

Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

# 2023 Annual Report

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# Somerville



## Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee

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# Table of Contents

<b>2023 Annual Report</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Committee Members</b>	<b>3</b>
Current Community Representatives	3
Ex Officio	3
Former Community Representatives	3
Subcommittees	3
<b>Letter from the Chair</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Areas of Activity</b>	<b>7</b>
Focus Area: Enforcement and Street Safety	7
Letters	9
Davis Square Station Accessibility Improvements Project	9
FY24 Budget Priorities	9
Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing Bridge Project	10
Draft Safe Streets Ordinance	10
Project Review	11
Meeting Engagement	11
Events	12
Community Walks	12
Tablings	12
Gatherings	13
<b>Progress on 2023 Goals</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Looking Ahead to 2024</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>How to Get Involved</b>	<b>16</b>
Join PTAC	16
Make Your Voice Heard	16

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## **Committee Members**

### **Current Community Representatives**

Ted Alexander

Ginny Alverson

Caroline Bodager

Meredith Brown

Laura Evans

Christopher Ferry

Vitor Pamplona (*Vice Chair*)

Zach Rosenberg

Alessandra Seiter (*Chair*)

Carole Voulgaris (*Secretary*)

### **Ex Officio**

Lauren Craik (*OSPCD - Mobility*)

Justin Schreiber (*OSPCD - Mobility*)

Will Mbah (*City Council*)

### **Former Community Representatives**

Thomas Coen

Kirsten Walters

Beatriz Gómez Mouakad (*City Council*)

### **Subcommittees**

Education & Engagement

Engineering & Evaluation

Policy & Enforcement

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## Letter from the Chair

All data not linked below comes from the [Mobility Division's 2023 Key Performance Indicators report](#).

2023 was a year of progress and hope for walkability and transit-friendliness in Somerville. At a time when [national pedestrian deaths are at a 40-year high](#), marking an alarming reversal of safety trends, Somerville represents a promising alternative. For the first time since 2018, our community suffered **no fatal crashes**. Severe crashes have dropped by 54% over the past decade, while 2023 saw the lowest number of crashes in general since 2012 (excluding 2020 when far fewer people were using the roads due to COVID-19 isolation). At the same time, more people are walking in Somerville. This too is in stark contrast to the national norm, with [all 50 states experiencing a pandemic-induced decline in walking that still hasn't reversed](#). Taken together, all of this data means that Somerville's streets are steadily becoming safer, more life-giving places to walk. It also means we must continue our impressive levels of investment in traffic calming and crosswalk infrastructure. In 2023, Somerville installed 56 traffic calming treatments including curb extensions, speed humps, raised crosswalks, and more. Moreover, the City implemented over 400 crosswalk improvements including new and refreshed markings, accessible push buttons and countdown timers, and [Clear Corners](#) treatments. These investments add up to a city of safe and vibrant mobility that can be a model for others around the country.

Indicators of transit success are more subtle, but the progress lies in equity-based strategies for increasing ridership and infrastructure (re)investments. Even though weekday bus and subway ridership is far below pre-pandemic levels, Somerville made transit more accessible to thousands of public school students, low-income residents, and City staff through the [Transit Benefits Program](#). Over 115,000 trips were taken with these free passes, and 84% of participants reported using a car less because of them. Somerville also continues to invest in transit speed and reliability, installing nearly 30 transit priority treatments in 2023 including bus lanes, in-lane bus stops, and signal priority improvements. At the regional level, new MBTA leadership launched a massive, palpable effort to right a sinking ferry. After the agency [launched a plan in November 2023](#) to eliminate all system

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slow zones by the end of 2024, riders on the [Red Line](#) and [Green Line](#) have experienced measurably shorter rides following temporary closures. Following a [new labor contract that promises a much higher starting wage for bus drivers](#), the MBTA saw a massive increase in driver applications. While [the MBTA still needs a massive amount of money to avoid a fiscal cliff in the coming years](#), the improvements we saw in 2023 leave room for optimism.

Other 2023 highlights include:

- The opening of the full Community Path, completing a long-awaited pedestrian and bicycle connection from Bedford to Boston. The Community Path Extension is already seeing a huge amount of use, including a peak of almost 30,000 weekly users in October 2023.
- The adoption of the [Somerville Bicycle Network Plan](#), a comprehensive vision for connected bicycle infrastructure. All corridors slated for improvement in the plan will also be more pedestrian-friendly after redesign.
- The release of [25% design ideas and vision for the Union Square Plaza and Streetscape Project](#), which includes exciting mobility improvements like pedestrianizing a portion of Bow Street, improving access to the Green Line station, and installing bus priority lanes on Prospect Street.

