

Chair’s Notes

Review of Multiple Member Bodies Committee

June 24, 2026 (Version 1.1)

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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 bodies both within and outside of our scope, and proposes a framework for approaching our recommendations. It is intended to clarify my own thinking and support my task, as chair, of guiding the conversation. I intend it to be a living document, evolving and expanding through the committee’s work, and perhaps eventually forming some portion of our final report.

This document is solely the work of the chair and is not intended as a communication or resolution of the committee. While it is informed by substantial conversation and advice, and any errors are mine alone.

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 most of the bodies in the city and leave ourselves with very little room to work. I choose to interpret the third exclusion as follows: *The review should not trouble itself with bodies that are convened to **create a recommendation on a particular decision, and which **disband when their work is done*****. This is like the “ad-hoc” category used by city staff in their initial presentation to the committee, through there are some important differences.

Approach

Several things have become clear to me through the committee’s early meetings, as well as through conversations with city staff, elected officials, members of MMBs, and interested community members. My detailed observations are below, which have led me to this conclusion: ***My inclination is to err on the side of recommending that the city reduce and consolidate the roster of MMBs while ensuring that each one has a natural alignment with an administrative function or department.***

I have also become keenly aware that there is no possible way for the committee to do a truly thorough job of reviewing each MMB in detail. We must therefore triage and focus our efforts on the bodies where we are likely to recommend changes. My intended approach is:

- Identify defunct and outdated bodies and recommend that they be dissolved (complete)
- Identify high-functioning bodies that serve a current purpose and recommend that they be retained
- Identify groups of bodies that advise and support the same department within the administration and speak to both current members and staff liasons about whether they should be merged
- Focus the committee's research efforts on the bodies that remain.

While this approach will leave blind spots in our analysis by not interviewing every staff liaison and soliciting feedback from members of each body, I feel that it is the best path to completing a report that captures the actionable recommendations in our allotted time.

Observations

We probably have too many MMBs

For the first two meetings of the committee, we did not even have a comprehensive list of the MMBs under consideration. While staff had done an excellent survey, the committee kept discovering new bodies and discussing whether to take them into consideration. Those conversations were much of the imputus for the original form of this document.

This led to the following observations:

- The city is awash in MMBs, most of which are optional, at least from the perspective of state law.
- MMBs operate at varying levels of effectiveness, with some creating frustration among staff, members, and the communities they are intended to serve.
- Each MMB carries a burden of staff time and administrative overhead. While the exact level of effort is challenging to estimate, it is undoubtedly several full-time staff equivalents sprea.
- This sheer volume of MMBs, as currently organized and staffed, is beyond the ability of the city to effectively manage or even to track.

Department adjacency is one key to effectiveness

One of the ways that MMBs can be divided is into two categories:

- Bodies that advise and support a city department or function.
- Bodies that advocate for a particular constituency.

The first category has a natural alignment for staffing and support. For example, the Urban Forestry Committee advises (mostly) Public Space and Urban Forestry, so it is staffed by the Senior Landscape Planner from that division. As part of their regular job duties, that staff member will be aware of topics of interest to the committee, and can often put committee recommendations directly into action.

The second category has no clear and natural alignment against a city department, so it is less clear who should be the staff support. Examples include the Women's Commission, the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, the Ethics Commission, and others. The staff who support these committee risk functioning as middlemen with no direct stake in the committee's work. Staff for these bodies may struggle to gather timely information about relevant city activities and may have no way to act directly on recommendations.

Most of the frustration that I, personally, have heard about is associated with this second category. These bodies operate at risk of frustration both among staff and among the volunteer committee members. ***This is not to say that these advocacy-based bodies should not exist.*** Rather, I believe that our recommendations should consider these structural challenges and suggest ways to mitigate or overcome them.

