

Brendan Salisbury

From: Alessandra Seiter [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, August 21, 2026 7:17 AM
To: Chris Dwan; Derrick Rice
Cc: Brendan Salisbury; Ben Ewen-Campen; Jon Link; Transportation; Lena Webb
Subject: PTAC & SBAC comments on MMBC vote to merge our committees
Attachments: PTAC+SBAC_MMBCRecommendations_8-21-26.pdf

Categories: MMB Review Public Comment

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Good morning, Chair Dwan and Vice Chair Rice--

(With Analyst Salisbury, Councilors Ewen-Campen and Link, and Mobility staff on cc.)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the work of the Review of Multiple-Member Bodies Committee (MMBC). The effort you are undertaking is significant, and we thank you for your dedication to reviewing and deliberating on at least 56 multiple-member bodies serving the City of Somerville. We and our fellow members of the Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) and Bicycle Advisory Committee (SBAC) are writing in response to deliberations and recommendations made at the July 8, 2026 meeting of the MMBC, namely the vote to recommend merging our two committees. We firmly oppose this recommendation and are troubled by the deliberations that precipitated it. We believe merging our committees would offer no productivity or capacity gains for our members or City staff, and would instead decrease our focus, increase administrative burden on the Mobility team, and result in lost membership while demanding double the workload from a community of volunteers. Beyond our committees but based on our extensive experience leading and participating in multiple-member bodies in Somerville, we believe it is less important for the MMBC to focus on reducing the number of multiple-member bodies than it is to identify what makes a successful one and support the City in ensuring such factors apply to all of Somerville's multiple-member bodies.

The attached letter details our concerns and feedback, as well as the following recommendations:

1. Rescind the recommendation to merge PTAC and SBAC.
2. Establish actionable, transparent criteria by which to evaluate multiple-member bodies relative to their mandates.
3. Advise the City to establish a tiered classification system of multiple-member bodies and best practices for each type.

Thank you again for your continued attention to the important matter of Somerville's multiple-member bodies, and for your consideration of our concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely,
Alessandra Seiter, *Chair, Somerville PTAC*
and
Lena Webb, *Chair, Somerville SBAC*



August 21, 2026

ATTN Brendan Salisbury, Staff Liaison
Review of Multiple-Member Bodies Committee
93 Highland Ave
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Chair Dwan, Vice Chair Rice, and fellow Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the work of the Review of Multiple-Member Bodies Committee (hereafter, the MMBC). The effort you are undertaking is significant, and we thank you for your dedication to reviewing and deliberating on [at least 56 multiple-member bodies](#) (boards, commissions, committees, and working groups) serving the City of Somerville. We, the 28 undersigned members of the [Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee \(PTAC\)](#) and [Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee \(SBAC\)](#), are writing in response to deliberations and a recommendation made at the [July 8, 2026 meeting of the MMBC](#).

1) The Significance of Multiple-Member Bodies

For members of the public who may not be familiar, the MMBC was established earlier this year following the November 2025 passage of the [Revised Charter](#) – our city’s basic law. [Article 8, Section 6](#) of the Revised Charter mandates a review of Somerville’s multiple-member bodies at least every 10 years, to be conducted by a special committee with the charge to assess the function and relevance of multiple-member bodies and the authority to recommend the combination, dissolution, and creation of such bodies. Per the Revised Charter, in February 2026 the Somerville City Council [passed an ordinance](#) establishing the first and subsequent MMBCs, including their membership and timelines. The current MMBC began its work in April 2026 and must deliver a report to the City Council no later than the first Council meeting this December. The [MMBC’s meeting materials](#) – including agendas, video recordings, and presentations – are available for public viewing on the City of Somerville website.