There is, of course, always more work to be done. [Highland Ave](#) is in desperate need of redesign. Essential utility work has been ongoing and we should see interim paving starting very soon. But design work isn't expected to resume until Summer 2025 at the earliest – nearly four years after the first community meeting. Meanwhile, Highland Ave remains one of the most dangerous corridors in the City for vulnerable road users.

Similarly, McGrath Highway endures as a scourge to the safety and vitality of our community. [McGrath was built in 1928 and partially elevated in the 1950s with the McCarthy Overpass](#). 60 years later, Somerville residents launched a massive campaign to tear down the overpass, demanding that one of the most diverse areas of our city be reconnected, spared from needless traffic deaths and severe injuries, and opened to increased economic opportunity. That campaign culminated in [MassDOT's 2013 Grounding McGrath Study](#), which validated the feasibility of turning the highway into a people-friendly at-grade boulevard. The next year, MassDOT launched an environmental permitting and preliminary design process. In the intervening decade, the McGrath Boulevard project has received

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funding to begin in 2027 while traffic on the highway has seen a steady 34% decrease. The most recent milestone came in February 2024 with the [release of an updated concept design](#). Transforming McGrath from one of the deadliest roads in the city into a corridor that supports human-friendly mobility will continue to be a long haul, but we must stay energized to push for an alternative that will serve our community for decades to come.

There is clearly no shortage of positive activity and continued need at all scales of mobility in Somerville. This report zooms in on one group of community members working for change alongside a dedicated and relentless team of City staff, a City Council of progressive transportation allies, a robust network of advocacy organizations, and an incredible number of residents who are actively invested in our ability to move safely and joyfully. 2023 was PTAC's fourth year of activity, and we are looking forward to a half-decade of meetings, letters, community events, and more in 2024.

With warmth and solidarity,

Alessandra Seiter

Chair of the Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

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## Areas of Activity

### Focus Area: Enforcement and Street Safety

In 2023, PTAC devoted considerable time and energy to exploring the role of enforcement in street safety. Committee members came to these conversations with an array of beliefs: some favored stronger law enforcement of dangerous driving behavior, others supported modified approaches to traffic enforcement like automated ticketing, others still preferred self-enforcing roads based on design rather than police presence.

We all agreed, though, on the significance of the topic. Regardless of our personal feelings, traffic stops are the most common way civilians interact with the police, and [evidence suggests](#) that Black drivers are stopped at higher rates than white or Hispanic drivers. There are [several bills](#) working their way through the Massachusetts legislature pertaining to automated enforcement. And we are in the midst of a [nationwide pedestrian safety crisis](#) with an average of 20 people losing their lives every day just by walking around their neighborhoods — the highest number since 1981. All of this means that questions of how we make our streets safe for people of all modes and identities are urgent and complex. PTAC understood that we needed to engage with these questions in Somerville's context to fulfill our committee's responsibilities.

To this end, PTAC devoted a full quarter of our meetings in 2023 to the question of traffic enforcement. We invited four sets of speakers to present from a variety of perspectives and roles:

- In May, Somerville's **Parking Department** presented on their enforcement processes, including the regulations they uphold, how they respond to violations, and the results of their automated parking enforcement pilot. We learned that obstruction of pedestrian walkways was not among the top three ticket types in 2023, that the automated enforcement pilot in front of B-Fresh in Davis Square recorded 420 violations with the longest violation lasting 68 minutes, and that all revenue generated through parking violations in accessible spots goes directly to the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities. [View the Parking Department's](#)

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[presentation slides](#) and [view the minutes from this presentation](#), and a [write-up of the meeting in \*The Somerville Times\*](#).

