



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

21 MAY 2026 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	<i>Present</i>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	
Lynn Richards	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Coralie Cooper	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Lexie Payne (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Daniel Bartman (Director of Planning, Preservation, & Zoning); Kit Luster (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 9:42pm.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the 16 April 2026 meeting minutes.

RESULT:

APPROVED

OTHER BUSINESS: Executive Session

The Board entered into an Executive Session to discuss litigation strategy at 6:05pm

The Board reconvened the meeting at 6:35pm.

PUBLIC HEARING: 222 Broadway

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 16 July 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 1 McGrath Highway

This hearing was previously continued to 4 June 2026.

PUBLIC HEARING: 120 Middlesex Avenue

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 4 June 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Zoning Amendment Recommendations to the City Council

- 26 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend the Zoning Ordinance sections 3.1.8c, 3.1.9c, 3.1.10c, 3.1.13k, 3.1.13l, 3.2.12l. and 3.2.12m. (File#[26-0287](#))

The Board explained that this item allows the increased height of detached house, semi-detached house, and duplex building types in the NR zoning district from 2.5 stories to 3 stories, and to reduce restrictions on gable and shed dormers in the NR zoning district. The Board previously asked for Staff to give their perspective on this proposed amendment. Staff stated that they find themselves similarly aligned in terms of relaxing the dormer standards. Staff did not support the proposed change to the 3-story building height. Permitting buildings to have a full-height third floor nullifies the reason for having dormers in the code in the first place. Either the code needs to have half-story buildings and dormers, or full-story buildings without dormers. In reviewing properties in the City with dormer setbacks, ones with slight setbacks of 2'-3' end up creating a visual optical illusion that there is a dormer from the front view and not a full loss of the pitch roof of the house. Residents were asked their opinions on this and 90% of the responses were to relax the standards for dormers. Many people also thought that this should go further and not include a front setback. The response rate was not representative of the entire City but still represented unique opinions. Staff still advocated for a front setback of dormers from the façade, and not to include the portion of the amendment that allows semi-detached houses and detached houses to have a flat roof third floor.

The Board asked if there will be a competing amendment from the City. Staff stated that the Land Use Committee plans to amend the proposal as they see fit. This will not include the changes to number of stories for those buildings and to maintain a 15% fenestration percentage for dormers to have a front setback. The Land Use Committee awaits the Planning Board's recommendation.

The Board discussed a neutral recommendation with reflection on other proposals that may address this issue. The recommendation should include some consideration that review of the dormer ordinance is appropriate and should be done by and through the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division (PPZ) with the City Council, and with engagement of the neighborhood and other groups. There was support expressed for this process to update ordinances.

Some Board members asked about the fenestration requirement as a low impact item which could make more usable space in the dormers.

The Board asked that a null recommendation with some of the additional details be drafted.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make null recommendation, with additional thoughts to be reflected in the recommendation.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

- o Union 2 Associates, LLC requesting a Zoning Map Amendment to change the zoning district of 2 and 9 Union Square, 286, 290, and 298 Somerville Avenue from Commercial Core 5 (CC5) to Mid-Rise 6 (MR6). (File#[26-0257](#))

The Board discussed that Union Square has been subject to previous careful and diligent planning. There was concern expressed regarding this proposal being opportunistic spot zoning in response to market conditions and that it is not aligned with the longer-term strategic plan for the neighborhood. The vacancy rates for new construction in Union Square are still quite high in the residential development. Staff stated that they are not in support of changing the base zoning on this lot. An adjustment to new market conditions could be executed by US2 and the Somerville Redevelopment Authority through a Master Plan amendment.

Some Board members stated that they are not necessarily in favor of subjecting the Board to the liability for spot zoning. If this is the way that this particular subsequent purchaser of the plot wants to consider rezoning, they should have gone through the appropriate channels.

Some Board members spoke in favor of a no recommendation, while others spoke in favor of a negative recommendation.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make null recommendation, with additional thoughts to be reflected in the recommendation.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

The Board recessed until 7:30pm.

- o 29 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 3.1.12 Backyard Cottage. (File#[26-0330](#))

Staff explained that they are currently in collaboration with the Inspectional Services Division (ISD) to draft an amendment for both backyard cottages and accessory dwelling units (ADUs) that will bring the City into compliance with the ADU law at the state level. This amendment may be available by the end of the summer.

Staff explained that while ADUs could potentially increase price per square foot when built smaller, the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) does not regulate price points or require affordable housing, and developers have the choice to create rental or for-sale units. The discussion addressed concerns about lot splits, with Staff clarifying that the crowded nature of resulting developments is due to building dimensions rather than lot splitting itself, and that by-right development processes should not require extensive public hearings for compliant land divisions. Some Board members expressed opposition to lot splits based on previous history.

