City of Somerville
STRATEGY & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

MAYOR JAKE WILSON

To: Zoning Board of Appeals
From: Planning Division
Date: November 12, 2026
Subject: 102 Morrison Ave Variance Application

Planning Division staff have reviewed the variance application for 102 Morrison Ave. This memo provides analysis and supporting information for weighing the benefits versus detriments of issuing the requested variance subject to the statutory requirements of M.G.L. 40A.

Zoning Analysis

Strict enforcement of the zoning ordinance for 102 Morrison Ave would require a backyard cottage to be setback 60' from what many would expect to be the rear lot line because the property abuts the Somerville Community Path. The Community Path is classified as a "thoroughfare" and "civic space" by the Inspectional Services Division. Any lot abutting the Community Path has two front lot lines – one fronting the street and one fronting the Community Path - and is therefore subject to requisite setback standards on both fronts. As buildings are not permitted within setback areas and the lot cannot accommodate a backyard cottage elsewhere, strict enforcement of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance would not allow a backyard cottage on this parcel, which would otherwise be permitted by-right. The proposed backyard cottage would be compliant with setbacks and otherwise located on the lot as expected, save for the dual frontage designation due to the Community Path.

Variance Requirement	Required	Proposed	Variance
ZP26-000090 Primary Front Setback (SZO 3.1.12.b,)	60' primary front setback from Community Path	3.7' primary front setback from Community Path	56.3 ft less than required

Benefits to the Applicant

The Planning Division has identified the following benefits to the Applicant:

- Allows the Applicant to construct a backyard cottage on the property.
- Repurposing of an existing non-conforming structure that would be impossible to redevelop otherwise.
- Increased desirability and value of the property

Benefits to the Public Interest

Massachusetts case law treats the public interest as relating to the general public, extending beyond the boundaries of a municipality. Zoning defines the public interest by the purpose that zoning ordinances are adopted and the statutory limits of what zoning can regulate.

The Planning Division identified the following benefits to the public interest:

- Additional housing in the community
- Creation of transit-oriented living opportunities
- Increase in property value and taxbase

Detriments to the Health, Safety, and Welfare of the Neighborhood

Massachusetts case law treats the word "neighborhood" as an elastic geographic area that may alter in size according to the nature of the impact of a proposed variance. For the context of the requested variance, staff analysis identifies public health, safety, and welfare consequences of the proposal that are experienced in the geographically relevant area.

The Planning Division identified the following detriments to the Health, Safety, and Welfare of the Neighborhood:

- No detriments were identified to the Health, Safety, and Welfare of the Neighborhood.