- In June, **LivableStreets Alliance** staff presented their 2022 report [Dismantling Law Enforcement's Role in Traffic Safety: A Roadmap for Massachusetts](#). We learned about evidence that traffic stops have not been shown to improve road safety, that high-visibility enforcement campaigns have no lasting impact on driving behavior, and that automated enforcement has been found to reduce crashes where cameras are installed. [View the minutes from this presentation](#), and [read the report](#).
- Also in June, **Mobility** staff presented on their evolving approach to traffic enforcement within [Somerville's Vision Zero framework](#). We learned that while the City's [2020 Vision Zero Action Plan](#) identifies equitable enforcement as a strategy for combating dangerous driving behavior, over the past three years Mobility has seen a lack of evidence that enforcement effectively improves street safety. They have also found it difficult to separate traffic enforcement from systemic issues like discriminatory traffic stops and inequitable fines, exacerbated by a lack of tools for equitable enforcement. Mobility's more recent approach to enforcement revolves around education rather than punishment, and is secondary to changing the structure of our streets so that unsafe behavior is less likely to happen. [View Mobility's presentation slides](#) and [view the minutes from the presentation](#).
- Finally, in August, **Somerville Police Department** staff presented their approach to traffic enforcement in the City, focusing on vulnerable road users. We learned that of the SPD's 88 staff members, three are assigned to a Traffic Unit whose sole responsibility is to monitor traffic, with a focus on motor vehicle enforcement. In the first half of 2023, the most frequent citation types included failure to stop or yield, no inspection sticker, texting while driving, speeding, and "improper operation of a motor vehicle." We also learned that without the [overtime funding](#) SPD has received over the past few years from the [Massachusetts Municipal Road Safety \(MRS\) Grant](#), they would not do enforcement of pedestrians or cyclists. [View SPD's presentation slides](#) and [view the minutes from the presentation](#).

We are grateful to all the presenters listed above for sharing their expertise and time with us over this past year. PTAC has not yet come to consensus on questions of traffic enforcement, and we intend to continue our exploration in 2024.



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## Letters

Over the past year PTAC wrote four advocacy letters, continuing our rate of one letter every three months. PTAC devoted significant commitment and analysis to these letters, including independent research, subcommittee work, committee discussions, and stakeholder engagement.

### [Davis Square Station Accessibility Improvements Project](#)

- **DATE:** March 1, 2023.
- **DETAILS:** The MBTA is planning to [improve Davis Square Station accessibility](#) as part of its system-wide [Elevator Accessibility Upgrades](#) project. PTAC is enthusiastic about the MBTA's efforts to make existing stations more accessible, but are concerned about designs for the Holland Street headhouse. We encouraged the MBTA to devote more resources to a comprehensive redesign of the Holland Street headhouse without delaying elevator replacements at the mezzanine or College Avenue headhouse. We also encouraged the City of Somerville to pursue additional accessibility improvements in Davis Square.
- **PROGRESS:** The MBTA has not advanced the station project past 75% design. The City has [replaced old cobblestone](#) along Elm Street and around Statue Park with new sidewalks. New crosswalks are planned at the intersections of Elm Street @ Grove Street and College Avenue @ Morrison Avenue.

### [FY24 Budget Priorities](#)

- **DATE:** May 26, 2023.
- **DETAILS:** PTAC identified two street safety priorities not already included in the City's [Capital Investment Plan \(CIP\)](#). We encouraged Mayor Ballantyne and City Council to launch a planning process for a north-south transit connector to break the isolation of Mystic Avenue, improve bus connections to GLX stations, and make it easier for community members with mobility impairments to traverse Somerville's steep streets. PTAC identified this priority to accommodate gaps in the [MBTA Bus Network Redesign](#). We also encouraged elected officials to fund a Curb Manager to support the [Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study](#).

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- **PROGRESS:** Mobility identified a staff lead for the north-south transit connector. They are working with the [Metropolitan Area Planning Council \(MAPC\)](#) on a feasibility study. A new project manager role has been allocated to the Parking Department.

#### [Mystic River Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossing Bridge Project](#)

- **DATE:** July 21, 2023.
- **DETAILS:** The MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is planning to construct a shared-use path over the Mystic River between the Fellsway and Route 99/Alford Street, connecting the Mystic River Greenway in Assembly Square with the Northern Strand Community Trail in Everett. The 75% design proposes a path that is 12 feet wide – the same width as the narrowest segments of the Community Path Extension and two feet narrower than the project’s 2018 conceptual design. PTAC joined the [Somerville Transit Equity Partnership \(STEP\)](#) and [Friends of the Community Path \(FotCP\)](#) to encourage the DCR to restore the bridge design to its original 14-foot path width.
- **PROGRESS:** The DCR has not advanced the bridge project past 75% design. No public meetings are scheduled. Advocacy around the bridge has continued with more letters, pushback at the DCR’s [Draw Seven Park Renovations Project](#) meeting in November, and vocal support from Senator Jehlen and Representative Connolly.