MMBs serve a different purpose than city departments

The committee's early recommendations included dissolution of several defunct MMBs that had not met in many years. In some cases, the consensus was that the MMB had been superseded by a city department. For example, the Recreation and Youth Commission could reasonably be thought of as a predecessor to our Department of Parks and Recreation. Similarly, the Multicultural Affairs Commission serves substantially the same constituency and function as the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA).

While I continue to feel that dissolving these groups (which, again, have not met or had a member in years) was the right decision, vice chair Derrick Rice made an important point in those discussions: Most MMBs operate under open meeting law and are thus vastly more transparent in their operations than even the most openly run city department. While members of MMBs do serve at the pleasure of the mayor and are usually considered "special" employees of the city – their work on the MMB is not their core livelihood. MMB members are thus much freer than city staff to surface uncomfortable truths and confront.

We should keep this in mind when we consider the non-department-adjacent bodies described above.

Five Pillars

In our early conversations about this review, legislative liaison Brendan Salsbury shared a framework known as the “five pillars of good legislation.” I have found this to be a useful way to approach the work of the committee. 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 in the real world?
4. **Legality:** Would the MMB’s recommendations be legal and within the city’s power?
5. **Equity:** Are either the creation or the recommendations of the MMB likely to have a negative impact on any specific populations, particularly the most vulnerable?

Summary of MMBs

MMB's required under MGL

The following bodies are required under Mass General Law. Despite the charter's instruction that these are outside the scope of the committee's review, I feel that it is appropriate to list them here to make a complete and accurate accounting. Beyond merely mentioning these MMBs, I also feel empowered to comment on their activity, membership, and ability of the city to fill vacancies. Finally, I believe the committee would be within its scope to suggest changes to local ordinances.

	Body	MGL	Ordinance
1	Board of Assessors	MGL: Ch 41, Sec 24	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 2
2	Board of Health	MGL: Ch 111, Sec 26	Ch: Sec 38
3	Board of Library Trustees	MGL: Ch 78, Sec 11	Ch: Sec 39
4	Somerville Housing Authority (SHA)	MGL: Ch 121B, Sec 3, 5, 5A, 5B, 6, 7, 7A, 8	N/A
5	Licensing Commission	MGL: Ch 128, Sec 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 10A, 10B	Charter: Div 2, Art 3 Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 4
6	Planning Board	MGL: Ch 41, Sec 70 and 81A - 81GG	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 5 Zoning Ord: 15.7.3
7	Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA)	MGL: Ch 121B, Sec 5	N/A
8	Retirement Board	MGL: Ch 32, Sec 20	N/A
9	Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)	MGL: Ch 40A, Sec 12	Zoning Ord: 15.7.2

MMBs adopted as a local option

Some laws in Massachusetts are available to cities as a "local option." This table lists the bodies that have been adopted by the city council and approved by the mayor. In some cases, the city council has chosen to expand on the definitions from MGL by creating ordinance language. These bodies are an edge-case for committee review, since the city has previously chosen to adopt state language and it is unclear whether the council and mayor can revisit that decision.

	Body	Adopted	MGL	Ordinance
10	Affordable Housing Trust Board	2005	MGL: Ch 44, Sec 55C	Ord: Ch 7, Art 5
11	Arts Council Board	1992	MGL: Ch 10, Sec 58	N/A
12	Commission for Persons with Disabilities	1992	MGL: Ch 40, Sec 8J	N/A
13	Community Preservation Committee	2013	MGL: Ch 44B, Sec 5	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 16
14	Conservation Commission	1972	MGL: Ch 40, Sec 8C	N/A
15	Council on Aging	1963	MGL: Ch 40, Sec 8B	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 8
16	Municipal Scholarship Committee	1988	MGL: Ch 60, Sec 3C	N/A
17	Veterans Commission	2006	MGL: Ch 41, Sec 105	Org: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 14

MMBs defined by ordinance

The largest group of bodies are those that are defined either by ordinance or by home-rule petition that are *not* inherited from state law. Providing clear recommendations about this group should be the substantial portion of the review committee’s work.

