



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

19 AUGUST 2026 MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via remote participation on Zoom.

NAME	TITLE	STATUS	ARRIVED
Susan Fontano	Chair	<i>Present</i>	
Anne Brockelman	Vice Chair	<i>Absent</i>	
Olivia Mobayed	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Zachary Zarembo	Member	<i>Present</i>	
Brian Cook	Alt. Member	<i>Absent</i>	
Sisia Daglian	Alt. Member	<i>Present</i>	

City staff present: Kit Luster (Planning Division); Lexie Payne (Planning Division)

The meeting was called to order at 6:01pm and adjourned at 7:01pm.

Member Zarembo sat as Acting Clerk.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Meeting Minutes

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Zarembo, seconded by Member Mobayed, the Board voted (3-0-1), with Chair Fontano abstaining, to approve the 15 July 2026 meeting minutes.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 22 Park Avenue (ZP26-000035)

The applicant team explained that the property was built in 1910 and is located about 1/4 of a mile from Davis Square. The structure has a dominant portion in the front and a smaller portion in the back. This was all built in 1910 on an existing foundation. The dominant roof is higher than the back roof. This is the smallest lot on the south side of the street and the third smallest lot on the street itself. It is surrounded by much larger buildings. The overall goal of the project is to capture some unusable space in the attic at the back of the structure and create a new writing studio for the owners. This will be accomplished by raising and unifying the roofs. Part of the proposal is to replace existing steep and narrow attic stairs and also to install a small bathroom at the half story level. The applicant team stated that per Section 2.4.4 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO), the new roof rafters have to intersect the walls at no more than 2' above the finished floor of the half-story. This occurs in compliance everywhere, except at the back corner of the house. This area is about 18' in length and hardly visible from the street. The new height would be about 2' higher. There are two shed dormers visible from the street. The slope of the new roof would match what it is now, approximately a 10:12 ratio, whereas the dormers would be approximately 3:12. These are set back 4'9" from the front gable. There are two dormers on the east facade. The roof is proposed to be raised all the way back so that the eave line is continuous and the ridge line is continuous. The team stated that the design has met all the other requirements except for this 18' section. This proposal provides an architectural integrity that adds to the dignity of this home.

Chair Fontano opened public testimony.

Emma Stellman (3 Wallace Street) – stated that she is in agreement with the proposed plans. The project will keep the house in the character of the neighborhood.

Staff noted that no additional public comment was received via email.

The Board asked if there is any concern with changing the shadows cast to other properties. The applicant team stated that the home is surrounded by taller buildings, and so there is no concern. This is a 2' difference and so the change would be minimal.

Seeing no additional public comments at this time, Chair Fontano closed public testimony.

The Board reviewed the variance criteria findings. For special circumstances of the property, there is a unique site geometry dating to around 1900. This is a small lot of approximately 2,500 s.f. which features a two-story rear mass set back 6', which is unusual in the neighborhood. This is among the smallest lots. There would be a substantial financial hardship to comply with the zoning criteria as this would require complex architectural changes that would likely be much more expensive, including increased construction costs. The Board heard from one neighbor in support. The Board does not believe there will be any detriment to the public good. It seems that this will make the house look better and make it more practical.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Zaremba, seconded by Member Mobayed, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve the Hardship Variance for 22 Park Avenue (ZP26-000035) based on the findings regarding the required criteria and incorporating the conditions as detailed in the Staff Memo.

RESULT:

APPROVED

PUBLIC HEARING: 17 Monmouth Street (ZP26-000043)

The applicant team explained that prior to purchase, the City of Somerville owned this property for 50+ years, and, more specifically, it was owned by the Somerville Housing Authority. The house has not really been used since around 2018/2019. The proposal is for a lot split because the property is in a National Historic District. This was before the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) back in June of this year, and they made some recommendations. The recommendation of Staff is to deny this lot split. The sticking point is a large bay window that Staff would like to see preserved. The applicant team does not see that as an option for this project.

The applicant team explained that the existing home falls on the left of the property. On the right-hand side, there is a large swath of asphalt pavement and some sporadic trees. The property has not been occupied in quite some time and has fallen into a bit of disrepair. The home is from 1896. The existing roof is in bad shape. The house at one point had an unfortunate addition put on the front end, and a similar one on the rear, along with a fire escape. The bay window proposed to be removed will make for a better project in the whole. The applicant team stated that the proposal is to split the lot slightly to the right of the bay window. Removal of the bay allows the applicant to not create a nonconformity from a zoning standpoint. Preserving the bay would create a 1'7" setback on that side. The applicant team is trying to limit the number of variances, while also removing a portion of the building that is in disrepair. There are ten windows in the bay, and none of them are in good shape. The cost to replicate this in an appropriate manner is not feasible. They would like to work with the City to find another location for a similar bay, including one on the other side that could be brought back to life. The applicant team is proposing a rear addition with parking for the three units in the existing house. They are also proposing a new three-family home on the front, and a backyard cottage. All units will have a parking space, and there will be an additional visitor space and a large green space. This is in the Neighborhood Residence (NR) zoning district, which only allows for smaller neighborhood-scale buildings. This is a big house, but the applicant does not believe it is out of character with the existing street, or much of the City. A central driveway would service all three of the buildings using an existing curb cut.

Chair Fontano opened public testimony.

Thomas Bent (3 Harvard Place) – the bay window is a stained glass window and there are many great characteristics of the building. It appears that this property is proposed to be expanded to seven units, where there has not usually been much traffic in the area. He does not have any issues with removal of the bay window, as long as it can be recreated elsewhere in the house.

The Board asked if the proposed roof change and other changes to the building are being done by-right. The applicant team stated that this is the case, as long as the demolition percentage stays under 50%. The Board suggested jogging the property line around the bay. The applicant team stated that this could be further explored if the Board sees fit. It is unclear if the driveway should also jog, and this could make things a bit tight overall in terms of circulation and access. The bay cannot truly be seen unless one is in the driveway of the property.

The Board asked about adding seven units to the property without a lot split, by creating an addition in the back. The applicant team stated that this is not possible based on zoning.

Some Board members stated that given the recommendation from the HPC and the seeming feasibility of being able to move the line while still making the project work, albeit in a tight space, it is unclear if the requirement to eliminate the bay as an option should be considered. The applicant team stated that there needs to be some consideration as to the financials of this project, as this house has sat in disrepair for a number of years and the proposal will be more of a benefit to the neighborhood and City.

Other Board members stated that taking this house that has essentially abandoned for many years, rehabbing it, and adding another triple-decker and unit in the back is aligned with SomerVision 2040. This is going to be a very capital-intensive project, and the applicant team needs to maximize the space in order to make it feasible. Removal of the window may make sense in order to not require the applicant to request additional variances. The Board noted that the purpose of the NR district is to permit the development of 1-, 2-, and 3-unit detached and semi-detached residential units on individual lots, and this does provide that ability, while also rehabbing an unoccupied building.

Seeing no additional public comments at this time, Chair Fontano closed public testimony.

Following a motion by Acting Clerk Zaremba, seconded by Member Mobayed, the Board voted unanimously (4-0) to approve a Special Permit for 17 Monmouth Street (ZP26-000043), based on the findings regarding the required criteria and incorporating the conditions as detailed in the Staff Memo.

RESULT:

APPROVED

GENERAL BUSINESS: Massachusetts General Law Updates to Variance Criteria

The Board agreed to table discussion of this item to the next meeting.

GENERAL BUSINESS: Board Jurisdiction Zoning Amendment

The Board agreed to table discussion of this item to the next meeting.

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.](#)