



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 20, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held in the City Council Committee Room and via Zoom for remote participation, and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 6:01 p.m. and adjourned at 8:56 p.m.

The Committee entered into recess at 7:56 p.m. and reconvened at 8:06 p.m.

Others present:

Michael Potere – Assistant Clerk of Committees; Hannah Carrillo – Legislative Liaison; Ellen Shachter – Director of the Office of Housing Stability; Rachel Nadkarni – Director of Economic Development; Ted Fields – Senior Planner, Economic Development; Greg Jenkins – Director of the Arts Council; Beatriz Gomez Mouakad – Ward 5 City Councilor; Ann Gille – Director of Human Resources; Waleska Alves – Recruitment Manager; James Stanford – Deputy Chief, Somerville Police Department; Joseph Teves – Officer, Somerville Police Department.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Kristen Strezo, Vice Chair Judy Pineda Neufeld and Jesse Clingan

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0961](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Housing and Community Development Committee Meeting of May 30, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

Housing Stability

2. Order (ID # [22-0085](#)) By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of the Office of Housing Stability appear before the Housing and Community Development Committee to discuss the current status of Somerville residents facing displacement and the number of households seeking rental assistance.

Director Shachter stated that the city has assisted 249 households with rental assistance during the last fiscal year. Director Shachter noted that although funding for new applications has nearly run out, an effort is being made to reallocate the \$3 million in funding approved by the Council for rental assistance from the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to fund the Flex ARPA Rental Assistance Program. Director Shachter also stated that the department intends to begin issuing its first 12 municipal rent vouchers beginning in November 2023, with 7 being available immediately and 5 becoming available shortly thereafter, but also explained that the Cambridge Housing Authority has yet to hire a full-time staff member to administer the program, which may delay its implementation.

Director Shachter also stated that there have been 117 eviction cases filed in Somerville since February 2023, half of which were based on nonpayment, a quarter were based on lease violations, and a quarter were “no cause” evictions for reasons such as building sales, etc. Director Shachter added that during the last fiscal year, the department has assisted 182 families facing evictions. Finally, Director Shachter stated that the department is supporting state-level legislation that will assist renters facing eviction, as well as a statewide real estate transfer fee that could generate between \$6-10 million in annual revenue for the city.

Councilor Clingan asked if there is an expectation that gentrification will continue to alter the real estate landscape in the city, and Director Shachter replied that it likely would but that Somerville has more robust resources and programs available to alleviate it compared to neighboring cities that have not similarly made housing stability a priority.

Chair Strezo stated the situation with rents rapidly increasing is unsustainable and asked what will happen when the housing bubble pops, and Director Shachter replied that the department’s housing program will step in and make as much of an impact as possible to keep people in their homes. Director Shachter added that the department will continue to seek out ways to increase funding for those programs.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about the department having 125 new cases per month and how that compared to the previous year, and Director Shachter stated that the number has been stable during the course of the past two years.

Councilor Clingan asked how many housing program units are currently vacant, and Director Shachter replied that there are currently vacancies but those units are being held for allocation through the municipal voucher program.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Armory

- 3. Resolution (ID # [23-1310](#))

By Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Strezo
That the Administration report to this Council on the usage of the Armory building by existing tenants, city tenants, and what have been the vacancies.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 3 (ID # 23-1310), 4 (ID # 23-1309), and 5 (ID # 23-1308) would be taken together.

Director Nadkarni stated that the Administration has not yet made any final decisions regarding usage for the Armory building. Senior Planner Fields added that there are some tenant vacancies in the building resulting from the

planning process, and that the Administration is not currently actively pursuing new tenants for those vacancies. Director Jenkins added that the current tenants are related to the arts, such as members of the dance community. Director Nadkarni stated that, during the current planning process, there are two points of consensus: stability for the current tenants, and the continued use of the performance hall. Director Nadkarni continued that the issues where consensus is lacking pertain to the range of arts that would be permitted to use and lease space in the building moving forward, and that a larger community conversation needs to take place. Senior Planner Fields added that the complexity of this process would likely take longer than initially anticipated, in part to work with existing tenants to increase their security and stability in the building.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about the timeline for when the decisions regarding the use of the building will be made, and Director Nadkarni replied that the process for these decisions to be made is complex and that a definitive timeline does not yet exist.

Chair Strezo expressed concern that the two plans to move forward did not expressly include reference to the arts or existing tenants, and asked the Administration to respond to that. Councilor Clingan expressed similar concern regarding stability for the building's existing tenants, and asked if hiring a private contractor to come in and run the facility had been considered. Senior Planner Fields responded that a contract was awarded last year to master planning consultants to conduct research and hold community meetings regarding the future use of the building. Senior Planner Fields continued that one result of the consultant's work was that the city's operation the facility was a disfavored option, and that is one reason further development has been delayed.

