



January 20, 2022

On January 20th, 2022 the Urban Forestry Committee discussed a response to the planned removal of up to 60 trees as part of the Public Safety Building Project at 90 Washington Street. We are particularly concerned with the potential removal of mature pine trees in parcels A and the PSB project site. We ask that these pine trees be given special consideration due to their exceptionally large size, age, species and their location in East Somerville.

Urban trees of this magnitude provide profound benefits to their surrounding communities. The PSB project site states that the 40% reduced carbon footprint of the new PSB in comparison with the current building greatly outweighs the carbon sequestration benefits from these trees, and this indeed may be the case. But carbon sequestration is only one type of benefit provided by these trees. Urban trees play a large role in reducing heat through shade and evaporative cooling and improving air quality through blocking or absorbing pollution. Urban trees also reduce sewer water overflow by absorbing rainwater, prevent erosion, reduce noise, reduce crime, reduce rates of childhood asthma and generally improve mental and physical health of people in their community ([Urban Forestry Master Plan](#)). These benefits (unlike carbon sequestration) most directly impact the neighborhood and residents who live within a few miles of the trees.

The East Somerville areas surrounding the 90 Washington site are environmental justice neighborhoods, based on income, race, and language isolation ([Mass.gov](#)), making it crucial for the City of Somerville to be careful, considerate, and transparent about the environmental impacts of projects on residents in this area. East Somerville currently has the lowest canopy cover of any ward in Somerville, only 8%. Our current Urban Forestry Master plan prioritizes planting in East Somerville to improve our tree canopy equity (Section 1, [Urban Forestry Master Plan](#)). The loss of the large pine tree stands at the 90 Washington site works against this goal and may make getting Ward 1 above 8% difficult or impossible to achieve for several more decades. East Somerville also currently has the worst air quality in Somerville, due to being bordered on three sides by I-93 and McGrath highway (Patton et al [2014](#), [2015](#)). Poor air quality is linked to numerous poor health outcomes, especially cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses (see [Rajagopalan and Landrigan 2022](#) for a review). Local studies by the [CAFEH](#) group have demonstrated that for East Somerville, air quality is at its worst during the winter months, when cold temperatures make toxic particles slower to rise into the upper atmosphere ([Padró-Martínez et al 2012](#)). This makes evergreens such as the pine trees at 90 Washington particularly valuable for their ability to block and absorb air pollution year-round. Pine trees are generally poorly tolerant of salt, making them hard to grow under many urban conditions. The pine trees at 90 Washington are therefore extremely valuable for their public health benefits and extremely difficult to replace in other areas.



We understand that a large-scale building development such as the PSB cannot avoid some tree loss. However, we ask the committee to re-evaluate the value of the mature pine trees on site in terms of their public health impacts within an environmental justice community that lacks adequate tree canopy and is subject to unhealthy air quality. Preserving every mature pine tree at all possible should be a priority in the development plans, especially those in Parcel A and the tail end of the PSB site where the geothermal heating source is currently planned. Any loss of trees that serves only for temporary placement of building equipment should be avoided at all costs. The resident group at Cobble Hill apartments also reached out to the Urban Forestry Committee to state the value of these trees in their own lives, as a part of their community and a place to be outdoors and walk with family. If these trees could be preserved as a park/green space on the site that is open to Cobble Hill residents and the surrounding the community their value would only increase.

We ask that the PSB committee consider updating the plan to make it more responsive to the existing trees and other natural resources on the site. We encourage you to find ways to center green, open, and natural spaces throughout the updated plan.

Thank you for your service on the PSB committee. We would welcome you at future meetings of the UFC as the plans continue to evolve.

Respectfully,

Somerville's Urban Forestry Committee
Tori Antonino and Chris Dwan - Co-Chairs,