

Chair’s Notes on Scope and Approach
Review of Multiple Member Bodies Committee

June 24, 2026

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Introduction

The review of multiple member bodies committee is a new initiative in 2026, part of a broader effort to make more regular and intentional updates to Somerville’s governing documents and processes. As the members of the first instance of this committee, we have a unique opportunity to approach this process as a blank canvas and a responsibility to define an approach that future committees might follow. Therefore, I believe that there is substantial value in explaining how we are approaching this task.

This memo describes the context and legal framework in which the committee works, lists the bodies that are outside of our scope, and proposes a framework for consideration of what remains. It is intended to guide conversation, and to be a living document through the committee’s work.

This document is solely the work of the chair and is not intended as a communication or resolution of the committee.

Situation

In November of 2025, Somerville adopted a [substantially revised charter](#). Among other changes, the city is now required to periodically review the charter itself, the code of ordinances, and Multiple Member Bodies (MMBs) within the government. The [charter language](#) says that this review will be accomplished by a special committee that will assess the “function and relevance” of the bodies, potentially recommending combining, dissolving, or even creating bodies. Bodies required under Mass General Law are explicitly out of scope and “shall not be included.”

In February of 2026, the city council passed [an ordinance](#) further refining the role of the review committee. We were convened in April and are asked to produce a report for submission to the city council no later than its first meeting in December. Our report is required to include, in addition to the items specified in the charter, a review of activities of MMBs from recent years, as well as an assessment of the ability of the city to fill appointments to each body.

The charter [defines MMB’s broadly](#), with three exclusions:

- The city council and its committees
- The school board and its subcommittees
- Advisory or task forces

That third category leaves room for interpretation. If we choose to look only at the *name* of the body, our approach will be incoherent because the bodies are inconsistently named. If we take an expansive view of the word “advisory,” we will exclude the majority of the bodies in the city and leave ourselves with very little room to work. I choose to interpret that third exclusion as: *Purely advisory bodies, convened to create a recommendation on a particular decision, which disband when their work is done, are excluded*. This is similar to the “ad-hoc” category provided by staff in their presentation at the committee’s first meeting, through there are some differences which I discuss below.

Approach

Several things have become clear to me through the committee’s early meetings as well as conversations with members of city staff, elected officials, members of MMBs, and interested community members:

- The city is awash in MMBs, most of which are optional – at least from the perspective of state law.
- These optional MMBs operate at different levels of effectiveness. Some create frustration among staff, members, and the communities they are intended to serve.
- Each MMB creates a burden of staff time and administrative overhead for the city. While I do not know how many hours per week or month are spent on the current list, it is at least several full-time equivalent roles.
- This surfeit of MMBs is beyond the ability of the administration to effectively manage, at least as presently organized.

Five Pillars

The framework known as the “five pillars of good legislation” is a useful way to approach questions of governance and law. It asks us to consider, in order:

1. **Necessity:** Is there a specific problem that needs to be solved?
2. **Effectiveness:** Would any MMB, in an ideal world, be able to address it?
3. **Practicality:** Is an effective MMB feasible?
4. **Legality:** Would the MMB’s recommendations be legal and within the city’s power to implement?
5. **Equity:** Are either the creation, or the recommendations of the MMB likely to have a negative impact on specific populations, particularly the most vulnerable?

In reviewing the list of optional MMBs, most of them fall into one of two categories:

- Bodies that advise and support a city department or function (Urban Forestry and PSUF, for example).
- Bodies that advocate for a particular constituency (Women’s Commission, Commission for Persons with Disabilities, for example).

That latter category has no clear and natural alignment against a city department, and run the risk of creating frustration both among staff and also among the volunteer committee members. This is not to say that they should not exist, but rather that our recommendations should consider the structural challenges of embedding what amount to advocacy bodies within the city.

Put another way: My inclination is to err on the side of *reducing* the roster of MMBs to those that (a) provide a clear benefit to the city and (b) can be effectively staffed and supported.

MMBs and Initial Recommendations

Required under MGL

The following bodies are out of scope because they are required under Mass General Law. In my opinion, it *will be* appropriate for the committee to comment on the activity, membership, and ability of the city to fill vacancies on these bodies. We are only barred from suggesting that the city violate MGL by dissolving them:

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
1	Affordable Housing Trust	Exclude	Mass General Law , Ordinance
2	Arts Council Board	Exclude	Mass General Law
3	Board of Assessors	Exclude	Mass General Law
4	Board of Health	Exclude	Mass General Law
5	Board of Library Trustees	Exclude	Mass General Law
6	Commission for Persons with Disabilities	Exclude	Mass General Law
7	Community Preservation Committee		
8	Conservation Commission	Exclude	Mass General Law
9	Housing Authority	Exclude	Mass General Law
10	Licensing Commission	Exclude	Mass General Law
11	Municipal Scholarship Committee	Exclude	Mass General Law
12	Planning Board	Exclude	Mass General Law
13	Redevelopment Authority	Exclude	Mass General Law
14	Retirement Board	Exclude	Mass General Law
15	Veterans Commission AKA Veterans Commission on Monuments, Memorials, and Dedications	Exclude	Mass General Law , Ordinance
16	Zoning Board of Appeals	Exclude	Mass General Law

Purely Advisory or Task Forces

The following bodies are out of scope because they are purely advisory and of limited duration:

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
17	90 Washington Street Civic Advisory Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
18	Anti-Displacement Task Force	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
19	Charter Review Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
20	Gilman Square Civic Advisory Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
21	PILOT Advisory Task Force	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
22	Police Chief Selection Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
23	Public Safety for All Task Force	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
24	Review of MMB Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
25	Safe Consumption Site Task Force	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
26	Vision Zero Task Force	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
27	Winter / Brown School Construction Advisory Group	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
28	Winter Hill School Building Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force
29	Winter Hill Urban Renewal Committee	Exclude	Advisory or Task Force

Defunct

At the committee’s first meeting, staff identified six functionally defunct bodies with no current members or record of recent meetings. I agree with the recommendation that these be formally dissolved. Only five are listed here because the PILOT task force was purely advisory and completed its work in 2025. I have chosen to list it in the prior section as being out of scope for the committee’s work.

