



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

18 FEBRUARY 2026 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Susan Fontano	Chair	<i>Absent</i>	
Anne Brockelman	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Olivia Mobayed	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Ann Fullerton	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Zachary Zarembo	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Brian Cook	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	
Sisia Daglian	Alt. Member	<i>Absent</i>	

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

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 8:00pm.

Vice Chair Brockelman sat as the Acting Chair. Member Fullerton sat as Acting Clerk.

PUBLIC HEARING: 12 Linden Street (ZP25-000112)

(continued from 4 February 2026)

The applicant team explained that 10-12 Linden Street is a double lot. It is not uncommon to have a driveway on each side with parking. The building was renovated several years ago and converted to condominiums. The left and right sides mirror each other, and both look like driveways. The owner believed he was buying a unit with a parking space, but that there may have been a curb cut matter to deal with, only to later find out that it actually requires a Hardship Variance. Nearby, 35-37 Linden St has the same exact condition, with a curb cut on the left side of the building and a curb cut on the right side of the building. The Condominium Association supports the owner in obtaining a curb cut. The applicant team stated that this issue needs to be resolved, no matter the owner.

The Board asked if the condo unit, when purchased, came with a deeded parking space. The applicant team stated that it did not and there should have been more discussion at that time. In conversations with Staff, the owner agreed that he would not park within 20' of the front yard and this is included on the plan.

The Board asked if the unit is eligible for an on-street parking permit. The applicant team stated that it is though the applicant has not looked into this further. The Board noted that the similar example from down the street includes a curb cut that has been in existence for at least 14 years. This is a transit zone, which was established in 2022. The applicant team stated that this is a unique situation. The property reads as a parking space with a drive aisle. There are no parking maximums or minimums in the Urban Residence (UR) zoning district.

The Board asked about the measurement between the two curb cuts. The applicant team responded that it is approximately 36'.

Acting Chair Brockelman opened public testimony.

Courtney Pollack (14 Linden Street) – stated that, as the closest abutting driveway, she supports the proposal.

Seeing no additional public comments at this time, Acting Chair Brockelman closed public testimony.

The applicant team noted that the curb cut between this requested area and the abutting property would be continuous.

The Board discussed the Hardship Variance criteria. The applicant team stated that the loss of a parking space would be a financial hardship. This request does not create any parking maximum compliance issues. The Board noted that the financial hardship is unclear, as there is not currently a parking space for this unit, though the owner has been parking there anyway. The applicant team stated that the owner believed this unit came with a parking space and this was a fair mistake or assumption to make in purchasing the property. They noted that the area the owner has been parking in is deeded to the unit, though not as a parking space.

The Board asked if the owner noticed the curb existed prior to purchasing the unit. The owner stated that the curb existed at purchase but was told this would be an easy issue to address. The Board stated that this appears to be an inconvenience, but a parking space was not deeded for the unit. The owner appears to be eligible for an on-street parking space, which would be much cheaper than building a parking space. Also, there would be a loss of an on-street parking space, which would be an impact to the neighboring community. This would essentially privatize an on-street parking space and putting it on the property, rather than having it on the street, available for anyone to use. The applicant team stated that this double lot could be subdivided in the future and split into two structures, each having its own curb cut, which would lead to the same issue. Also, it is unclear what the owner will do if the Hardship Variance is denied. The easiest solution is to add a curb cut instead of ripping out the existing hardscape and replanting the area.

The Board noted that it was likely clear that this was not an immediate parking spot when purchasing the property and another owner may have not made this into a parking area. However, the lot is wide enough to support the addition of a driveway and combining this with the curb cut next door makes sense. This would limit the amount of curb reduction needed. There may be a hardship case for this owner.

The Board reviewed the Hardship Variance criteria. First, in terms of special circumstances related to soil conditions, shape, or topography of the parcel, this is a double-wide lot with a side-by-side multi-family unit on it. There is enough width between the right-hand boundary and the side of the building to fit a compliant driveway. For criterion 2, literal enforcement would create an impact to the family in terms of the livability of the home. In terms of criterion 3, the substantial detriment to the public good without nullifying or substantially derogating from the intent of the purpose of the UR District, this would be a limited driveway combined with an already existing curb cut. This will insubstantially impact the neighborhood and reduce the curb cut as minimally as possible.

