



City of Somerville
PLANNING BOARD
City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

16 JULY 2026 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation via Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Michael Capuano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Amelia Aboff	Vice Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Jahan Habib	Clerk	<i>Present</i>	
Michael McNeley	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Luc Schuster	Alternate	<i>Present</i>	Exited at 7:47pm
Lynn Richards	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Coralie Cooper	Alternate	<i>Absent</i>	

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

The meeting was called to order at 6:03pm and adjourned at 8:28pm.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to approve the 4 June 2026 meeting minutes, as amended.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 222 Broadway

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 20 August 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 120 Middlesex Avenue

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to continue this hearing to 6 August 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

PUBLIC HEARING: 1 McGrath Highway

(continued from 18 June 2026)

Vice Chair Aboff recused herself from this item.

The applicant team explained that the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) previously issued two Hardship Variances for this project; one for surface parking and one for parking lot landscape relief. This property is partly in Somerville and partly in Cambridge. An approval from this Board would still require the applicant to go to Cambridge and go through their process. A hotel has been approved on this site three (3) times already and the hope is to get a hotel approved once more. Since the last meeting, the applicant has filed a revised landscape plan and Green Score calculation to address the Public Space and Urban Forestry (PSUF) Division's comments. The project is still Green Score compliant. Also, a late joint letter was submitted by the Friends of the Community Path and the Friends of the Grand Junction Path with support for the project with many included details. A supplemental memo from the applicant included a suggested change to Mobility Condition #13. This condition requires the Somerbridge Hotel to make a payment-in-lieu for the ramp design of 25%, which the applicant accepts. However, Somerbridge requested that this amount be capped at \$105,038.88. This is \$2.36 per square foot times 44,508 s.f. of the building in Somerville. Somerbridge Hotel is giving the land for the ramp that connects to the Community Path, and this is essentially the only place it can go to connect both paths and the cycle track along McGrath-O'Brien Highway. The applicant feels this should be tied to the number that is in the amended Development Covenant which was signed with the City, and which mentions \$2.36 per square foot times the amount of square footage in Somerville. Staff stated that they are comfortable with the amended condition.

The Board noted that it received one written comment for the project after the deadline for written submissions. This has been reviewed and will be accepted as part of the record from the Friends of the Community Path.

The Board noted that surface parking lots are the absolute poorest form of land use, particularly in a City as dense as Somerville. The Board asked why structured parking underground was not being considered. The applicant team explained that the proposal is not a lot of surface parking and much less than would normally be seen for a hotel use. The ZBA provided a variance to allow for this. Secondly, the site is contaminated and so going underground is not feasible. The proposal was never to go underground on this site. The applicant was going to use the neighbor's site at 15 McGrath for a joint project with the driveway and parking, but this did not work out. The applicant is proposing parking tucked behind the building and at the bottom of a large retaining wall with the Community Path above it. This will not be visible from the public way. Parking is needed for a hotel use.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Major Amendment to the previous Site Plan Approval (Case PZ21-028) in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district, with the recommended conditions listed in the Staff Memo dated 12 June 2026 and as amended tonight, and the Supplemental Staff Memo dated 10 July 2026.

RESULT:

APPROVED

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Special Permit to establish a hotel use in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district, with the conditions outlined in the Staff Memo and Supplemental Staff Memo, and as amended this evening.

RESULT:

APPROVED

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Member Habib, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to approve, with the conditions listed in the Staff memo and Supplemental Memo and as amended this evening, a Special Permit to establish a formula business in the High-Rise (HR) zoning district.

RESULT:

APPROVED

Vice Chair Aboff retook her seat at 6:29pm.

OTHER BUSINESS: Housing Stock Discussion

The Planning Board discussed the Housing Needs Assessment with Housing Division Staff. This highlighted key findings from the assessment, including the need for more ADA-accessible units and the lack of development of three-bedroom and larger housing stock in the City. The Board expressed concerns about ensuring that new developments address actual City needs rather than anecdotal perceptions. Housing Staff confirmed the demographic trends and housing stock data, including an aging housing stock and a limited supply of single-family homes at 11% of the housing stock, though it is unclear if families are specifically seeking single-family housing.