	Body	Year	Ordinance	Action
18	AIDS commission	1990	Ord: Ch 6, Art 5	Dissolve
19	Bicycle Advisory Committee	2001	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 11	
20	Biosafety Committee	1994	Ord: Ch 6, Art 4	
21	Board of Election Commissioners	1928	Charter: Div 2, Art 4	
22	Climate Action Commission	2001	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 12	
23	Commission for Women	1988	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 10	
24	Condominium Review Board	2019	Ord: Ch 7, Art 4, Sec 7-67	
25	Emergency Management Advisory Council	1963	Ord: Ch 4, Sec 4-7	
26	Ethics Commission	1997	Ord: Ch 15, Art 2, Sec 15-32	
27	Fair Housing Commission	1963	Ord: Ch 7, Art 3, Sec 7-46	
28	Gang Advisory Board	2004	MGL: Acts of 2004, Ch 327	Dissolve
29	Historic Preservation Commission	1963	Ord: Ch 7, Art 2, Sec 7-19	
30	Human Rights Commission	1993	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 6	
31	Multicultural Affairs Commission	2005	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 13	Dissolve
32	Memorialization Committee	2020	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 18	
33	Municipal Athletics Facilities Commission	2007	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 15	Dissolve
34	Municipal Compensation Advisory Board	1963	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 9	
35	Municipal Job Creation and Retention Fund Board	2018	MGL: Acts Of 2016, Ch 199 Ord: Ch 7, Art 8, Sec 7-191	
36	PILOT Advisory Task Force (Final Report)	2020	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 19	
37	Recreation and Youth Commission	1963	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 7	Dissolve
38	Traffic Board	1978	Charter: Div 2, Art 7, Sec 6	
39	Traffic Commission	1978	Charter: Div 2, Art 7	
40	Urban Design Commission	2022	Zoning: 15.7.4	
41	Urban Forestry Committee	2019	Ord: Ch 12, Art 6, Sec 12-105	
42	Wage Theft Advisory Committee	2019	Ord: Ch 9, Art 3, Div 2, Sec 9-35	

MMBs not defined by ordinance

Some bodies are mentioned on the city website or in city council minutes, but do not seem to have any governing documents that would define their makeup and scope in a concrete way. These are also clearly within scope for the committee to recommend formally adopting as persistent MMBs with details in ordinance and administrative code as appropriate.

	Body	Year	Notes	Action
43	Appointments Advisory Committee	2018	Mayoral committee to review applicants and provide advice on members to be appointed to certain bodies. Dissolved as of 2025. (website , city council action)	N/A

44	Armory Advisory Board	2026	Successor to the Armory Advisory Committee, intended to advise on programming, partnerships, and long-term vision (press release)	
45	Children’s Cabinet	2017	Support and develop child well-being in Somerville. Dissolved as of 2025 (website)	N/A
46	Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)	2020	Mayor appointed body of volunteer community members who advise on street safety and accessibility. (website)	
47	Young Somerville Advisory Group (YSAG)	2007	Mentioned on the city website as a group for residents aged 35 years or younger, to “foster community and civic engagement.” Likely defunct.	

Potential new MMBs

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	Action	Action
48	Board of Water Commissioners	Boards of water commissioners are available to towns under MGL Ch 41, Sec 69A . Somerville, being a city, could use this as a model. Doing so would require substantial overhaul of the department of water and sewer. As it stands, the city council is the de-facto board.	
49	LGBTQ Commission	Several individuals have suggested to me in personal communication that the lack of a commission for LGBTQ issues is conspicuous, especially given the variety of other identity groups for whom commissions exist.	
50	Police Oversight Commission	Independent oversight of the police has been a substantial portion of the public conversation since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. The city council called for it, The Public Safety for All task force recommended it, and the Wilson administration has committed to rolling it out in early 2027.	

