



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

November 16, 2020

REPORT OF THE HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Kristen Strezo	Chair	Present	
Ben Ewen-Campen	Vice Chair	Present	
Wilfred N. Mbah	City Councilor at Large	Present	

Others present: Khushbu Webber-Mayor's Office, Tom Galligani-OSPCD, Doug Kress-HHS, Ellen Schachter-Housing, Luisa Oliveira-OSPCD, Fred Berman-Housing, Danielle O'Hearn-Fire Department, Jill Lathan-Parks & Recreation, Councilor Lance Davis and Sue Thomas-OSPCD

The meeting was held virtually and was called to order at 6:02 p.m. by Chairperson Strezo and adjourned at 7:14 p.m.

210891: That the Director of Parks and Recreation appear before this Council's Committee on Housing and Community Development to discuss installing playground communication boards in all parks to expand park accessibility for children who are nonverbal or have other communication challenges.

Ms. O'Hearn was sponsored by the chair to speak on this item. She stated that playgrounds are critical for children to get their wants and needs met. Many children can benefit from a visible board. Chair Strezo stated communication boards are durable for outside use and can be placed in playgrounds and parks. They can be 3-5 feet in length and children can use communication boards for non-verbal tool. Communication boards would remove the need for children to have iPad or other tools on the playground.

Ms. Oliveira stated she would be happy to study and see how other cities have used this tool. She also stated there will be a number of guidelines to look at such as ADA compliance and 6-foot fall zones. Ms. Oliveira stated this is a good project for the winter months and hope to get to studying this in the earlier winter and have feedback in the spring.

Ms. O'Hearn stated it would be the city's applications and words to use on the communication board. Ms. Oliveira asked if there are other companies to see what this looks like and Ms. O'Hearn will send information about this and send to the chair.

Ms. Lathan stated there are universal boards out there with pictures and blocks. She will work with Ms. Oliveira on this matter and what works with our park structure. Ms. Oliveira believes it should be easy to find a place to put the board. Ms. Lathan would like this to be as inclusive as possible.

RESULT:**KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

210380: That the Directors of SPCD, Housing Stability, and Inspectional Services discuss with the Housing and Community Development Committee the anticipated impact and possible responses when the MA Eviction Moratorium expires on August 18.

Mr. Berman representing the housing office, stated that the moratorium expired Oct. 17. He stated that the CDC moratorium which is interpreted differently, prevents the ultimate phase of eviction. The actual eviction process, “Notice to quit” can go forward, but the actual removal from their homes cannot happen until CDC moratorium expires.

Over the past 7 months, due to the pandemic, there have been over 1,000 referrals to the office for rental assistance. Majority of the referrals were from residents who speak Spanish or Portuguese. They are starting to see “Notices to Quit” now. People cannot go to court until the notice expires. They have not seen those yet because it’s only a few weeks of when the moratorium expired.

The Chair asked Mr. Berman what their greatest needs are doing this time. Mr. Berman stated they have been falling behind to keep up with the demand. They brought on 10-12 volunteers to help out which was more work to supervisor them. They brought on multilingual contractors and trying to bring on someone trilingual. They are also in the process of finalizing contract \$1.5M in HUD grant administered by the Welcome Project. Respond, which is a domestic violence agency in Somerville, is using money to eliminate some of the congestion issues in their shelter. They have been receiving emergency grants to address homelessness for many years. Housing is looking for additional money that may expire this year to focus on arrearages until the end of year. Mr. Berman stated they are focusing on rental assistance and continuing contract with Cambridge and Somerville for legal services. It was stated that Ms. Schachter has been working with Senator Pat Jehlen on cases that involve eviction while also accessing cases that are pending.

Housing is also working with the law dept to let them know that while the moratorium is still in effect, constables and sheriff’s office cannot go to people’s homes giving them 48 hours to vacate. They are also working with mayor to promote a landlord pledge to not evict tenants, as well. Housing is also running a workshop with the school department to know your rights, one on Wednesday for a general audience and updating the documents so they know tenants’ rights and limitations. Mr. Berman tenants are severely underrepresented when it comes to eviction.