Other Board members noted that there are multiple other properties in the neighborhood with a similar setup which do not have a second curb cut. This property is uniquely wide, but there are nearby units with a similar layout with the amount of space needed on either side of the building which do not have a second parking area. For the second criterion, there does not seem to be an impact if the owner is still able to park their car within the immediate vicinity of the property in terms of inconvenience. In terms of the value of their condo based on what they had interpreted regarding a parking space, this may be a different story. This area is designated as a transit zone, specifically because it has density, walkability, and multi-modal access. This does not seem like a unique case for the neighborhood.

The Board noted that the symmetry of the way the house sits on the lot could lead one to assume that the site plan would be symmetrical as well. It seems to be an anomaly not to have a curb cut and driveway on both sides.

It was noted that all four members of the Board would need to vote in favor for approval. The applicant team could continue the hearing in order to have additional voting members at a future meeting. The applicant team stated that they would request a continuance at this time and that they would work on language for the Master Deed to ensure future compliance with the 20' front yard parking requirement.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Fullerton, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to continue this hearing to 18 March 2026, at request of the applicant.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 148 Morrison Avenue (ZP25-000089)

The applicant team explained that this Mansard townhouse, which is not covered by the current building code, was purchased with the intention to clean up this corner, which is across the street from the rail trail, including a three-car garage and a couple of additions. The goal is to reduce the amount of space covered by asphalt, create a small addition on the back, and dig out the basement so that it and a rear unit can be rented out long-term.

The applicant team explained that the basement space will be made into a two-bedroom apartment with its own access from the outside. Most of the windows for this unit are captured within a window well. The ground level floor complies with all of the impervious and pervious requirements and there is a garden along Morrison Avenue. The corner with Clifton Street will also be planted. Trees are included in the planting plan to re-establish the sense of an urban edge within the City. The ground floor unit is a two-story unit where the homeowners will live. At the back of the property is a two-story unit. The edge of the Mansard roof will be preserved, and the back unit has two dormers. The project includes removal of the fire escape, a raised deck elevation, and the garage. There will be a low open fence along the front of the property and an open permeable terrace between the two buildings on the site.

Acting Chair Brockelman opened public testimony.

John Golson (146 Morrison Ave) – spoke in support of the updates. However, there is a concern with the shared property line. The applicant is proposing rear additions directly on the property line. There is a shared deck in the back which is connected to the house. The plan is to demolish that portion of the house, which is fine, and rebuild it. The new plans look to add a second story to the building on that shared property line, which is perpendicular to their rear bedroom window. This is the only source of natural light into the rear of the house. A second-story height wall, 3' from the bedroom window, will impact this. Without having it on a setback, this will literally be 3' from his bedroom window.

The applicant team explained that all of the abutting lots touch one another. The intention is to bring green space back to the lot and remove much of the asphalt. The City's recommendation was that a two-story addition would meet code. There are no setback requirements for this property. The second-story addition originally had windows proposed in it, which have been removed in order to allow for privacy for the neighbors. The intention is to minimize the presence of the structure in the neighborhood. The depth of the addition is proposed at 16', though it could have been longer.

Cassie Arnaud (142 Morrison Ave) – stated that it is difficult to understand how these substantial changes will take place with the row houses all being attached. There are shared party walls. The designs look beautiful, however, the other owners have been living under a very strict historic regime, where even minor changes have not been allowed. Other owners were quite shocked at the extensive changes that the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) approved. The addition which is proposed to be demolished was of a 1.5-story height and the proposed addition will cause impacts to the abutting neighbors.

Philip Higonnet (169 Morrison Ave) – agreed that the existing garage and lot configuration are terrible. The row houses are historic, and this is noted with a plaque on the house. He noted that the location would be a great spot for a woonerf, which is a pedestrian streetscape shared by automobiles, people, and landscaping.

The applicant team noted that the plans have been before the HPC and approved. It is believed that there will still be ample light going into the abutting property. Some of the properties will get more light, based on items being removed. Additional discussions can be had with the abutters.

John Golson (146 Morrison Ave) – stated that adding a second story will block light coming into his bedroom window, which is 3’ away from the shared property line.

The Board noted that a shadow study could be completed in order to demonstrate any impacts.

The Board kept the public comment period open at this time.

The applicant team noted that this is the third public hearing for this proposal.

The Board suggested working with abutters to mitigate concerns, either using a shadow study or through other means. The Board typically likes for all neighbors to be on board with significant changes.

The Board asked about the location for the mechanical equipment. The applicant team noted that the equipment was moved from on top of the two-story addition, due to abutter concerns of the view, to a 3’ seam which is depressed between the two roofs. The Board noted that the plan drawings also show a single window over the sink in the primary unit, but the elevations show a pair of windows. The applicant team stated that a pair of windows is correct.

