresses transparency, playfulness, movement, and a connection to the community, not only at the base, but also at other levels of the building. Introducing some larger format windows and consolidating the overall number of windows for the building is most appropriate for this project.

The applicant team explained that the update affords a balance across the façade. The omnidirectional, playful nature of the façade allows for a layout that complements, rather than drawing the eye away from, the large massing. This works to organize the entire building and builds it from the ground up with a strong base, middle, and top. The team considered pulling the color out of the building but felt strongly about leaving it at this time. This is not a final color selection or palette, but colorful elements will accentuate the playfulness and movement across the façade. The applicant team reviewed the Commission's suggestion regarding the appropriateness of bringing the terracotta across to directly connect to the School Street façade. Pulling it back was a bit much for both the design and project team, as this would introduce yet another façade type. As there is a break on Highland Ave between the residential building and the YMCA Community Center, it made sense to introduce a strong break while also adjusting the cornice level of the School St façade in order to establish this as its own building and to mitigate the underlying massing.

The Commission noted the attention to detail in the design. This building will be unique and dynamic. They noted that it was nice to hear the similarity in materiality referenced to the Civic block next door.

Following a motion by Member Arbaugh, seconded by Member Pavlinic, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend the preferred façade as presented.

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

Following a motion by Member Pavlinic, seconded by Member Arbaugh, the Commission voted unanimously (4-0) to recommend additional design guidance:

- Related to the ground floor and the glass façade, it will be important to ensure adequate variation in the mullion width, depth of caps, etc. to achieve the design concept of movement and to achieve design guideline J.

- The detailing of the vertical reveals of the building should be considered to make sure they do not overwhelm the variation in the window pattern.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

OTHER BUSINESS: In-Person Meetings

Staff explained that the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning (PPZ) Division does not currently have adequate staffing to consider in-person meetings for each Board/Commission, and there is still a hybrid option required. There would need to be 3-4 Commissioners available in person in order to hold an in-person meeting. This will continue to be revisited in the future.

The Commission noted that this has been a five year request. They noted that it is frustrating to hear that this basic request continues to not be met and it needs to be clear that this is a priority for the Commission. The Commission would operate more effectively in-person for some meetings. The Commission suggested a communication to the administration for this request. The Commission also suggested setting criteria for which projects would be reviewed in-person and a goal timeline of when to meet in-person, such as quarterly.

The Commission targeted 24 March 2026 as its first in-person meeting date. Staff stated that there would likely not be enough staffing by that time in order to hold an in-person meeting. The Commission noted that they would still like to target the date of March 24th.

The Commission asked if there is a plan for an evaluation of the current zoning and how it is working. Staff noted that this is part of the 5-Year Zoning Review project.

OTHER BUSINESS: 2026 Meeting Attendance

Staff reminded the Commission to respond via email with their 2026 availability for meeting attendance. 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.](#)