Advisory and Task Forces

Following my interpretation of the charter text above, I choose to interpret “advisory” bodies as those which are intended to advise on a particular topic, publish a report, and then disband. That final step of disbanding has been erratic over the years, and artifacts of several of these bodies still appear on various city websites. While recommending on the creation or disbanding of task forces is outside the committee’s remit – I personally do recommend a cleanup and closure process when the reports are published for the avoidance of confusion.

As of this writing, the links to the reports are incomplete. This reflects my own time constraints, and not and shortfall on the part of either the task forces or the city staff.

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	Body	Started	Finished
51	90 Washington Street Civic Advisory Committee (CAC)	???	Ongoing
52	Anti-Displacement Task Force (ADTF)	2023	2026 (Report)
53	Anti-Violence Working Group	2023	2025 (Report)
54	Armory Advisory Committee / Master Plan Committee	2022	2024 (Report)
55	Charter Review Committee	2021	2022 (Report)
56	Civilian Oversight Task Force	2023	2025 (Report)
57	Gilman Square Civic Advisory Committee	2022	???
58	Police Chief Selection Committee	2023	2024 (Website)
59	Public Safety for All Task Force	2022	2025 (Report)
60	Review of MMB Committee	2026	Ongoing
61	Safe Consumption Site Task Force		
62	Vision Zero Task Force		
63	Winter / Brown School Construction Advisory Group		
64	Winter Hill School Building Committee		
65	Winter Hill Urban Renewal Committee		

Defunct MMBs

An earlier version of this document listed defunct bodies as a standalone table rather than including them in the categories above. On consideration, I found this confusing and unwieldy. I have therefore chosen to include them in the correct categories above and also to provide this summary list.

Body	Started	Notes
Appointments Advisory Committee	2018	Mayoral Committee: Disbanded in 2025
Children’s Cabinet	2017	Mayoral Committee: Disbanded in 2025
Gang Advisory Board	2004	No recent meetings.
Multicultural Affairs Commission	2005	No recent meetings.
Municipal Athletics Facilities Commission	2007	No recent meetings.
Recreation and Youth Commission	1963	No recent meetings.

Committee Recommendations

This table is *not* the authoritative record of the committee’s recommendations. That is found in the minutes of our meetings and our final report. As with this entire document, this table represents my own notes and thinking on potential recommendations to be made, as well as when votes were taken on preliminary recommendations.

	MMB	Recommendation	Date voted
1	AIDS Commission	Dissolve	June 24, 2026
2	Gang Advisory Board	Dissolve	June 24, 2026
3	Multicultural Affairs Commission	Dissolve	June 24, 2026
4	Municipal Athletics Facilities Commission	Dissolve	June 24, 2026
5	Recreation and Youth Commission	Dissolve	June 24, 2026
6	PILOT Advisory Task Force	Dissolve: Update Ch 2, Art 5, Div 19 of the code of ordinances either to indicate that the body has completed its work or that it should be re-formed from time to time to update its findings.	Not yet discussed
6	Interim Urban Design Commission	Dissolve: Repeal Ch 2, Art 5, Div 17 of the code of ordinances.	Not yet discussed
7	Board of Assessors	Update Ch 2 Art 5 Div 2 of the code of ordinances to remove the reference to the outdated “section 36” of the charter. Include in updated administrative code.	Not yet discussed

MMB Details

This section of the document will be populated in greater or lesser detail with my own notes on the details of each MMB. As of this writing, it is incomplete and included here only as a placeholder for future research.

MMBs Required Under MGL

1. Board of Assessors

Function	
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 41, Sec 24
Ordinance	Charter: Formerly section 38, now undefined Ordinance: Ch 2 Div 2
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/board-of-assessors
Members	3
Term	3 years
Meetings	As needed
Staff Support	
Recommendation	N/A

2. Board of Health

Function	Establishes rules and regulations related to public health, including body art, removal and transportation of trash, the keeping of hens, and other topics.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 111, Sec 26
Ordinance	Charter: Section 38
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/board-of-health
Members	3
Term	3 years
Meetings	The third Thursday of each month at 6pm
Staff Support	
Recommendation	N/A