Director Jenkins added that there was a range of governance proposals for the Armory building: one was to sell the Armory, which was not considered the ideal option; another was to have a third-party entity come in and fully operate the facility, which is already happening to a lesser extent; and the other was to continue the current multi-tenant model. Director Jenkins continued that, as a result, the department is currently engaged in an analysis as to what the necessary investment would be to have the city operate the facility, as compared to the multi-tenant model using third-party management, the latter of which would require the city to issue requests for proposals (RFPs). Director Jenkins concluded by stating that this analysis is currently ongoing.

Councilor Clingan asked if the RFPs would make the tenants vendors of the city and require them to take certain clients, and Director Jenkins replied that the outcome would be legal lease agreements and, for example, if an agreed upon rent was lower than the market value, there would likely be an expectation that the tenant also provide a community benefit. Director

Jenkins added that the RFP process would allow for fair and equitable bidding on leasing the space, and the question then becomes is the multi-tenant model preferred, or would it be more beneficial to the community to have the city run the Armory in the same way it operates pools or ice-skating rinks.

Because a full quorum of the City Council was not present, Chair Strezio recognized Ward 5 Councilor Gomez Mouakad to speak at 6:41 p.m.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad expressed concern regarding insufficient community input on the development of the Armory, instability for its current tenants, the extended duration of the planning process, and the lack of transparency in the planning process. Director Nadkarni responded that the department's first goal is to focus on the tenant stability issue, which requires working with the law department on occupancy agreements for the existing tenants. After that, the department will continue working towards putting forth a master plan for the use of the space, including facilitating community engagement and discussions regarding the same. Senior Planner Fields added that part of the reason for the delay in moving forward is the extensive research being conducted regarding the ways the space can most effectively be used in the future.

Councilor Clingan asked about the current arrangement for the building's tenants, and Senior Planner Fields responded that because the building was taken by eminent domain, the Law Department advised the use of occupancy agreements, not leases, and then later those spaces can be opened up for public RFPs in compliance with state procurement laws.

Chair Strezio sponsored Stephanie Scherpf, Co-Director and CEO for the Center for the Arts at the Armory, to speak. Scherpf advocated for increased involvement by her organization in the development of the master plan for the Armory, for a third-party multi-tenant governance model, and improved maintenance of the building. Scherpf continued that the proposed timeline of an additional two or three years to complete the master plan for the Armory was not sustainable for their non-profit business model to continue operating.

Councilor Clingan asked if the Armory, which was acquired by the city through eminent domain, could in turn be resold to a private party, and Director Nadkarni confirmed that was possible.

Councilor Clingan asked about the timeline for stretching the current occupancy agreements to solidify tenant stability, and Director Nadkarni replied that those agreements are in the Law Department's current queue for review and that they would follow up with them.

Councilor Clingan asked if there was a specific point person that the

department could communicate with at the Armory regarding future planning meetings, and Director Nadkarni replied that there is not one single point of contact because the Armory has numerous tenants and they each need to be treated equitably. Senior Planner Fields added that quarterly tenant meetings have been instituted to keep the Armory’s tenants updated regarding the planning process.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 4. Order (ID # [23-1309](#))

By Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Economic Development take the steps described within, relative to the Armory building.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 3 (ID # 23-1310), 4 (ID # 23-1309), and 5 (ID # 23-1308) would be taken together.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 5. Order (ID # [23-1308](#))

By Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Strezo
That the Director of the Arts Council and the Director of Economic Development take the steps outlined within, relative to the Armory building.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 3 (ID # 23-1310), 4 (ID # 23-1309), and 5 (ID # 23-1308) would be taken together.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Police

- 6. Order (ID # [23-0523](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That the Chief of Police and relevant departments discuss the use and effectiveness of the Community Alert System and advise if an update to the system is necessary.

Chair Strezo stated this Item would be kept in committee because there is no new information to discuss during this meeting.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Crossing Guards

- 7. Order (ID # [22-1568](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Chief of Police inform this Council which intersections are prioritized with crossing guards.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 7 (ID # 22-1568), 8 (ID # 22-1567), and 9 (ID # 22-1566) would be taken together.

Recruitment Manager Alves explained that the department’s goal is to hire 20 crossing guards for the school year, that three have been hired as of

September 13, 2023, and that five candidates are currently in the pre-employment process. Alves continued that the hiring process for this position can be challenging given its hours and part-time status, but that the department has been utilizing creative recruitment strategies, such as appealing to college students and retirees. Deputy Chief Stanford agreed that it is difficult to find candidates for this position.