The Board discussed making a null recommendation with a reflection of the discussion by the Board for the Land Use Committee to consider.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make a null recommendation, as discussed.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

- o 14 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend the Zoning Ordinance Section 3.1.12 Backyard Cottage. (File#[26-0329](#))

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make a null recommendation, as discussed.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

- o 14 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 12.2.2 regarding affordable dwelling units. (File#[26-0328](#))

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make a null recommendation, as discussed.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

- o 29 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 15.7.2.d Zoning Board of Appeals Board Rules. (File#[26-0327](#))

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make a null recommendation, as discussed.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

- o Councilor Strezo, Councilor Mbah, Councilor Davis and Councilor Sait requesting an amendment to sections 2.1.1 and 3.1.12 of the Zoning Ordinances regarding Accessory Dwelling Units. (File# [26-0234](#))

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to make a null recommendation, as discussed.

RESULT:

NULL RECOMMENDATION

PUBLIC HEARING: 32 Webster Avenue

The applicant team explained that the request is for a Special Permit for residential housing within the MR4 zoning district. The site features an existing building that will be removed for the new construction. The property contains overgrown weeds and vegetation and is located in the heart of Union Square. The property also abuts the NR zoning district, which shapes much of the geometry for the building. This is not on a pedestrian street but is very close to public transit. The primary entrance will be accessible at grade on Webster Avenue and will feature new street tree plantings. There will be an egress door onto Newton Street. There will also be a transformer vault manhole that is screened and at grade. Some light wells are proposed and an outdoor area for the basement unit. The applicant team noted that the site slopes basically a full story from the top of the corner all the way to the back and a 5' setback is proposed to give some breath to the adjacent structure next door. The building will be dimensionally compliant, but two Special Permits are being sought. The design utilizes building components such as bays and balconies that extend past that setback, which is in compliance with the SZO. There is large setback to the NR zone abutters allowing for a roof deck and overlook on the fourth floor, and a common roof deck on the top floor for those units that do not have balconies. On the basement floor plan, there will be a bike room, trash room, and an amenities space. There are also three units proposed in the basement. The building will have a mix of

one-bedroom, two-bedroom, and studio units. The design repeats on the second and third floor. The fourth floor has roof decks, as well as a green roof, and larger units of 1,000 s.f.-1,200 s.f.

The applicant team explained that the project proposes Net Zero construction. The material is a through-color fiber cement panel, while trying to break up the scale of the massing. The bays project from the building as a different color. The applicant team worked with the Urban Design Commission (UDC) regarding how best to embrace the corner and make it special. The intention is to introduce a unique geometry for the balconies that invites people to look and celebrate this corner. There will be a red material that wraps around the side. The bays will be similar to a copper and brick modern interpretation of the colors. Around the back of the building, where it is facing the residential side, there will be warmer colors with a wood tone, along with some fencing, screening, and vegetation.

The applicant team also explained that one of the Special Permits is needed due to an elevator running to the penthouse. The 10' requirement cannot be met because an elevator has a 4' overrun with a hoist beam, so any elevator going to a penthouse would need relief. The design shows a small, landscaped area that is the inverse angle of the kind of upturned balcony area. Passive House buildings require a lot of insulation which adds depth to the proposed accessible common roof deck. This raises the floor height of the penthouse level, requiring 15'8" for the elevator head house. The common roof deck and green roof will be at 10'2", where the requirement is 10'. There will also be a 7'6" code minimum hallway height in that area.

In terms of streetscape improvements, the applicant team stated that there are two existing green ash trees on Webster Avenue which are proposed to be maintained. The intention is also to enlarge the tree wells to allow for a minimum of 40 s.f. The proposal is also to add an 18" high tree guard to those tree wells, which is standard per the Somerville Complete Streets Guidelines. This will create a 4' wide furnishing zone with permeable pavers, to allow for some sustainability and aesthetic of the walkway. The building will be set back 8' allowing for a wide sidewalk and bike racks on the street. Along the Newton Street side, the applicant is proposing three new street trees, following the Somerville Complete Streets guidelines. There will also be a 4' wide furnishing zone with permeable pavers, visitor bike parking racks, and 18" high tree guards. This street will have an 8' wide concrete sidewalk, allowing for a better pedestrian experience. Around the perimeter of the site, the applicant is proposing 6' wood privacy fencing, substituted along the way with some tree plantings. This will make for a smoother privacy buffer transition. There will be a vaulted transformer at the back of the site, and the utility area will be made as aesthetically pleasing as possible using a horizontal wood screen around it and permeable unit pavers for aesthetic and sustainability purposes. Around the site, there will be four additional trees, shrub plantings and perennials. Around the basement unit, there is a larger private deck area, and a planting area to respect the abutters. There will be a larger setback next to the 24 Webster Street development with trees to create a nice transition between the two properties. There will be a buffer for the trash room. Also, the roof area is located the furthest away from abutters in an act to help alleviate any privacy concerns.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Mike Katz (3 Emerson Street) – expressed concern regarding the proposed height of the building. He has solar panels on his roof and would prefer for them not to be useless. He has not seen any shadow studies to date.