3. Board of Library Trustees

Function	Has ‘custody and management’ of the library and reading room, and of all property owned by the town related to them.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 78, Sec 11
Ordinance	Charter: Section 39
Website	https://somervillepubliclibrary.org/library/board-trustees/
Members	9
Term	3 years
Meetings	The second Wednesday of each month at 6pm
Staff Support	
Recommendation	N/A

4. Somerville Housing Authority (SHA)

Function	Provides for the clearance of substandard, decadent, or blighted open areas and the provision of housing for families or elderly persons of low income.
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Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 121B, Sec 3, 5, 5A, 5B, 6, 7, 7A, 8
Ordinance	N/A
Website	https://sha-web.org/
Members	5
Term	5 years
Meetings	The third Thursday of each month at 6pm
Staff Support	
Recommendation	N/A

5. Licensing Commission

Function	Issues licenses for hotels and lodging houses, restaurants, entertainment venues, outdoor seating on the public way, and for the sale of alcohol and other intoxicants including marijuana.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 128, Sec 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 10A, 10B
Ordinance	Ord: Ch 2, Div 4
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/licensing-commission
Members	3
Term	6 years
Meetings	The third Tuesday of most months at 6pm.
Staff Support	Office of the City Clerk
Recommendation	N/A

6. Planning Board

Function	The decision-making authority for development in larger and special zoning districts where site plan approval or special permits are required.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 41, Sec 70 and 81A - 81GG
Ordinance	Ord: Ch 2, Art 5, Div 5 Zoning: 15.7.3
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/planning-board
Members	5 members, 2 alternate members
Term	5 years
Meetings	1 st and 3 rd Thursday of most months.
Staff Support	Department of planning, preservation and zoning (PPZ)
Recommendation	N/A

7. Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA)

Function	Has the power to declare that an area is substandard, decadent, and/or blighted and may prepare urban renewal plans and recommend eminent domain takings to implement the plan.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 121B, Sec 5
Ordinance	N/A
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/somerville-redevelopment-authority
Members	7 members
Term	5 years
Meetings	1 st Wednesday of the month
Staff Support	Department of planning, preservation and zoning (PPZ)
Recommendation	N/A

8. Retirement Board

Function	Administer pension and other retirement benefits for former city employees.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 30, Sec 20
Ordinance	N/A
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/retirement
Members	5 members
Term	3 years for members who are not ex-officio
Meetings	As needed
Staff Support	Finance Department
Recommendation	N/A

9. Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)

Function	The decision-making authority for all development in neighborhood residence, urban residence, commercial industry, commercial business, and tufts university. Also decides on hardship variances and administrative appeals.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 40A, Sec 12 Zoning Ordinance: 15.7.2
Ordinance	N/A
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/retirement
Members	5 members, 2 alternates
Term	5 years
Meetings	1 st and 3 rd Wednesday of the month
Staff Support	Department of planning, preservation and zoning (PPZ)
Recommendation	N/A

MMBs Adopted from MGL

1. Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board

Function	Manage the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which provides for the creation and preservation of affordable housing in Somerville, for the benefit of low and moderate income households.
Mass General Law	MGL: Ch 44, Sec 55C
Ordinance	Ord: Ch 7, Art 5
Website	https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/affordable-housing-trust-fund
Members	From 5 to 9
Term	Indefinite
Meetings	The 2 nd Thursday of the month
Staff Support	Housing
Recommendation	

[-- IN PROGRESS --]

MMBs Defined by Ordinance

Bicycle Committee

[-- IN PROGRESS --]

Template

Function	
Mass General Law	
Ordinance	
Website	
Members	
Term	
Meetings	
Staff Support	
Recommendation	

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.

Version History

Version	Date	Authors	Changes
1.0	June 24, 2026	Chris Dwan	N/A
1.1	June 24, 2026	Chris Dwan	Adjusted language to clarify “exclude from consideration,” corrections on particular committee status