We would like to begin by stating the value multiple-member bodies bring to the Somerville community. Based on our combined century of experience serving on our respective committees, we believe that — if effectively administered — multiple-member bodies are a valuable venue for municipal civic engagement. They create a dedicated channel for community members to publicly voice concerns and recommendations while developing in-depth knowledge of the City’s functioning and appreciation for the complex work staff undertake to improve people’s daily lives. They provide City staff with a direct and ongoing opportunity to ensure their work is responsive to the needs of community members, thus making their work more impactful. And they encourage members to serve as ambassadors of the City, inspiring their families, friends, and neighbors to take up the mantle of civic engagement and become more invested in their community. The combined impact of these

outcomes is a city with a more trusting, effective, and invested relationship between a government and its people. At a moment when [public trust in government](#) and [in one another](#) are at their lowest points since the 1970s, when [voter turnout is low compared to other advanced democracies](#), and when [only 20% of Americans report spending time with their neighbors](#), the democratic bonds formed through the collaborative work of multiple-member bodies and their staff liaisons are not something we can take for granted – and that merit continued investment.

We believe the MMBC's work is vital for ensuring Somerville's multiple-member bodies have the resources and structures necessary to deliver on their value and enhance the City's efforts rather than strain staff capacity. It is in this spirit that we write with concern about the deliberations undertaken at the July 8, 2026 meeting of the MMBC. At that meeting, three out of five MMBC members were present to discuss and vote on the consolidation of PTAC and SBAC into a single body. Specifically, Chair Dwan, Councilor Clingan, and Clerk Henderson voted in favor of merging PTAC and SBAC into a Mobility Advisory Committee while retaining the constituencies represented by each body as subcommittees "and potentially allowing space for others." This vote was taken without justification for how a merged body would improve either committee's efficacy.

We on PTAC and SBAC firmly oppose the recommendation to merge our committees and are troubled by the deliberations that precipitated this recommendation. We believe merging our committees would offer no productivity or capacity gains for members or City staff. On the contrary, a merged committee would diminish our focus, increase administrative burden on Mobility staff, and result in lost membership while demanding double the workload from a community of volunteers who already devote significant time and energy to the City.

2) Merging PTAC & SBAC Would Reduce Committee Effectiveness

We oppose the recommendation to merge our committees because we believe that doing so would reduce our effectiveness in representing the distinct constituencies served by PTAC and SBAC, thereby making Somerville's streets less safe and functional for people walking, taking transit, and biking. While both of our memberships are motivated by a strong desire to make Somerville's streets safer and more livable for all, we know that to do so, separate and intentional considerations must be paid to each constituency. This individualized attention reflects the nature of safe streets infrastructure. [Best practices for making a city walkable](#) include wide sidewalks, shortened street crossings (i.e., curb extensions), visible and raised crosswalks, and signals that allow enough time for people walking to cross the street. [Best practices for making a city transit-friendly](#) include dedicated bus lanes, well-placed and amenity-rich bus stops, signal priority for above-ground transit, and fast and frequent subway service. [Best practices for making a city bikeable](#) include separated bike lanes, a comprehensive bike network, clear and dedicated intersection signals, and sufficient bike parking. And best practices for making a city's transportation network equitable include universal design for accessibility, easy access to fast and frequent public transit for people who rely on it, and community-engaged investment in historically underserved neighborhoods. While PTAC and SBAC have each been able to effectively navigate these nuanced and multifaceted considerations, demanding that a consolidated committee entertain them all would result in a scope and complexity far beyond what volunteers could successfully navigate in a mere 2-4 hours per month.

While there are plenty of strategies proven to make streets safer for all (e.g., reducing vehicle speeds, minimizing vehicular conflicts with people walking and biking, improving intersection visibility, keeping paths of travel clear in all weather), in our experience it is very easy to overlook specific modal considerations without time, space, and expertise dedicated to the individualized interests of people walking, taking transit, and biking.

This is exactly the reason PTAC was established 5 ½ years ago through Somerville's [Vision Zero Action Plan](#): to ensure the tens of thousands¹ of Somerville residents who walk and take transit every day are well-represented in the City's transportation decision-making.