The discussion highlighted a disconnect between housing supply and family needs. Some Board members suggested that building more 3-4 bedroom units could help address the issue. There was also discussion regarding potential incentives for developers to build larger units, particularly three-bedroom apartments. Housing Staff noted that only about 8.55% of current projects include three-bedroom units. Staff explained that, while income-restricted households need these larger units, construction costs and current inclusionary requirements make it challenging for developers to make three-bedroom units financially viable. The Board discussed the high burden of affordable housing requirements in current development, with a suggestion that developers might prefer building multiple smaller units rather than a few large ones due to cost and efficiency considerations. The Board expressed interest in exploring ways they could provide incentives for larger unit development. There was discussion that there may be insufficient three-bedroom units in the City, but families may also be considering trade-offs due to high prices and suburban preferences. Also, the importance of diversifying housing stock beyond racial and gender diversity to include families and elderly residents, as well as considering future housing needs over the next 5-10 years noting that location-specific factors such as proximity to transit should influence decisions about three-bedroom unit development.

The discussion continued regarding a balance between different unit types and accessibility features, with concerns raised about the need for more accessible units with specific features. An interest was expressed in determining universal design principles that the relevant agencies in the City are aware of as tools that can be considered for recommendations when reviewing applications. Housing Staff acknowledged the need for better coordination and data collection on accessibility requirements. The Board discussed the trade-offs involved in incentivizing different types of housing, including the challenges of accommodating families in an urban setting where incomes have increased and many families are moving to suburbs. There was discussion regarding potential strategies for creating more three-bedroom units, though concerns were raised about the impact on green space and density. It seems that more families may move into three-bedroom units if there are multiple of them within a building. There was a suggestion to explore row houses and townhouses as alternatives. The Board discussed that developers seem to be pushing back against three-unit requirements at the Board stage due to financial constraints and timing issues. The importance of creating predictable, prescriptive paths for developers rather than relying on discretionary decisions at the Planning Board stage was mentioned.

The Board discussed creating policy documents for topics such as green infrastructure, geothermal features, and three-bedroom units.

OTHER BUSINESS: Recommendation to City Council

- Proposing an amendment to Section 2.1.1 of the Zoning Ordinance regarding Homeless Shelters (File# 26-0835)

The Board discussed the proposed amendment to allow by-right homeless shelters in various zoning districts. A comparison to peer communities was presented to the Board. This document seems to show that homeless shelters in other communities are not usually permitted in residential neighborhoods, but when they are it is authorized by Special Permit. There was a suggestion to recommend an amendment to not allow homeless

shelters by-right in the Neighborhood Residence (NR) zoning district but to allow authorization through the Special Permit process. There was also interest in removing the ground floor restriction from the proposal.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (6-0) to recommend adoption with the proposed considerations and amendments as discussed.

RESULT:

RECOMMENDED

Member Schuster exited the meeting at 7:47pm.

PUBLIC HEARING: 32-40 White Street

The applicant team explained that this lot is just under 9,000 s.f. and the proposal is for 29 units with a mix of studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units. The building is proposed to have four-stories, with a basement included. This is on a corner lot of 40 White Street, which is a one-way street, and White Street Place, which is a private way.

The proposal is set to passive house standards and be LEED Platinum certifiable. This is a highly transit-oriented area, and the units being proposed are what the market seems to be looking for currently. The first floor plan shows an accessible lobby and elevator to access the upper units. The plan introduces a Group 2A unit, which is a one-bedroom unit on the first floor. The three units toward the back/side yard are a townhouse that walks into the basement. The Urban Design Commission (UDC) suggested adding windows on the amenity side. The trash and bike room is located on White Street Place. The bike room is technically 30 bike spots, with 29 compliant spots and an extra bike spot within the two-rack equipment. There are also two dumpsters which are accessible by the entire building. The second floor contains two more Group 2A units, #202 and #205. #202 is a one-bedroom, and #205 is a studio. The building shows two bays on either façade of White Street or White Street Place, for a total of 15 balconies in the entire project, five on each floor. Every unit gets a bay and a balcony, or sometimes two bays or two balconies. The fourth floor contains mostly one-bedroom and two-bedroom units facing White Street Place. There is an accessible roof. The plans show a blank wall for an art installation which faces 14 White Street Place. This is a zero plot property, running right along the property line facing the other proposed construction building.

