



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

15 JULY 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>	
Zachary Zarembo	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Brian Cook	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	
Sisia Daglian	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Kit Luster (Planning Division); Alvaro Esparza (Planning Division)

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm and adjourned at 7:21pm.

Member Mobayed sat as Acting Clerk. Vice Chair Brockelman sat as Acting Chair.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

It was noted that the Board had previously approved the 20 May 2026 meeting minutes at the 17 June 2026 meeting.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Mobayed, seconded by Member Daglian, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve 3 June 2026 meeting minutes.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 6 Wheatland Street (ZP26-000018) (ZP26-000019)

The applicant team explained that the requested Hardship Variances are for relief from primary front façade build out and the landscape buffer requirement abutting a Neighborhood Residence (NR) zoning district. It was noted that the applicant also requires Site Plan Approval for the building in the Mid-Rise 3 (MR3) zoning district, as well as a Special Permit for a housing use from the Planning Board. The property contains an existing long vacant two-family detached house which abuts a blank wall to the left of the commercial building at 273 Broadway. The blank wall is pushed up against the side of the house which is located 2.3' from the NR zone. The applicant is seeking to demolish the existing house and build a new three-story, five-unit residential apartment building in the MR3 zone. The new building is a conforming building type in the MR3 zone, whereas the existing detached house is not an allowed building type in the MR3 zone. The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) previously determined that the existing structure is not Historically Significant, such that no demolition delay was imposed. The new project will have five parking spaces. The narrowness of the lot leads to a need for the requested variances; it makes constructing an MR3-compliant building very difficult unless variances are granted. The property is not in a transit area. Of the five units proposed, one would be affordable.

The applicant team explained that a 10' wide driveway is proposed at the right side of the structure in order for Eversource to access the rear of the site for the transformer. The 10' setback on the right side pushes the maximum façade build out to less than 80%, leading to one of the requested variances. At 80%, the minimum

façade width would be 34'. With the 10' driveway at the right side to provide access for the five proposed parking spaces, the façade width is approximately 74.7%, or 31'9". The second variance request is for relief from the required landscape buffer between the driveway and the right side lot line. The Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) stipulates that there needs to be a 6' wide landscape buffer at the right-side lot line. This would push the driveway to the left, leading the façade build out variance to be more non-compliant. A green roof will be utilized on a majority of the roof structure.

The applicant team reviewed the elevations and materials for the proposed structure. The landscape plan is compliant with the Green Score. There will be a buffer between the commercial structures along Broadway and the residential property along Wheatland Street. The proposed building will be pulled back from the house to the right to provide more of a setback than currently exists and pushed up against the commercial blank brick wall. The proposed structure will comply with zoning, except for the small primary front façade build out relief requested due to the narrowness of the lot, which is unique in the MR3 zone. This creates a hardship to build a building which would be permitted in the MR3 zone without needing some relief. The relief sought for the minimum façade buildout is very small, at 74.7% where the requirement is 80%, or a requested variance of only 5.3%. It would be difficult to have a residential, otherwise compliant, building without the small, primary front façade build out variance. The applicant team stated that the difference will not be noticeable to passersby. Creating more housing is a goal of the City and this will create more density near the old Star Market site's new development and the main thoroughfare of Broadway, while providing a buffer between Broadway and the NR zone, as well as pull the building closer to the commercial blank wall and away from the NR residential abutter. The applicant team stated that there will be no substantial detriment as a result of the facade build-out relief. The development meets the goals of the MR3 zone and SomerVision. It will comply with the Green Score and there will be one affordable unit. There is no room for the required landscape buffer against the NR lot line and pushing the building to allow for this would lead to a further requirement for a larger variance for the front façade build out. This is a substantial hardship. Building a residential structure at 6 Wheatland will require relief of some form or another. The team stated that the landscape buffer variance does not create substantial detriment. The building will have the required setback from the NR zone and cars will be off the street.

The applicant team reviewed that the State budget recently passed, which changed the law regarding variances. In Chapter 40A, the changes are reflected in the language which states that "the permit-granting authority shall, after a public hearing for which notice has been given..., grant upon appeal or petition with respect to particular land or structures a variance from the terms of applicable zoning ordinance or by-law if the permit-granting authority specifically finds that a strict enforcement of the ordinance or bylaw would result in a practical difficulty. In making its determination, the Board shall weigh the benefits to the appellant or petitioner and to the public interest, including the interest in supporting the production of housing against the detriment to the public health, safety, and welfare of the neighborhood, and may also consider whether there is a practical difficulty relating to soil conditions, shape, or topography of the land or structures; whether the strict enforcement would pose a financial hardship; whether the benefit sought can be achieved by another means; and whether the practical difficulty was self-created".

Acting Chair Brockelman opened public testimony.

The Board noted that the percentage for the front façade in the narrative submitted by the applicant was 76.5%, but the presentation tonight and the Staff Memo noted this as 74.7%. The applicant team explained that the number presented in the Staff Memo and this evening is the correct number.

The Board expressed some confusion regarding whether findings for the required criteria need to be discussed or whether the Board can reach a decision based on the practical difficulty posed by the dimensions of the lot and other requisite items as presented in the narrative. Staff stated that they are waiting on further guidance from the Executive Office of Healthy and Livable Communities (EOHLC) and that the Board is instructed to continue with the three criteria review while awaiting further guidance.

The Board discussed that there seems to be a tradeoff in this case with having a driveway and being able to park cars off the street, or making the building comply with the SZO. The variances will allow cars to be off the street and will still allow for some landscaping. This neighborhood needs off-street parking due to the nearby old Star Market development. The Board noted that meeting the required façade build out would not allow for enough clearance for Eversource to access the rear of the site.

The Board discussed the landscape buffer requirement. It was noted that the landscaping would need to go down the right side of the driveway. The applicant team noted that there is a specific landscape element requirement in the SZO which would require one large tree for every 30' of lot line. This would take up additional space on the right side of the property.

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

The Board reviewed the variance criteria for the front façade. The first criterion is related to special circumstances such as soil conditions, shape, or topography of the parcel of land, or unusual character of the existing structure. In this case, the narrowness of the lot, the presence of a commercial building to the left side when facing from the street, and the necessity of moving the structure away from the other residential property which is in a different zoning district impinges on the applicant's ability to meet all the SZO requirements. The applicant has met them to the best of their ability. For criterion 2, 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, to the petitioner or appellant due to said special circumstances. In this case, literal enforcement would negate the dimensions of a driveway so that driveway parking would not be possible on the site. It would also aggravate other zoning requirements. The proposed solution minimizes the relief needed. In terms of the third criterion, based on public meetings that have occurred, residents have indicated that they would like parking on the property to exist to avoid additional street parking demand. The proposal also reinforces the developments nearby and proposes improvements that will integrate the Comprehensive Plan, SomerVision 2040, and other efforts to improve this area beyond the substantial developments in the former Star Market area. The proposed design is a good transition between the residential and commercial area.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Mobayed, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Hardship Variance for zoning relief from SZO 4.1.7.C in order to build a primary front facade of 74.7% where 80% is the minimum in the Mid-Rise 3 (MR3) zoning district, based on the statutory criteria previously discussed, with the conditions outlined in the 9 July 2026 Staff Memo.

RESULT:

APPROVED

The Board reviewed the variance criteria for the landscape buffer. The first criterion is related to special circumstances such as soil conditions, shape, or topography of the parcel of land, or unusual character of the existing structure. In this case, this is an unusually narrow parcel, and it would be difficult to reasonably fit a building, driveway, and landscaping on the lot. For criterion 2, any attempt to make an adjustment would create other impingements on SZO requirements. This is the best solution under the circumstances. The third criterion is addressed based on the findings stated for the first variance request.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Mobayed, seconded by Member Daglian, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Hardship Variance for zoning relief from SZO 10.3.6.A.I. in order to build a new three-story apartment building that does not meet the landscape buffer requirements in the Mid-Rise 3 (MR3) zoning district based on the statutory criteria previously discussed, with the conditions outlined in the 9 July 2026 Staff Memo.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 75 Myrtle Street (ZP26-000013)

The applicant team stated that the property contains an existing five-story multi-unit residential building that is owned by the Somerville Housing Authority. The site is located in the Urban Residence (UR) zoning district and the Affordable Housing Overlay. Verizon proposes to construct and operate a roof-mounted wireless communications facility on the existing building. The project requires a Special Permit from the Board pursuant to Sections 10.10.3. and 15.2.1. of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO). The team noted that Planning Staff recommends approval of the Special Permit, as proposed. The facility will consist of three sectors of antennas labeled Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. The Alpha sector is located in the corner of the roof facing north along Myrtle Street. The Beta sector will be located in the corner facing south at the intersection of Pearl and Florence Streets. The Gamma antenna sector will be located in the corner facing west-southwest at the intersection of Pearl and Myrtle Streets. Each sector will contain four antennas, which will be located within a screen wall enclosure. The enclosure will be colored to match the façade of the existing building. The enclosure will be attached to a ballast mount, which will be attached to the roof of the building. Utilities will run inside the building from the basement to the stacked electrical rooms and up to the roof, where they will be secured along the roof and run over to the equipment area. The proposed antenna sectors will be set back at least 10' from the edge of the roof in compliance with Section 10.10.5.A.1.B. of the SZO. The proposed equipment area will be located on the southern part of the roof near the existing HVAC system. The equipment area will be located on a roughly 10' by 14' steel frame platform which will contain an equipment cabinet, a battery cabinet, and a small GPS antenna to be mounted on the railing of the platform. The south side of the building elevation shows the top of the screen wall enclosure at a height of 56'7", which is 10' above the existing roof line. The centerline height of the antennas will range based upon the antenna type between 51'1" – 53'2" – 54'9". There is an existing stairwell penthouse located on the roof at a height of 57', and this will remain the tallest item on the roof. The screen wall enclosure will extend 10' in height above the existing roof line in compliance with Section 10.10.5.A.1.A. of the SZO. The antenna sectors will not project above a plane inclined at a 45-degree angle from vertical beginning at the edge of the roof, in compliance with Section 10.10.5A.1.C. of the SZO. Proposed views of the site were shown.

The applicant team explained that the proposed site will improve signal quality to areas along Washington Street, Pearl Street, Broadway, and Route 28. The new site will also help take some of the burden off surrounding sites, allowing them to better serve areas closer to them. The proposed facility will help improve the quality of service by increasing the network capacity, enhancing coverage, improving signal quality, and allowing for faster data speeds and more reliable connections. The site sits in a slightly elevated area, allowing for a good job in providing coverage. The applicant team stated that the Special Permit should be approved because the facility meets all relevant standards under the SZO for development of a wireless facility.

Acting Chair Brockelman opened public testimony.

The Board asked about any impact on residents of the building in terms of installation of the proposed project. The applicant team stated that Verizon is required by its Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses to ensure that any sort of RF emissions exposures comply with the standards imposed by the FCC. Any noise from the facility should be minimal, if any. The facility also will not generate any odor or produce any glare to traffic. There will be no on-site employees. The Board noted that there must be some noise and vibration created in placing the antennas and foundations on the building, as well as any testing needed before it is operational. Staff stated that, after the Special Permit is granted, the applicant will also have to seek Building Permits, and these items may be further considered by the Building Inspector.

The Board asked why this building was chosen in particular for the project. The applicant team explained that multiple, taller buildings in the area were considered and ultimately ruled out as candidates due to high rent costs and suitability to the network. This location was chosen based on the height of the building in comparison to others around it. The SZO prioritizes sites for towers and antennas to be on buildings owned by the City or by the Housing Authority.

The Board noted that there is no evidence in the record from the applicant that the Somerville Housing Authority was consulted on this project, though they are not required to sign off. Staff stated that the Inspectional Service

Department (ISD) submitted the proper comments and discussed the project with the applicants but nothing else was required from the City departments. The Board stated that the City tends to want to make sure there is buy-in from all the affected parties, whether required or not. The applicant team stated that this project came from an RFP that the Housing Authority issued for rooftop antennas, which Verizon responded to. The Housing Authority should be aware of the project and there would have been preliminary plans attached to the RFP response.

The Board noted that one of the special procurements in the permit criteria is visual impact. In the proposed visual photo from Perkins Street, the project seems very prominent and appears to have a visual impact. It was asked if the unit could be moved in, further away from the edge of the building, or lowered a couple of feet to mitigate the visual impacts. The applicant team explained that the screen walls are made of fiberglass, which will be painted to match the existing building façade. The proposed equipment for the antennas will be installed behind those screen walls. There will be four faces for the wall and so none of the antennas will be seen from any vantage point. The Alpha sector in question was chosen for that location specifically to aid the coverage map. If the enclosure was pushed backwards, the system would need to gain more elevation and be higher to clear the existing parapet wall, making it potentially more visible.

The Board asked about the radio frequency emission mitigation plan. The applicant team stated that Exhibit A of the application package shows a mitigation plan including the physical barriers on the roof. There will be an EME physical barrier mitigation as well as signage for contractors onsite to maintain the facility as needed. The mitigation plan is established via OSHA regulations. With the mitigation plan in place, the consultant found that the proposed facility would comply with the emission standards.

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

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Mobayed, seconded by Member Cook, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve a Special Permit Finding under MGL Chapter 40A Section 6 to install a building-mounted wireless communication facility in the Urban Residence (UR) zoning district, with the conditions outlined in the 9 July 2026 Staff Memo.

RESULT:	APPROVED
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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.](#)