Seeing no additional public comments, Chair Capuano closed public testimony. The written comment portion was left open until 9:00am on Friday 29 May 2026.

The applicant team explained that there have been two community meetings. The abutter who spoke this evening attended both sessions. Nothing in the plan materials has changed since the proposal was last presented to the community. The building is dimensionally conforming on all aspects. The elevator head house height provides handicap access to the community roof deck, leading to the relief being sought. A shadow study was completed and the results were displayed. There are existing shadows to the 3 Emerson Street property based on the existing 6-story building nearby. During winter, there will be additional shadows cast from various items.

The Board noted that this project is calibrated to meet the bare minimums across every metric. The green score is 0.26 against the 0.25 minimum. The unit count sits below a 30-unit threshold. The affordability count is exactly 20% via the partial buyout. There were community members who specifically flagged the fact that there is a school nearby and requested 2- and 3-bedroom units.

The applicant team explained that there is an efficient mix of unit numbers based on the building's footprint. Bringing a 3-bedroom unit into the mix would require the elimination of some units and the shrinking of the other units. The applicant team explained that they are adding two levels of green roof and other green features into the building footprint as much as possible. The tight footprint of the lot does not lend itself to much exterior landscape activation beyond what is currently proposed. The applicant team is not dogmatic one way or the other about providing an affordable unit versus the buyout. This is a tight project. There was discussion regarding the 12' wide sidewalk requirement and whether it should be permeable or concrete. The applicant team determined that this should be concrete for accessibility.

The Board asked about Condition #8 which effectively concedes that the Webster Avenue Bridge project may render the current design infeasible and force a Major Amendment. The neighborhood meeting report also references vague terms around coordination with MassDOT, but there have not been any documents submitted.

The applicant team stated that they have discussed this and the frontage on Webster Ave would not be affected. It would mostly affect the Newton Street side of the property by narrowing the sidewalk further, but would not render the future potential sidewalk unusable or unpassable.

The Board asked the applicant team to confirm whether or not the rooftop is accessible to the public or to residents only. The applicant team stated that the rooftop on the highest level at the penthouse is common for the building residents, and there are three private roof decks on the fourth floor.

Regarding the proposed vaulted transformer design, the applicant team explained that they cannot submit a work order to Eversource until there is an approved project. There have been preliminary discussions to date. The goal is to have a vaulted underground transformer. The Board asked if switching this from a vaulted to a stand-up transformer would trigger the plan to come back before the Board. Staff stated that the Board could add a condition specific to transformers that this type of change would automatically trigger a Major Amendment to come back before the Board.

The Board asked how the applicant plans to make the rest of the building more accessible-friendly, above and beyond what the standard code might require. The applicant team explained that the front entry is very large and fully accessible. The elevator in the building will service all floors. Every single unit is Group 1. There are not any Group 2 units in the project. 5% of the units will be for the hearing impaired. The bike room design was originally in the basement but has been moved to the ground floor to make it more easily accessible.

In response to a question from the Board, the applicant team stated that the building will have 35 bedrooms. The Board noted that allowing 29 bikes for 35 bedrooms may not be enough and asked the applicant to consider how to create more space for bike parking.

The Board expressed concern with not conditioning the trash room. The applicant team stated that the plan is for it to be open with vents on the side and there will be private trash removal, but this can be further considered.

The Board also expressed concern with the number of bedrooms per unit, and the unit count. The Board generally strongly encourages more than just two bedrooms, particularly close to transit. Some concerns were expressed with the design and colors of the structure. It looks generic and could be better articulated to fit in with the neighborhood. There are many ways the building could be effectuated to be an interesting looking building. Improvements could be made in how the building looks, how the building operates internally, and how it serves the neighborhood as a community and family-centered hub. The applicant team noted that they went back and forth with the UDC and this was the design that the UDC chose. The applicant team asked if there is a different

process that could be undertaken, as it currently seems disjointed. The Board explained that the UDC is an advisory board and City administration needs to find a better way to make the process clearer. It is unclear the best way to resolve the process issue if the UDC's recommendation does not match what the Planning Board is looking for. A suggestion was made for the applicant team to present other design options at a future meeting.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 4 June 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Board Administration Open Discussion

Nothing was discussed at this time.

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.](#)