



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

10 MARCH 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>Present</i>	
Frank Valdes	Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Deborah Fennick	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Andrew Arbaugh	Member	<i>Present</i>	<i>Exited at 6:07pm.</i>
Tim Talun	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Martin Pavlinic	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	

City staff present: Lexie Payne (Planning, Preservation, & Zoning)

Sarah Lewis, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:05pm and adjourned at 7:47pm.

GENERAL BUSINESS: MEETING MINUTES

Following a motion by Member Talun, seconded by Member Fennick, the Commission voted unanimously (3-0) to approve the 10 February 2026 minutes, as presented.

Member Arbaugh exited the meeting at 6:07pm.

OTHER BUSINESS: Revised Arts & Innovation for the Urban Design Framework

The Commission discussed the process for this Urban Design Framework. The zoning has already been passed for this district by the City Council. This is an additional layer that is intended to address the implementation of the framework, architectural character, etc. The process was a bit backwards. Normally, there would have been a neighborhood planning process first, prior to a Master Plan proposal and a zoning amendment responding to that.

While the document currently covers a larger area including residential properties and historic buildings, there was a suggestion to limit the scope to the zoning district boundaries, to ensure appropriate application of the design guidelines. As currently shown, the framework includes residential properties, the church, and the Milk Row Cemetery, none of which are explicitly addressed in the document. There are design guidelines and criteria that one would then seek to apply to a development proposal anywhere within the boundary. It is unclear if it would be appropriate to apply those guidelines and criteria in the same way to the redevelopment of a residential property within the boundary, for example, compared to a development block.

The Commission discussed that there are specific sections for each streetscape and the alleys individually, but a huge component of the plan extends to the Somerville Avenue streetscape. This should potentially be explicitly addressed.

There was discussion regarding the extent of proposed arcaded sidewalks in the plan. It would be helpful to understand the precedent for this proposal. Arcaded sidewalks may not be suitable for the public realm due to privacy concerns and potential conflicts with bike facilities. The Commission discussed the need to align with the City's bike plan and create comfortable pedestrian realms. There was a suggestion to remove the arcaded sidewalk

image from the plan to allow for future negotiation. This could include considering where bike lanes and pedestrian solutions would be most appropriate in this area.

The Commission noted that there is no representation on what is permitted for building massing in the plan. Other neighborhood plans, such as Union Square's, include at least a basic massing and a reference for the recommendations for each block.

The Commission also discussed traffic and access challenges for various blocks, particularly regarding truck traffic and loading docks. It was identified that Block 3 could potentially have a rear alley due to its greater depth. Blocks 1 and 4 present difficulties due to their narrow widths, potentially requiring truck access from a different area. While minimizing truck traffic through residential areas is desirable, the framework needs to identify this as a problem and, rather than providing a complete solution, give potential consideration of below-grade loading options for Block 3.

In terms of buildings, Staff explained that the document discusses reflecting the industrial heritage of New England factory buildings. The Commission noted that the idea of retaining the industrial heritage of New England as a design concept is not a bad one, especially for the extremely large buildings, but there was a question as to if all the architecture should integrate historic industrial character with modern sustainability standards. The document speaks to art and fostering creativity. It would be great to see language that the district explicitly encourages creativity in architectural design as well. The Commission also noted that the human scale is important for the buildings as well.

Staff explained that there was a lot of discussion regarding architectural step backs during the public meetings. The idea is to create a step at the fourth story, or 75' mark, and this came directly from people in the neighborhood. The intention is to allow for more flexibility in articulating the step backs as the building goes up. This would also lead to a cohesiveness between each building. The intention is not to articulate all the floor lines. The Commission stated that reference massing diagrams would be helpful to understand what the setbacks are and which zoning is already prescribed in order to determine the correct guidelines. It is unlikely that someone will build a building that has floor heights which are all that tall. It is more likely that there will be some variation throughout the building, and the standards should anticipate that.

The Commission asked about an earlier idea to maintain a sight line through Properzi Way. The buildings in that area could be connected by a bridge or something similar, but one would be able to see the sky in-between buildings on Blocks 1 and 2. Staff noted that this may be something to consider at the Master Plan level.

The Commission noted the idea of designing facades to be responsive to their orientation. A southern façade should probably look a little different than a northern façade. Also, this is a district that is integrated into the neighborhoods around it; it does not stand-alone. The document does not talk about how this district relates to its residential neighbors. The document could mention being very sensitive at the district's edges, repairing the neighborhood edges, and being sensitive to context at those transitions in scale.

The Commission agreed that a letter should be sent to the Planning Board outlining the topics of this discussion, while also spending additional time with the design guidelines before sending along further comments.

OTHER BUSINESS: Update on In-Person Meetings

Staff explained that there are rules that Tufts will require for using its conference room for in-person meetings. Additional spaces are still being considered but would have to be done on a non-regular meeting day. The existing Recording Secretary will not be used for these meetings.

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.](#)