The applicant team explained that the elevator exceeds 10', but this is an accessible roof deck, which pushes the threshold a bit higher. The UDC approved a design option which has a solid brick base that creates the foundation/first floor. This bleeds into a two-tone, light paneling on the top with a darker tone base. The façade will also be coupled with a natural wooden finish. Other potential design options for the building were presented to the Board. This project meets the Green Score and has more open space than required with permeable pavers on the sidewalk and greenery along White Street Place. There are three trees proposed to be planted on White Street. Also, part of the landscape plan is widening the streetscape along White Street from the current 4' width of concrete paving to approximately 12' wide, with a 4' wide furnishing zone with permeable pavers, visitor bike parking racks, three new street trees, and another 8' of concrete paving. Along White Street Place, the proposal is for another 12' setback with concrete paving, street trees, and plantings.

Chair Capuano opened public testimony.

Clara Serpa (68 Elm Street) – stated that aesthetically, the developer should look at other similar buildings that have been built. The proposed building will not attract a lot of families. She asked how many affordable units are proposed. She noted that the area is already very congested with no places to park.

Garrett Einis (14 White Street Place) - commended the architect on the design and streetscape. He noted that his property is 5' away from the proposed building. He believes that the rear lot line would be facing his property and

was not aware it would be a side lot line. He stated that the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) shows that, for a corner lot, the rear lot line should be facing his property instead of a side lot line. He noted that, if the building was pushed back 5', the developer could have a wall of windows instead of a blank wall facing his property's wall of units which have windows on that side. This would bring more natural light into the proposed units and his property's units. He is also concerned about the construction proposed 3" away from the lot line. This will likely require access to his property.

Seeing no additional public comments, Chair Capuano closed public testimony. The written comment period was left open until Friday 9:00am on 31 July 2026.

The Board noted that it had certain expectations regarding the unit mix for this project. There is a building literally next door with three (3) three-bedroom units included, but the applicant is stating that it cannot fit one in. The Board just had a conversation regarding the housing needs of the City, and chief among them was the need for three-bedroom units. The applicant team stated that the project at 44 White Street contains lovely family-sized units, between 1,800-2,000 s.f. each. That project is serving the market for those units. In order for this project to fit three-bedroom units into the building, it would have to sacrifice and merge or delete some number of units. Instead of 29 units, this would likely lead to a 26 or 27 unit project. The applicant team does not feel this best serves the needs of the market in terms of market rate units. The Board noted that the 29-unit count is proposed to get under the threshold of having to put in an affordable three-bedroom unit. The applicant team stated that this is not necessarily true, but the SZO creates a challenge in terms of how to construct and deliver housing. The SZO, as written, has created a ceiling for feasibility that bumps up against the 30 unit count.

The Board expressed concern that there seems to be a dire need for larger family-sized housing and the applicant's statement that this is satisfied by the project next door. The Board asked the applicant team to address the neighbor's concern regarding the blank wall next to his property. The Board requested to see another unit mix proposal presented.

There was discussion regarding if the underground vault is viable for this project. The applicant team stated that it is fully dimensionally compliant with Eversource's requirements and located within the property. The Board asked about a dedicated mail or package room space. The applicant team stated that there is an automated locker area for package storage proposed. The Board asked about the secondary egress from the waste and bicycle room and if this is a guaranteed code-compliant, unobstructed, secondary means of egress. The applicant team stated that, for an occupant load, 150 people in a space allows for one means of egress to be fully compliant. People will primarily be going through the front entry and into the bike room. There are large doors primarily for trash and recycling.

The applicant team noted that they are requesting two Special Permits for multi-family housing, and a head house for accessible access to the roof deck. If the City wants to mandate three-bedroom housing, then it should do so in the SZO. The proposal is otherwise compliant with the ordinance. The Board noted that it has quite a bit of discretion to request items in terms of the Special Permits being requested, as they relate to the zoning and the housing needs of the City.

Following a motion by Chair Capuano, seconded by Vice Chair Aboff, the Board voted unanimously (5-0) to continue this hearing to 8 August 2026.

RESULT:

CONTINUED

OTHER BUSINESS: Board Administration Open Discussion

There was no discussion on this topic.

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.](#)