Chair Strezo asked how many crossing guards are currently employed, and Deputy Chief Stanford replied that there are currently 32 crossing guards, 8 of which are job-share positions, and that there are 27 priority positions around the city that are staffed every day.

Councilor Clingan asked about the low return rate on 93 initial applications, and Manager Alves replied that a lot of the applications are from people submitting “mass applications” to many employers at once without actually reading the job description or understanding its geographic location.

Councilor Clingan asked if the department was providing any signing bonuses, and Alves replied that there is a \$50 referral bonus.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the department reached out to other communities for recruitment ideas, and Alves replied that they had, but that other communities are experiencing the same crossing guard shortages as Somerville.

Chair Strezo and Councilor Clingan asked if there was the possibility of modifying the position to make it more marketable, and Director Gille replied it has been considered but doing so would be difficult because, for example, some of the current part-time roles that could theoretically be combined have scheduling conflicts.

Chair Strezo asked about the availability of police officers to cover these crossing guard positions, and Deputy Chief Stanford replied that sometimes officers will do so but that it is not a permanent solution because it diverts officers from traffic control and also makes it more difficult for them to respond to emergencies quickly.

Chair Strezo asked Deputy Chief Stanford which intersections the department prioritizes to staff with crossing guards, and Deputy Chief Stanford provided the following list:

Priority C.G Locations Schedule
Highland @ Cedar M-F Both Shifts
Glen @ Webster M-F Both Shifts
West Somerville Main M-F Both Shifts
Edgar @ Meacham M-F Both Shifts
Holland @ Newbury M-F Morning only

M-F Both Shifts

Broadway @ North Street M-F Mornings only

Elm @ Cherry M-F Both Shifts

Pearl @ Glen M-F Both Shifts

Main @ Broadway M-F Both Shifts

Cross @ Everette M-F Both Shifts

Bow @ Warner M-F Both Shifts

Powderhouse Blvd @ Packard M-F Morning Only

Main @ Broadway M-F Both Shifts

Willow @ Kidder M-F Both Shifts

Mystic @ Temple M-F Both Shifts

Powderhouse Blvd @ Curtis M-T-F Both Shifts Tues&Wed First Shift Only

Broadway @ Curtis M-F Both Shifts

Medford @ Central M-F Both Shifts

Edgar @ Meacham M-F Both shifts

Summer @ Cherry M-F Both Shifts

Powderhouse Blvd @ Curtis M-F Both Shifts

Curtis @ Raymond M-F Both Shifts

Broadway @ Glen M-F Both Shifts

Medford @ Thurston M-F Mornings Only

Summer @ Cedar Street M-F Both Shifts

Powderhouse@North M-F Afternoon only

Washington @ Argenziano M-F Both Shifts

Cross @ Pearl M-F Both Shifts

Morrison @ Willow M-F Both Shifts

Cross @ Otis M-F Both Shifts

Webster @ Newton M-F Both Shifts

Chair Strezo asked about the possibility of obtaining state resources for crossing guards on state roads, and Deputy Chief Stanford replied that those requests have been made but the state has not responded to them.

Legislative Liaison Carrillo added that the Administration will again reach out to the state but that a response is not necessarily expected.

Councilor Clingan asked about the flexibility of relocating crossing guards as needed to higher priority locations, and Deputy Chief Stanford replied that sometimes that is possible, but often crossing guards are assigned to a specific location due to health or transportation limitations.

Chair Strezo asked how many crossing guards could potentially be hired by the city, and Deputy Chief Stanford replied that there are technically 55 openings but that they have never been completely filled.

Officer Teves described the difficulty in coordinating the schedules of the current crossing guards, noting frequent scheduling conflicts and callouts. Officer Teves also stated that he has investigated and conducted research on

intersections that have been flagged for him as potentially dangerous and in need of crossing guards, but that his observations did not reflect those reports.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

8. Order
(ID # [22-1567](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Director of Human Resources discuss the possibility of modernizing crossing guard positions to attract candidates and increase hiring.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 7 (ID # 22-1568), 8 (ID # 22-1567), and 9 (ID # 22-1566) would be taken together.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

9. Order
(ID # [22-1566](#))

By Councilor Strezo, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Burnley Jr.
That the Director of Human Resources update this Council on the hiring process and staffing numbers for crossing guards for the 2022-2023 school year.

Chair Strezo stated that Items 7 (ID # 22-1568), 8 (ID # 22-1567), and 9 (ID # 22-1566) would be taken together.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- Housing - 2023-09-20 Crossing Guard Progress Fy24 (with 23-1566, 23-1567)
- Housing - 2023-09-20 230915_Armory_HCDMemo 9.20.23 (with 23-1308, 23-1309, 23-1310)
- Housing - 2023-09-20 Somerville Armory Master Plan - Short HCD Presentation 9.20.23