#### [Draft Safe Streets Ordinance](#)

- **DATE:** November 17, 2023.
- **DETAILS:** Councilor-At-Large Willie Burnley Jr. introduced the [draft ordinance](#) at the September 28 City Council meeting. If passed, the Safe Streets Ordinance would amend Somerville’s [Complete Streets Ordinance](#) passed in 2014. PTAC supports the spirit of the ordinance and its potential to accelerate the construction of safe infrastructure for vulnerable road users, especially given the success of Cambridge’s similar [Cycling Safety Ordinance](#) passed in 2019. However, we encouraged the Council to strengthen the elements of the draft ordinance that address pedestrian, transit, and accessible infrastructure to give legal weight and accountability to existing City documents that put forth comprehensive visions for street safety.

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- **PROGRESS:** The draft ordinance is under review by the Council's Legislative Matters Committee. The Committee [discussed a brief update on February 13, 2024](#), including that Councilor Burnley Jr. and Analyst Salisbury have been meeting biweekly with Mobility, Intergovernmental Affairs, and Engineering. Another update is expected in the coming months.

## Project Review

PTAC reviewed and gave feedback on 5 projects in 2023:

1. Davis Square Station Accessibility Improvements Project ([view project details](#), [read PTAC letter](#)).
2. East Broadway Bus Extension ([view project details](#), [view presentation](#), [view meeting minutes](#)).
3. Tufts Street Reconstruction ([view project details](#), [view first meeting minutes](#), [view second meeting minutes](#)).
4. Glen Street Quick-Build Neighborway ([view project details](#), [view community walk details](#)).
5. West Broadway Reconstruction ([view project details](#), [view meeting minutes](#)).

## Meeting Engagement

PTAC welcomed over 30 guests to our monthly committee meetings in 2023, including fellow Somerville residents, safe streets advocates, City staff, transportation planners, elected officials, and policy experts. Several of these guests gave presentations at PTAC's invitation, including on:

1. Davis Square Station Accessibility Improvements Project ([view meeting minutes with presentation slides](#), [read PTAC letter](#)).
2. GLX station safety review and improvement plans ([view presentation](#)).
3. Traffic engineering: No Turn on Red signs, Traffic Management Plans, pavement marking/clear corners, pedestrians signals, and Transit Signal Priority ([view presentation](#)).
4. Somerville Safe Routes to School and Transit Benefits Program ([view presentation](#)).
5. Parking enforcement ([view presentation](#)).

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6. LivableStreets Alliance report: *Dismantling Law Enforcement's Role in Traffic Safety* ([read report](#)).
  7. Mobility's approach to traffic enforcement within Somerville's Vision Zero framework ([view presentation](#)).
  8. Development review 101 ([view presentation](#)).
  9. Somerville Police Department's approach to traffic enforcement ([view presentation](#), [view meeting minutes](#)).
  10. Proposed Safe Streets Ordinance ([view presentation](#), [read PTAC letter](#)).
  11. Snow clearing on sidewalks and transit infrastructure ([view presentation](#)).

## Events

PTAC hosted or participated in 11 events in 2023, averaging almost one event every month.

### *Community Walks*

PTAC's community walks invited neighbors to explore areas where the City is planning a street reconstruction, identifying areas for improvement and generating feedback to inform project designs.

1. May: Western Washington Street ([view event details](#), [view project details](#)).
2. August: Tufts Street ([view event details](#), [view project details](#)).
3. October: Glen Street ([view event details](#), [view project details](#)).

### *Tablings*

PTAC tabled with Mobility staff throughout the year. At the tables, we asked community members to share their favorite places to walk in Somerville. [We got over 230 contributions, and put them all on an interactive map!](#) We also shared informational postcards, newsletter signup sheets, a copy of our latest advocacy letter, and information on our next meeting.

1. May: Teen Empowerment Youth Block Party.
2. June: [Carnaval](#).
3. August: Somerville High School Welcome Night.
4. September: [SomerStreets - Strike Up the Bands](#).
5. October: [SomerStreets - Monster Mash](#).

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6. December: [Somerville Winter Farmers Market](#).