Before detailing the relevant provisions of the Vision Zero Action Plan, it is worth recalling the devastating crashes and subsequent community advocacy that spurred the creation of PTAC. In 2019, fatal pedestrian crashes spiked in Somerville. [Allison Donovan](#) was killed crossing Powder House Boulevard. [Cheryl Richards and Kevin Dumont](#) were killed at the intersection of Mystic Avenue and Shore Drive. These areas were known to the City as dangers to public safety prior to the crashes. In response, [300 community members submitted a petition](#) to the City Council calling for action. The third recommendation (of 11) was to “create a permanent City-staffed Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee by June 2019.” This recommendation was inspired by the work of the informal Pedestrian/Transit Resident Advocates Meeting, which met monthly from January 2018 to Spring 2019 under the leadership of former At-Large City Councilor Stephanie Hirsch. Several members of the Advocates Meeting remain local leaders on street safety, and two have served on PTAC since its inception.

This history helped to shape the 2020 Vision Zero Action Plan, which emphasizes the significance and impact of establishing separate committees for people biking and for people walking / taking transit. It notes that at the time of publication, SBAC had “been instrumental in converting Somerville into a true bike-friendly city with the fifth-highest bicycle mode share in the nation. They have identified issues and opportunities citywide, and pushed for the most state-of-the-art intersections. A similar pedestrian- and transit-oriented committee does not yet exist, and while Somerville has passionate advocates for pedestrian mobility and safety, there is no formal outlet to identify issues and opportunities for pedestrians [and transit riders] and make recommendations to the City” (p. 26). Today, Somerville benefits from having this formal outlet alongside the important work of SBAC.

These benefits are not theoretical. Our committees have played a key role in [Somerville's astounding success](#) preventing traffic fatalities for the past 4 years. No Somerville community member has died in a crash on our streets since 2023, and serious injury crashes have decreased by 50% over the past decade. A [recent report](#) by the influential Boston-area nonprofit LivableStreets found that Somerville's Vision Zero efforts have “poised [our city] to be a national leader on traffic safety” (p. 4). Detailing the factors behind Somerville's success, the report highlights PTAC and SBAC:

“Advisory bodies like the Somerville Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee and the Somerville Bicycle [Advisory] Committee have played an important role in shaping the City's work. These groups bring community voices directly into the planning process and help ensure that safety improvements reflect real, lived experiences. These formal City advisory committees complement the work of grassroots organizations, including Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets, Somerville Bike Safety, Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership, and Friends of the Community Path. Building these kinds of relationships takes time but it has helped Somerville move projects forward with strong community support” (pp. 16-17).

¹ As of 2024, the [US Census reports](#) that 15,339 Somerville residents take transit to commute to work (on par with the number of residents who drive alone to work) and 7,327 walk to work. These numbers reflect 38.6% of Somerville workers, yet still underestimate the number of community members who take transit and walk every day since they only capture commuting modes. The [data Mobility staff collect](#) (see p. 49) on the ways people travel within project areas supplement commuting numbers. Across the five street redesign projects pursued between 2023 and 2025, which spanned all of Somerville's wards, public transit and walking/rolling were the most common travel modes selected by respondents to Mobility's project surveys.

The findings of the LivableStreets report emphasize PTAC and SBAC's critical roles in a uniquely effective local ecosystem of safe streets advocates². The findings also emphasize the immense amount of trust, rapport, and community-building that have gone into creating this ecosystem. Merging our committees would rupture the strong collaborations we have built among each of our memberships, between our committees, between each committee and the truly phenomenal staff in the Mobility Division, and between our committees and the incredible network of non-municipal safe streets advocacy groups. It is worth remembering that PTAC and SBAC members applied and made commitments to specific committees, based on their interests and lived experiences. Changing the committees' structures would disrupt this commitment and likely drive members to resign, thus artificially suppressing the number of people who have otherwise been eager to devote their time and energy to the City.