Seeing no additional public comments at this time, Acting Chair Brockelman closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Fullerton, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) in the matter of 148 Morrison Avenue (ZP25-000089) to approve a Special Permit based on the Staff Memo findings and discussion by the Board, including a condition that a shadow study be submitted to Staff and shared with the neighbors.

RESULT:

APPROVED

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Fullerton, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to take a brief recess until 7:40 p.m.

The meeting resumed at 7:41 p.m.

PUBLIC HEARING: 307-309 Highland Avenue (ZP25-000110)

The applicant team explained that request is for a Hardship Variance for the principal entrance orientation of an existing detached house in the Neighborhood Residence (NR) zoning district. There is a proposed lot split as a separate application which would cause the principal entrance for the remaining existing house to no longer be oriented toward a front lot line. This is one large lot with two principal structures and one accessory garage located at the corner of Highland Ave and Cherry St. This condition is not shared by others in the neighborhood. The separate application to split this into four zoning-compliant lots would mean that the house in the upper left, on the newly created Lot 1, would no longer be facing a thoroughfare, due to the creation of the other lots. The house on the lot would still abut a thoroughfare, Cherry St, but its front door would not face Cherry Street. The front door would face Highland Ave, but there will be two lots between it and the house. The applicant team stated that there is a substantial hardship due to the special circumstances of the lot because the only way for the house on Lot 1 to comply would be to evict the tenants, demolish the house, and build a new structure that faces Cherry St. Evicting the tenants and demolishing the building would not further the goals of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) or the SomerVision Strategic Plan.

The applicant team explained that the existing lot is very unique in that it contains two principal structures, which is not permitted in the NR district. The proposed lot split will achieve having one principal structure on each lot, which is fully zoning compliant, except for this one issue. The front structure has two units that are stacked and the rear structure has a separate unit, with no access to the front area. Each area of the building has their own front door. This is set back quite far from Highland Ave, more than the currently allowed maximum setback. The applicant team noted that this proposal would correct several nonconformities for both lots, while adding this one new nonconformity. They stated that there is no substantial detriment in granting this Hardship variance, and it would allow the property to be brought more into zoning compliance by eliminating the two large setbacks and the two principal structures on one lot, by splitting the lots and adding much-needed housing on Lots 2 and 3, and a backyard cottage on Lot 1. The variance would also avoid the demolition of the existing structure and the disruption that it would cause in the eviction of the tenants. As stated in the Staff Memo, granting of the requested Hardship Variance would not cause substantial detriment or substantially derogate from the intent and purpose of the NR district. It would support the broader intent of the SZO and help to preserve and enhance the existing character of Somerville's traditional housing, as well as respect the existing built form and development patterns. Therefore, the applicant team requests that the Hardship Variance for principal entrance orientation be granted.

The Board asked if the address would change to a Cherry St address, while the functioning front door would remain in the existing location. The applicant team stated that the address would be an Engineering Department question at the Building Permit stage.

Acting Chair Brockelman opened public testimony.

Audrey Orenstein (315 Highland Ave) – asked about the parking spaces where the new front door is proposed. It is already hard to navigate getting into the parking spaces on her lot based on their proximity to the ones on the lot in question.

The applicant team explained that the front doors are not proposed to move and neither is the parking. One driveway access will be removed as part of the proposal. The request is for the doors to remain as they are.

The Board asked about this procedure, as the lot split has not yet occurred. The applicant team explained that that application is pending the outcome of this hearing.

Seeing no additional public comments at this time, Acting Chair Brockelman closed public testimony.

The Board reviewed the Hardship Variance criteria. Regarding special circumstances relating to soil condition, shape, or topography of the parcel, the unusual condition is that this is a multi-building parcel, and that the existing house in question is set at the back of the parcel with its front door facing Highland Ave, not facing the closest street. Secondly, literal enforcement of the provision of the Ordinance for the district where the subject land or structure is located would involve substantial hardship, financial or otherwise. A front door could not be physically added facing Cherry Street without rebuilding a substantial part of the structure, if not completely rebuilding it. Desirable relief could be granted without causing substantial detriment to the public good and without nullifying or substantially derogating the intent and purpose of the NR district, in the fact that this is a unique condition. As long as the Engineering Department ultimately helps with the wayfinding aspect, this will not create a public realm issue.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Fullerton, seconded by Member Mobayed, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) in the matter of 307-309 Highland Ave (ZP25-000110) to approve the Hardship Variance being sought, based on the Board's discussion.

RESULT:

APPROVED

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.](#)