City of Somerville

Human Rights Commission (HRC)

October 28, 2026 | 6:30 P.M

Format: Zoom

Proposed Meeting Minutes

Meeting called to Order at 6:32 PM

Attendance:

Commissioners present: Elyse Best (Co-Chair), Salma Kazmi (Co-Chair), Brian Sokol, Primrose Chareka, Jenny Bonham-Carter, Jason Mackey, Suelin Chen, Christopher Spicer Hankle, and Jovana Calvillo.

Commissioner Absent: Pao Mendez

Members of the Public Present: Ewan Henrie, Somerville Times Contributing Reporter and Joe Lynch, Chair of the Somerville Licensing Commission

A quorum was present.

Meeting

1. September Minutes Approval

The Commission reviewed the minutes of the September 30, 2026 meeting. There being no corrections, a motion was made to approve the minutes and the motion passed.

2. Complaints Investigation Procedure Revisions

The Commission approved investigation procedures in September. The City Attorney recommended revising the conflict-of-interest and recusal provisions to better reflect state requirements, finding the earlier wording too restrictive. The revision requires Commissioners with an investigation-related conflict to notify the chairs, in addition to any required formal state notification.

Vote: A motion was made to approve the revised investigation procedures. The motion passed.

3. Complaint Intake Form Revisions

Elyse outlined two changes:

- Identified the HRC as a volunteer body to set expectations for response times.
- Included the HRC email address on the first page and the thank-you/landing page in case the public needed to reach out to an HRC Commissioner for assistance.

Vote: Motion was made to approve the revised intake form as circulated. The motion passed.

4. Membership Removal for Absenteeism

The Commission discussed Pao Mendez's extended absenteeism and the Commission's unsuccessful attempts to reach them. A motion was made to remove the member due to absenteeism, in accordance with the ordinance. The motion passed.

5. Commissioner Recruitment and Selection

The City proposed that the Mayor's Office and Human Resources advertise open seats, conduct interviews, and make selections, to create a consistent process across the City's approximately 40 multi-member bodies. Under the proposal, the Commission could submit questions for interviewers to ask and possibly hold a meet-and-greet with applicants but would not take part in interviews or selection. Commissioners understood that appointments would still require mayoral appointment and City Council confirmation.

Commissioners expressed concern that the proposal does not reflect the Commission's volunteer work and established practices, and that City staff are less familiar with HRC operations and community agreements. Commissioners discussed reviewing applications before selection and having veto authority afterward. Some felt veto authority would be too strong a request. Commissioners also discussed that the optics of the current process are not good for anybody, including the City, since a process that excludes each commission's involvement has no checks and balances.

A letter was suggested to document the Commission's concerns and make specific requests to the City. The letter could include:

- Visibility into applications (resumes or letters of intent).
- At least one sitting commissioner on the interview process.
- A consistent change that benefits all commissions.
- A note that the optics of the current process are not good for anybody.
- A recommendation that candidates attend one or two Commission meetings before applying.
- Commission input on the City's upcoming recruitment notice.

Vote: A motion was made to write and send the email. The motion passed.

6. Advisory Council Planning

The Advisory Council has not yet been formalized. Commissioners were asked to send the Admin Committee recommendations for Somerville residents with human rights-related skills and networks.

Primrose shared a draft of the communication, Google Form, cleaned contact spreadsheet, and next-step notes, aiming for a first meeting around January with low-friction commitments. Commissioners will review the materials offline and consider them at the November 18 meeting. These are Advisory Council roles, not Commission seats.

Christopher identified several notable community service advocates and professionals as potential candidates for the Advisory Council. Their names were shared as recommendations for consideration, not as confirmed by participants or formal appointments.

7. Anti-Hate and Training Workshop with Somerville Office on Immigrant Affairs (SOIA)

Brian reported on a planning meeting with facilitator Jim McCarty and community representatives. The City expanded the scope to five groups; structure and format remain under discussion. January is the target, as November is too soon. McCarty will submit a proposal, and Open Meeting Law considerations need clarification. Others are welcome to join planning through the Compliance & Training Subcommittee.

8. Rights Violation Response and Correspondence

Two Israel-Palestine-related complaints were referred to the Rights Violation Response Committee. The 15-day contact period is underway. The subcommittee will meet early the following week and use the newly approved process.

Other correspondence:

- Complaints data were provided at Senator Pat Jehlen's request.
- Ongoing parent emails concern special-education accommodations and a dispute with Somerville Public Schools. Discussion addressed disability rights and service disparities, with a recommendation to submit a formal complaint through the new intake form.
- About five other emails addressed Israel-Palestine topics; some were political, while others were more aggressive or hateful.

The commission agreed to log emails as complaints when their content warrants formal documentation.

9. Subcommittee Organization and 2027 Priorities

Commissioners discussed uneven results from the current subcommittee structure. Rights Violation Response now has a clear purpose. Options included creating a communications/outreach committee or

adding those functions elsewhere, along with greater use of potentially nimbler project-based or ad-hoc approaches.

The Commission's 2027 priorities remain undecided; current work has focused on immigrant rights and basic needs. Discussion will be resumed at the next meeting. No formal decisions were made.

Meeting adjournment: Due to members needing to depart, the meeting was adjourned at 7:38 PM to avoid the loss of quorum.

Discussed Meeting Materials Attached to these minutes:

- **Revised and Finalized Complaints Investigation Process Document**
- **Complaint Form (intake form)**

Next Meeting: November 18, 2026

If a member of the public has any questions for the HRC, please email the Commission at hrc@somervillema.gov.