Finally, we would like to highlight the novelty of PTAC's creation process and how it may contribute to committee efficacy. As detailed above, PTAC was created through a collaborative act of former Mayor Curtatone and City staff following several years of resident advocacy. Because our founding was based on explicit resident need and enjoyed executive and staff support, PTAC has been empowered since day one to deliver on our mission. In other words, a gap was identified in the city, and PTAC was identified by all relevant stakeholders as the appropriate method for filling it. In this way, we were set up to succeed rather than fail due to misalignment on executive support, staff capacity and interest, or appropriateness for the identified goal. These are all factors we recommend the MMBC consider when evaluating the efficacy of multiple-member bodies.

2.1) Retaining Constituencies as Subcommittees Would Reduce Committee Output & Increase Staff Administrative Burden

We do not believe the component of the MMBC's recommendation to retain our committees' constituencies as subcommittees would alleviate our concerns. This is because having mode-based subcommittees would not reflect the nature of effective committee work, as has been demonstrated through the over 30 combined years during which our committees have functioned. Since the early 2000s SBAC's subcommittee work has been tactical, focusing on reviewing project designs, writing advocacy letters, and hosting community engagements. PTAC adopted this deliverable-centered subcommittee model when we were formed in 2020. Since then, PTAC has reviewed over 30 projects, written 27 advocacy letters, and hosted over 40 community engagements – averaging 5.5 projects, 4.5 letters, and 7.5 engagements annually³. SBAC has achieved a similar level of output. Without subcommittees to lend structured time, collaboration, and alignment on these valuable contributions, they simply wouldn't get done – such is the reality of a body of volunteer community members who have jobs, families, and other commitments beyond their committee service.

Beyond boosting our committees' utility, tactical subcommittees alleviate administrative burden on City staff. They ensure that our committees can organize ourselves around productive outputs rather than rely on City staff to direct our work. They also bolster the productivity of our monthly meetings, allowing City staff to receive the input they need to confidently move forward on projects and policies after one or two committee meetings. For example, PTAC's Design Review Subcommittee and SBAC's Engineering & Evaluation Subcommittee meet separately from the full committees to take a close look at the City's newly released project designs, and prepare to report their findings and recommendations to the broader bodies. With a merged committee

² The role of Somerville's mobility-focused committees received state-wide recognition in April 2026, when PTAC and the Mobility Division received a joint [Golden Shoe Award from WalkMassachusetts](#) for our unique and impactful partnership.

³ See the [PTAC webpage](#) for its five published annual reports.

composed of mode-based subcommittees, it is likely that each subcommittee would need to review every project design, taking time and energy away from other subcommittee matters and requiring City staff to attend each of our 3+ monthly subcommittee meetings plus our full committee meeting. Even if a merged committee were to meet quarterly instead of monthly (which we think would itself detract from committee coordination and efficacy), City staff would still need to prepare for, attend, and follow up on 40 meetings per year – 16 more meetings than they are currently responsible for under our dual committee structure. It should go without saying that this added administrative burden would directly detract from the Mobility Division’s ability to engage Somerville community members beyond our committees. This lost capacity would not only lead to fewer community members engaged overall, but to less equitable engagement – since reaching groups who are less likely to participate requires more time and energy.

Beyond the additional effort required to administer a merged committee, carrying out the merger itself would require an enormous amount of labor, and for negligible gain. It is worth enumerating the details of such labor. Both of our committees and Mobility staff would need to align on a unified mandate that encompasses our unique goals and memberships. We would need to establish new bylaws, which would include arriving at consensus on membership numbers, Officer positions, subcommittee structures, and other operational matters⁴. City Council would have to pass a new ordinance officially establishing the merged committee, as well as legislation to render the former SBAC defunct. Some, if not most, of our committees’ current members would resign, and we would have to administer yet another recruitment, application, interview, and appointment process. The web presences of both committees would have to be retired and redirected to a new digital home for the merged committee, which would certainly result in confusion among members of the public. In addition to these logistical considerations, we would need to undertake the difficult work of change management – leading people through a transition none of them signed up for, and somehow building trust and rapport in the process. If there were a compelling reason to embark on these changes, we would do so. But, such a reason does not exist.