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
30	AIDS Commission	Dissolve	Defunct. Superseded by Board of Health
31	Gang Advisory Board	Dissolve	Defunct. Approach in contrast to our current restorative justice philosophy
32	Multicultural Affairs Commission	Dissolve	Defunct. Dated language and approach. Superseded by SomerViva Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA) and the Department of Racial and Social Justice
33	Municipal Athletics Facilities Commission	Dissolve	Defunct. Superseded by the Parks and Recreation Department
34	Recreation and Youth Commission AKA Recreation Commission	Dissolve	Defunct. Superseded by Parks and Recreation Department.

Defined by Ordinance

The largest group of bodies to be considered are those that are defined by ordinance

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
35	Bicycle Advisory Committee	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
36	Biosafety Committee	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
37	Climate Action Commission AKA Commission on Energy Use and Climate Change	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
38	Condominium Review Board	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
39	Council On Aging AKA Council on Aging Board AKA Council for Aging Persons	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
40	Election Commission AKA Board of Election Commissioners	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
41	Ethics Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
42	Fair Housing Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
43	Historic Preservation Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
44	Human Rights Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
45	Memorialization Committee	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
46	Municipal Compensation Advisory Board	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
47	Municipal Job Creation and Retention Fund	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
48	Traffic Board	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
49	Traffic Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
50	Urban Design Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
51	Urban Forestry Committee	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
52	Wage Theft Advisory Committee	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance
53	Women’s Commission	Discuss	Defined by Ordinance

Not Defined by Ordinance

At the committee's first meeting, staff presented slides listing certain bodies as "ad-hoc." While there is strong overlap between the bodies listed on that slide and the purely advisory list above, I am suggesting that four bodies from the "ad-hoc" slide be included for consideration by the committee. I suspect that these were included in the "ad-hoc" list because they are not defined under ordinance. In my opinion, the definition of MMBs in the charter is sufficiently broad to include these bodies. They appear on the city website, members have been approved by the city council, they operate under open meeting law, they consume staff time, and they publish agendas and minutes.

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
54	Appointments Advisory Committee	Discuss	Persistent membership and mission
55	Armory Advisory Committee	Discuss	Persistent membership and mission
56	Children's Cabinet AKA Young Somerville Advisory Group	Discuss	Persistent membership and mission
57	Emergency Management Working Group	Discuss	Mentioned on website
58	Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee	Discuss	Persistent membership and mission

Potential New Bodies

The committee's remit includes suggesting the creation of new MMBs. As a first step towards that, the following bodies have been discussed or suggested either at recent city council meetings or in private conversations with residents and city staff. I include them here as a reminder for future discussion, not as an endorsement or recommendation.

	Body	Suggestion	Reason
59	Board of Water Commissioners	Discuss	Mentioned at city council
60	LGBTQ Commission	Discuss	Personal communication
61	Police Oversight Commission	Discuss	Requested by city council resolution

Appendix: Code and Ordinance Language

Defined Terms

Multiple-member body: Any council, commission, committee, subcommittee or other body consisting of 2 or more persons, whether elected, appointed or otherwise constituted, but not including the city council or its committees, the school committee or its subcommittees or an advisory committee or task force established by the mayor or city council.

Quasi-judicial body: Any multiple-member body which resolves specific disputes, or makes determinations about the rights, obligations or privileges of identifiable parties.

Regulatory body: Any multiple-member body responsible for establishing or enforcing rules or regulations.

Appointments to multiple member bodies

Multiple-Member Bodies ([Section 2-8; subsection b](#)): The mayor shall refer to the city council and simultaneously file with the city clerk, the name of each person the mayor desires to appoint as a member of a multiple-member body. The city council shall have 60 days after the date on which notice of the proposed appointment was filed with the city clerk to vote to approve or reject the appointment; provided, however, that the city council shall not unreasonably withhold approval of the appointment; and provided further, that if the city council does not take action on the appointment within 60 days, the appointment shall be deemed approved. Multiple-member body members may be removed at the discretion of their appointing authority.

1. All appointments to quasi-judicial bodies and regulatory bodies shall be for terms established by administrative order or the General Laws. Any member of a quasi-judicial body or regulatory body appointed to a successive term shall be subject to confirmation by the city council under subsection (b) of section 2-8 upon the expiration of each term.
2. In the event of a vacancy on a multiple-member body where the seat has remained vacant in excess of 1 year and the mayor has not referred to the city council any proposed appointees to fill the vacancy, the city council president may present to the mayor the names of not more than 3 persons as recommendations for appointment. The procedure for selecting names of persons for presentation to the mayor shall be established within the rules of the city council.

3. The mayor shall twice annually, in February and August, post a complete list of the vacancies on all multiple-member bodies, as well as the procedures for individuals to apply to become a member of such bodies. This posting shall be in addition to, and not a substitute for, regular posting for the purpose of filling vacancies as they arise.

Powers of the Mayor

Multiple-Member Bodies (Sec 3-4, subsection a): The mayor shall be, by virtue of the office, a member of every appointed multiple-member body of the city. The mayor may attend any meeting of an appointed multiple-member body of the city, including executive sessions, to participate in the discussions of that body; provided, however, that the mayor shall not have the right to vote on any matter before a multiple-member body which they serve on solely by virtue of their office.