### Gatherings

1. May: PTAC member social at Aeronaut.
2. November: [World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims](#).
  - a. Organized by [Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets \(SASS\)](#), Route 16 Traffic Calming Coalition, [Somerville City Council](#), [Everywhere Arlington Livable Streets \(EALS\)](#), and [WalkMedford](#).

## Progress on 2023 Goals

2023 saw the accomplishment of 3 of PTAC's goals, and progress on 6. We are thankful for the many individuals and teams who helped turn these projects, conversations, and events into reality.

2023 Goal	Priority Level	Progress
Enforcement & its role in traffic safety	High	3 meetings held with 4 sets of speakers; Letter opportunity?
GLX station safety/access	High	1 meeting; station improvements ongoing, including through Union Square Streetscape Project
Opening the Community Path Extension (CPX)	High	CPX is fully open!
Children's safety including Safe Routes to School	High	2 meetings held
Community walks including Neighborways	Medium	3 walks held including 2 on future Neighborways
Bus Network Redesign improvements	Medium	North-south transit connector being concretely explored
City snow-clearing pilot	Medium	1 meeting held
Rubric for evaluating projects and plans	Medium	Not started

2023 Goal	Priority Level	Progress
Learning from Transit Benefits Program	Medium	1 meeting held
Feedback on Silver Line Extension Alternatives Analysis	Medium	Missed opportunity (didn't appoint replacement rep to SLX working group)
Extending GLX to Route 16	Medium	Not started
Providing PTAC as platform for more diverse range of experiences	Medium	Event efforts, especially focused on youth; call for new members launched

## Looking Ahead to 2024

PTAC is looking forward to another year of work alongside Mobility and the many transportation advocacy groups that call Somerville home. Our priorities for 2024 include:

- **Welcoming new committee members:** Mobility and PTAC launched a call for new members in December 2023. We are so excited to work with them! Our first priority of the year will be onboarding new members into committee processes, integrating their priorities into PTAC's work, and revisiting our subcommittee structure with their input.
- **School mobility:** Engaging with parent, student, and school communities to understand and amplify mobility challenges, with a focus on the Winter Hill community and ongoing conversations around school siting options.
- **Enforcement:** Building on our 2023 conversations to continue exploring the role of law enforcement in traffic safety, with the goal of voicing a clear committee stance.

Beyond these priorities, we hope to:

- Begin work on a committee rubric for evaluating projects and plans.
- Monitor the progress of the Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study, including revisiting parking requirements in the City's zoning code.

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- Monitor the progress of the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign including Mobility's early efforts toward a north-south transit connector.
  - Monitor the progress of the snow clearing pilot.
  - Explore new and amplify existing advocacy opportunities around keeping sidewalks clear after trash/recycling pickup.
  - Monitor the progress of installing No Turn on Red signs at the vast majority of City-owned intersections.
  - Engage with City Council on developments to the draft Safe Streets Ordinance.
  - Explore new and amplify existing advocacy opportunities around extending either the Medford/Tufts branch of the Green Line to Route 16 or the Union Square branch to Porter Square.

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## How to Get Involved

### Join PTAC

PTAC periodically solicits applications for membership and submits recommendations for appointment to the Mayor. Additionally, community members may apply to join Somerville PTAC through the following process:

- Attend a minimum of six monthly committee meetings in a two-year period, and actively participate in other committee activities.
- Declare interest in becoming a member at a monthly committee meeting, and obtain the endorsement of the current membership through a simple majority vote. The current membership will then submit their recommendation for appointment to the Mayor.
- Write a letter to the Mayor, expressing interest in becoming a member and detailing any relevant experience.
- If appointed by the Mayor, arrange a time with the City Clerk to be officially sworn in as a member.

### Make Your Voice Heard

- Attend a monthly PTAC meeting, (usually) held on the third Thursday of each month, 6:30 - 8:00 pm. Meetings are held in hybrid format (virtual and in-person options). If you'd like to attend a meeting and need accessibility accommodations or have other questions/concerns, email [transportation@somervillema.gov](mailto:transportation@somervillema.gov).
- Stay up-to-date on committee meetings, advocacy work, and community events with the monthly [PTAC newsletter](#).
- Stay informed about pedestrian and transit happenings in Somerville with the monthly [Mobility Division newsletter](#).
- Sign up for email notifications about City Council and Committee meetings through [Legistar](#).
- Give feedback on City projects and plans on [SomerVoice](#).
- Request a specific improvement or report a problem via [Somerville 311](#).