During a later agenda item at the July 8 MMBC meeting, Clerk Henderson herself stressed the importance of maintaining separate multiple-member bodies to represent distinct constituencies. This was in the context of a deliberation on whether to recommend consolidation of the Human Rights Commission, Commission for Persons with Disabilities, Women’s Commission, Fair Housing Commission, and Council for Aging Persons. Clerk Henderson’s comments are worth quoting in full, with minor edits for clarity:

“As much as I would love to consolidate, I think there are too many specialized areas that each of [the multiple-member bodies] focus on, and that might be overshadowed if we were to combine them. Each of [the multiple-member bodies] have a very focused and narrowed [scope], and I think combining them would be too broad. And then they’re no longer serving the functions that they were originally supposed to.”

3) MMBC’s Approach to PTAC & SBAC Merits Reconsideration

The Clerk’s important comments represent exactly the concerns we have with consolidating PTAC and SBAC. They also reflect a second set of concerns we would like to raise, which is with the MMBC’s approach to their charge and deliberations – at least during the July 8 meeting. First, the MMBC members present on July 8 seem to have approached their deliberations with a certain amount of randomness. For example, Clerk Henderson expressed concern with consolidating one set of multiple-member bodies for reasons applicable to another set of bodies (ours) discussed earlier in the meeting. Additionally, during the agenda item on PTAC

⁴ These enabling activities required almost the entire first year of PTAC’s existence to complete.

and SBAC, Chair Dwan and Councilor Clingan both noted that our committees align with their understanding of “high-functioning bodies that serve a current purpose” – we have active memberships, don’t have trouble meeting quorum, are successful in our efforts, and have staff liaisons who believe our committees should continue to exist in their current form. These qualities all exemplify bodies that, according to the [Chair’s Notes](#), should be recommended for retention rather than dissolution or consolidation. Chair Dwan, Councilor Clingan, and Clerk Henderson all seem to agree with this assessment – at least to begin with. Chair Dwan states that his initial read is not to merge the committees. Councilor Clingan says, “I would be fine with keeping them separate. That’s my ultimate – where I come down.” Clerk Henderson shares that she doesn’t feel strongly either way. And yet, to close the agenda item, Chair Dwan proposes – admitting that “I’m contradicting myself here” – that the MMBC recommend the consolidation of PTAC and SBAC. The reason he gives is that the MMBC’s charge is to minimize the number of multiple-member bodies in Somerville. This is in fact not the MMBC’s charge as laid out in the [Revised Charter](#) or the [enabling ordinance](#), which mandate “an assessment of the functions and relevancies of the city’s current multiple-member bodies, a review of activities of multiple-member bodies from recent years, the ability of the city to fill appointments to the body, and recommendations for combining, terminating, or establishing new multiple-member bodies.” Chair Dwan’s stated reason for proposing consolidation, as well as Councilor Clingan and Clerk Henderson’s comments, suggest at best an arbitrary approach to the MMBC’s treatment of PTAC and SBAC, and at worst an underlying assumption about the MMBC’s work that does not match the contents of the Revised Charter democratically adopted by Somerville voters and approved by the State Legislature.

The second concern we have about the MMBC’s approach is the present members’ political maligning of PTAC, SBAC, and our representative constituencies. In direct contradiction of the MMBC’s charge to retain high-functioning multiple-member bodies, Councilor Clingan expressed the belief that the efficacy of PTAC and SBAC is “concerning” because it means that Brad Rawson – Director of the Mobility Division – could “lean” on our committees as a cover for “whatever his agenda might be.” Chair Dwan expressed agreement, asserting that “‘Big Bike’ is a thing” in Somerville and that having two committees focused on transportation “speaks to where the City is putting its energy.” These comments otherize the tens of thousands of Somerville residents who walk, take transit, and bike every day to get to work and school, run errands, patronize local businesses, and spend time with their friends, families, and companion animals. **They politicize successful, proven efforts to ensure community members do not die preventable deaths on our streets.** They suggest a strange belief that transportation is not an issue the City of Somerville should focus attention on, despite [streets comprising 25% of Somerville’s total land area](#) – the second-highest use of land after housing. And they betray a misunderstanding of our committees’ work, collapsing all transportation advocacy into a single-issue activity and erasing the critical work PTAC does to represent people who walk and take transit.