Mr. Berman stated that a “notice to quit” is for non-payment of 14 days, then the landlord can go to court. The courts are still working out their process and committed to come up with a protocol that avoids eviction. There should be a meeting first to explore options. The court wants to address the arrearage rather than evicting.

RESULT:**KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

210688: That the Director of Communications or the appropriate department remove the electronic Soofa signs from sidewalks in Ward 3.

Councilor Ewen-Campen introduced this item to voice his opinion. He stated that the rep from the sign reached out to him and this sign is not a great fit for Ward 3. He also stated there are

more important issues to address in Somerville. Mr. Galligani stated this was done as a pilot which is for one year. It will expire in a matter of months and they will re-evaluate at that time if it's a good innovation for the sidewalk area.

Councilor Mbah inquired about how the messages on the board were chosen. Mr. Galligani stated the sign company worked with many local businesses on the kiosk to share directions and advertising opportunities.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

207068: That the Administration advise this Board on the possibility of creating facilities similar to Bow Market, as start-up or temporary commercial space for small, local businesses displaced as the development of older buildings occurs.

Councilor Davis spoke on this order. He stated this was discussed in committee a while back. The thinking to create a mechanism to use through zoning for community benefits in Davis Square. He talked about an affordable commercial space, as part of a density bonus to build higher than 4 stories in a MR4. It was stated that a medical cannabis proposed this idea to put a process in place to receive a commercial space for a density bonus. This would entail affordable commercial space as a tool to leverage as a community benefit that's good for the community and provide appropriate community benefits.

Mr. Galligani stated a consultant brought in a master plan to work in Assembly Square and has experience in California and Seattle where these have been put in place. There is a redevelopment in Newton for a mixed use highly dense development. The plan was to temporary relocate some of the smaller building occupants and repopulate the tenant and keep the spaces affordable.

Councilor Ewen-Campen stated that as soon as the affordable overlay is done, he would be excited to work on this initiative. This would assist with the level of permitting and the challenges in the city for small businesses just starting up their businesses.

Chair Strezo stated as we head into winter, she is hoping to retain as many small businesses as possible. This resolution is an opportunity to support small businesses on the other side of COVID. Mr. Galligani stated they will be distributing the grant funds and processing grant applications to provide as much assistance and support for businesses. They are holding workshops with partners and The Chamber of Commerce for independent businesses. He stated that a zoning approach would be an important piece as well. He stated that people are not thinking about recovery just yet. Another piece to consider is the vacant property issue they discussed last spring. They will reach out to landlords who have vacant space to find out how they are handling this matter. Mr. Galligani stated that in 6 months' time, they will have rich data and maybe able to fine tune the vacancy ordinance. They may also take a look at the permit process for businesses. Does it still make sense to charge people for certain licenses and if the permits and inspections solve problems now or problems from 50 years ago.

Councilor Davis would like to hear or see any references basic data points from the consultant on this item. This is specific for temporary space for displaced businesses and urgency for grants, developers are as impacted and hope to move with as much speed as possible. Councilor Davis would be happy to help in any way possible.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

209360: That the Director of SPCD provide this Council, in conjunction with its FY21 budget review, a list of upcoming commercial development, including the square footage and linkage payment projections with corresponding payment dates.

Mr. Galligani stated they have done this on a regular basis and have not had a chance to so recently. He stated that Mr. Proakis is working on an update. They will share this information with the committee shortly and figure out a schedule when they can come back to the committee. Mr. Galligani will talk to Mr. Proakis tomorrow and will work with Mr. Inacio and Ms. Lewis to figure out where they are on this matter. Ms. Webber added she spoke to Mr. Proakis this afternoon, he will have a report of some nature by Wednesday.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE
