



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, September 23, 2024

6:00 PM

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

The meeting took place virtually via Zoom and was called to order at 6:06 PM by Chair McLaughlin and adjourned at 8:30 PM with a roll call vote of 10 in favor (Councilor Davis, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Sait, Councilor Scott, Councilor Mbah, Councilor Burnley, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Strezo, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor McLaughlin), none against and 1 absent (Councilor Ewen-Campen). Councilor Clingan joined the meeting at 6:08pm and Councilor Burnley joined the meeting at 6:42pm.

Others present:

Director of Intergovernmental Affairs - Neha Singh, Director of Libraries - Cathy Piantigini, Director of Parks and Recreation - Susan Yerkes, Director of Student Services - Liz Doncaster, High School Principal - Alicia Kersten, Deputy Chief of Police- James Stanford, Legislative Services Manager - Madalyn Letellier.

Roll Call

Present:	Ward One City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin, Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis, Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait, Wilfred N. Mbah, Judy Pineda Neufeld, Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, Kristen Strezo and Jake Wilson
Absent:	Willie Burnley Jr., Jesse Clingan and Ben Ewen-Campen

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-1318](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee Meeting of September 11, 2024.

RESULT:	<u>ACCEPTED</u>
AYE:	Ward One City Councilor McLaughlin, Ward Six City Councilor Davis, Ward Five City Councilor Sait, Burnley Jr., Clingan, Mbah, Pineda Neufeld, Scott, Strezo and Wilson
ABSENT:	Ewen-Campen

Library Overview

2. Communication (ID # [24-1314](#))

By Councilor Scott, Councilor Clingan and Councilor Ewen-Campen Conveying an invitation to the public to a community conversation about resources needed to restore full library access, hosted by Somerville's youth community and Somerville Municipal Employees Association members.

The Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, Neha Singh, outlined three key

developments in reopening the Central Library during afterschool hours. The administration is looking to install security cameras, hire an outside vendor trained in de-escalation techniques for afterschool hours, and continue creating programming in partnership with Parks and Recreation throughout the city. They are currently working from a short list of vendors and anticipate the hiring process to begin shortly, once that happens the vendor will want to work closely with necessary departments such as the Police Department (SPD) and schools to foster close relationships and effective communication methods. Councilor Wilson asked what the biggest issue to delay a reopening to the library would be and Councilor Strezo asked clarifying questions on where in the hiring process the city is. Director Singh conveyed the hopes to open as soon as possible, and are currently conducting interviews for a security vendor, they are working closely with the procurement team and do not expect any delays due to procurement. Once a vendor is hired, she reiterated the security vendor will meet with any relevant city department and start shortly.

Councilor Scott asked Director of Libraries, Cathy Piantigini, if library staff has been included in the reopening conversations and planning. Director Piantigini explained she has been keeping staff up to date with weekly emails that include any next steps. Councilor Strezo asked if she is comfortable with the concept of a security guard at the library. Director Piantigini responded that her opinion and thought is that it is good to have as many resources as possible during this time. Director Singh highlighted the interviews are prioritizing de-escalation and youth experience, she also included an opportunity was given to the schools Community Engagement Specialist to work overtime hours at the library, but staff is unable to do so at the time. Councilor Clingan asked if the security vendor is for the Central Library only and what their hours will be. Director Singh shared the vendor is focused on the Central Library for short term resolution, but city staff will continue to meet to review long term solutions for all library locations and the vendor will be focused on dismissal hours and the need will continue to be evaluated

Councilor Sait asked if there is coordination in hiring so that the social worker can start at the same time as security and where in the hiring process is that position. Director Piantigini stated the scope of the social worker is intended to reach a broader audience, and serve all vulnerable populations, so the focus for this position is not intended purely for youth engagement and they are working with HR to continue interviews.

Chair McLaughlin asked closing questions around the intended purpose for having cameras installed and what will the city do if an illegal act is caught on camera. Director Piantigini shared the hopes in having cameras installed will act as a deterrent for any illegal behavior and Director Singh stated any legal actions would need to be discussed with the law office. Chair McLaughlin also asked why a cop cannot be used at the library immediately,

Director Singh shared a pilot program had been done with law enforcement present and the response was not positive, the goal is still for police to response to any escalated situations but the security vendor to be present to try and de-escalate any situations.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Communication
(ID # [24-1313](#))

By Councilor Scott, Councilor Clingan and Councilor Ewen-Campen Conveying full support for the Public Library Board of Trustees and Director of Libraries in their efforts to maintain safe and accessible library environments for patrons and employees alike.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1314.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Resolution
(ID # [24-1273](#))

By Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Sait, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Strezo, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Davis and Councilor Scott

That the Administration update this Council on the status of the process to provide the resources and programming needed to safely re-open the Central Library during mid-day hours.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1314.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Incidents Report

5. Order
(ID # [24-1295](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin

That the Chief of Police and the Chief Fire Engineer provide a record of all calls to first responders regarding incidents at all Somerville Public Library locations since September 1, 2023.

Chair McLaughlin introduced this item and the two attached reports outlining all calls received across all libraries. Deputy Chief James Stanford spoke to the great relationship and support between staff in the library and the police in responding to all calls.

Councilor Clingan asked how the future social worker will engage with SPD. Director Piantigini said the hope is to provide a position where they can be more proactive rather than reactive through more engaging programming and create opportunities for conversation. The position was posted in the spring and the second-round interviews have been completed and they are working with HR to finalize the candidate.

Councilor Clingan asked if a police officer has been unable to de-escalate

what are the steps for de-escalation with a private vendor. Director Singh highlighted that SPD would continue to respond to serious incidents and public safety risks that arise, the goal for hiring a vendor who has worked with youth is to address issues at the library that do not require a law enforcement presence. Chair McLaughlin asked a follow-up question if the security were to witness a violent crime what role they would play. Deputy Chief Stanford shared they would still call in SPD with the assumption they would intervene where they could and become a witness to the crime. Councilor Burnley to the administration asked if the city is looking to hire armed security and if they would they be able to make arrests. Director Singh said they are not looking to hire armed security, and the intent is any law enforcement response will continue to go through SPD.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

6. Order
(ID # [24-1263](#))

By Councilor Strezo

That the Director of Libraries, and other relevant departments, appear before this Council's Committee on Equity, Gender, Seniors, Families and Vulnerable Populations to discuss the plans for the library closing in the middle of the day and what immediate steps are being taken to reopen the library during this time period to best support library staff and patrons.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1295.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Teen Space

7. Order
(ID # [24-1326](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Strezo

That the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator take the necessary measures to ensure ADA compliance for the second floor of 165 Broadway for the purposes of expanding youth services.

Councilor Strezo opened this item by asking why the teen empowerment space is unavailable for programming. Chair McLaughlin said the space is not ADA compliant and cannot be opened as a teen center for those reasons, he also asked what other spaces are available in the city. Director of Parks and Recreation, Susan Yerkes, outlined the various programming options for teen programming and since losing the Edgerly they are making the best use of the space remaining in the city.

Councilor Sait asked what the maximum number of teens that can be enrolled in each program are and what other challenges are being encountered outside of space. Director Yerkes responded that every program has a cap and as students sign up, they can see how many spots are available and the need for age-appropriate staff for their hours of operation to oversee

the teens continues to be a struggle.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

8. Resolution
(ID # [24-1270](#))

By Councilor Mbah

That the Administration discuss the sufficiency of after school programs for high school students and the methods of outreach and guidance to ensure that all students have access to activities that meet their needs and interests.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1326.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

9. Resolution
(ID # [24-1267](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Clingan

That the Administration and relevant city departments discuss an immediate action plan to address the increase of fights happening at Edward L. Leathers Community Park after students are released from school.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1326.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Schools

10. Resolution
(ID # [24-1271](#))

By Councilor Mbah

That the Administration discuss the scope and limitations of staff at Somerville High School to supervise high school students in the after school period.

Councilor Mbah asked if all afterschool activities require students to be pre-enrolled and what are the spaces in the high school they can hang out in. Director of Student Services, Liz Doncaster, responded every after school sanctioned event has a roster of students that requires parent permission to participate and if a student is not involved the high school library and weight room are both open until 4pm. Councilor Strezo asked if middle school students are able to use those spaces as well. Alicia Kersten, principal of the High School, said it is not currently open to younger students, but all middle school and younger programming also requires parental consent to participate. Councilor Mbah followed up asking what responsibility teachers or administration have for students after school hours to which Director Doncaster said there is support from various staff until 4pm, if a student does not report home after that, best practice is for parents to connect with the police.

Councilor Wilson asked had there been discussion about a role for the educators playing a role in afterschool assistance. Director Doncaster stated

the school appealed to the Community Engagement Specialist and they are unable to, if an employee wanted to volunteer time after their contracted hours with the library there is no resistance, and it is up to the city to being paid overtime to work in the library.

Councilor Clingan asked if some students need more support than only during the school day how does the school address that and how are disciplinary actions taken for afterschool hours. Director Doncaster shared various interventions that are in place for students during the school day and steps taken for beyond the school day. She also shared the protocol is if something happens after school hours that will be detrimental to the safety of the next school day a discussion will be had with that parent and student, but the practice genuinely is not to place consequences on students for actions taken outside of school hours.

Councilor Sait asked if there are conversations happening about hiring additional staff, outside of the educators, to staff after school programming. Director Singh responded the administration is working with SPS to flag issues for monitoring the space after hours and Director Doncaster said the superintendent will need to be a part of the discussion on how to utilize the high school after hours.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

11. Resolution
(ID # [24-1305](#))

By Councilor Wilson, Councilor Scott, Councilor Sait and Councilor Clingan

That the Administration explore activating Somerville High School for community uses outside of school hours.

This item was discussed with ID # 24-1271.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- PHPS - 2024-09-23 PHPS Data - Fire (with 24-1295)
- PHPS - 2024-09-23 PHPS Data - SPD (with 24-1295)