On July 24, PTAC called on Somerville’s local and state elected representatives to recommit to street safety following the traffic death of Boston transportation planner Louisa Gag. We believe some of the comments in that letter are worth reiterating in light of the MMBC’s deliberations:

“We must stop framing street safety as a battle of convenience between transportation modes, a zero-sum game with winners and losers. We must stop dehumanizing people on bikes, dismissing them as annoyances undeserving of safe infrastructure rather than as beloved members of our community. It is time to recognize street safety for what it is: a set of life-saving measures that prevent traffic violence from ravaging our communities.”

Finally, we feel it necessary to restate the philosophy behind our committees’ existence. The City of Somerville’s engagement efforts – including multiple-member bodies like PTAC and SBAC – should ensure

that all community members have a voice in matters that directly impact their lives, regardless of whether they have formal decision-making authority. This kind of participatory approach to local governance is meant to align the best practices of a field (e.g., transportation planning, public administration) with the lived experiences of people who use our municipal infrastructure and services every day. Community-engaged governance has been found to engender better social outcomes (e.g., employment, educational attainment), lead to more equitable and effective results, and increase trust and social cohesion. We urge the MMBC to reconsider their deliberations with this framework in mind, and develop practices for incorporating the experiential expertise of multiple-member body participants into future recommendations.

4) Recommendations for MMBC

We believe the MMBC should commit to reviewing Somerville's multiple-member bodies with agreed-upon criteria that match its enabling legislation, and proactively seek the input of multiple-member bodies themselves. Additionally, we believe it would be a valuable use of the MMBC's time to focus on evaluating the reasons why certain multiple-member bodies have been able to achieve greater success and impact than others. This effort would seem to fit squarely within the MMBC's legal charge to "[assess] .. the functions and relevancies of the city's current multiple-member bodies" and "review ... activities of multiple-member bodies from recent years." Such an evaluation would likely produce more informed and relevant recommendations on the handling of multiple-member bodies, including actionable efforts to ensure that all multiple-member body members and staff liaisons are given the appropriate structures, resources, and capacity to fully realize and deliver on their civic value. **Ultimately, we think it is less important for the MMBC to focus on reducing the number of multiple-member bodies than it is to identify what makes a successful one, and support the City in ensuring such factors apply to all of Somerville's multiple-member bodies.** Finally, our sense is that different types of multiple-member bodies will require different structures, resources, and capacity to be successful. For example, the responsibilities, legal authority, and functioning of advisory committees like PTAC and SBAC are very different from those of the multiple-member bodies required under Massachusetts General Law like the Planning Board and Somerville Housing Authority. We believe the City should formally recognize this reality by developing a tiered classification system of multiple-member bodies and identifying appropriate establishment processes, legal structures, internal procedures, staffing models, and membership expectations to fit each tier. Once implemented, this would reduce staff burden and member confusion while bolstering positive impact to the Somerville community.

Based on our understanding of the MMBC's charge, our concerns about the MMBC's handling of PTAC and SBAC, and our experiences as dedicated representatives of multiple-member bodies, we recommend that the MMBC take the following actions before the submission of their final report to the City Council later this year. These recommendations follow from our comments above, so we will not reiterate language and will instead provide references to relevant sections of this letter.

1. **Rescind the recommendation to merge PTAC and SBAC:** See pp. 2-5 of this letter.
2. **Establish actionable, transparent criteria by which to evaluate multiple-member bodies relative to their mandates:** See pp. 5-7 of this letter.
3. **Advise the City to establish a tiered classification system of multiple-member bodies and best practices for each type:** See p. 7 of this letter.

Thank you again for your continued attention to the important matter of Somerville's multiple-member bodies, and for your consideration of our concerns and recommendations.

Sincerely,
Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)
and
Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee (SBAC)

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CC: Mobility Division, City of Somerville
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