



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, March 4, 2025

7:00 PM

This meeting was held virtually via Zoom and in person in the second floor Committee Room and was called to order by Chair Strezo at 7:00 pm and adjourned at 9:13 pm on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Ewen-Campen, Pineda Neufeld, and Strezo), 0 opposed, and 0 absent.

Others present: Shannon Lawler - Fair Housing Specialist and Inclusionary Support, Lisa Davidson - Interim Director of Housing, Rachel Nadkarni - Director of Economic Development, Thomas Galligani - Director of the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, Yasmine Raddassi - Legislative Liaison, Dana Whiteside - Deputy Director of Economic Development, Madalyn Letellier - Legislative Services Manager.

Roll Call

Present: City Councilor At Large Kristen Strezo, Ward Three City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen and Ward Seven City Councilor Judy Pineda Neufeld

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-1681](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Housing and Community Development Committee Meeting of November 21, 2024.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: City Councilor At Large Strezo, Ward Three City Councilor Ewen-Campen and Ward Seven City Councilor Pineda Neufeld

2. Officer's Communication (ID # [24-1446](#)) Fair Housing Commission conveying the FY 2023 Annual Report pursuant to Section 17-7 of the Code of Ordinances.

Shannon Lawler the Fair Housing Specialist and Inclusionary Support staff was present to speak on presentation slide deck entitled, "*HCD 2025-03-04 FY23 FHC Annual Report Presentation (with 24-1446)*." highlighting all updates and from FY23.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked for clarification on the number of reports submitted and if there are repeat offenders, how does the city keep track of them. Housing Specialist Lawler responded complaints are often sent to the multiple locations and are not recorded in duplicates and provided more context to enforce fair housing law through the city a Home Rule Petition (HRP) would need to be submitted and there are a lot of other materials on the docket for enforcement and to track landlords who are repeat offenders. Councilor Pineda Neufeld went on to ask how the city receives numbers from MCAD and what their backlog looks like and the response provided by

Director Davidson was that a request can be made to MCAD for those numbers and due to the multiple reporting authorities is unclear on their backlog at this current time. Further discussion was held between the councilor and the Fair Housing staff about getting more information for tenants about their rights and the potential to add educational materials.

Councilors Ewen-Campen and Chair Strezo advocated for the Suffolk Universities program and to find ways Somerville can best partner to make the program more proactive rather than only in response to a complaint. Details on how this would be successful will be ongoing and Fair Housing staff did share there are resources about tests that have been done in other communities and will research Suffolk to be more proactive in their studies.

Chair Strezo inquired about the status of the Fair Housing Commission staffing and Housing Specialist Lawler shared the commission is now fully staffed at 5 members. Chair Strezo went on to ask about how ongoing outreach happens to tenants and how best to partner to get the information out. The Fair Housing staff provided more clarification on the main requests have been related to income vouchers and the nature of that information is more individualized. Conversation continued around how unresolved complaints are addressed and then if a complainant does not respond to multiple outreach requests it is cataloged as unresolved.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Order
(ID # [24-0070](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Wilson

That the Director of Parks and Recreation discuss how inclusive playground accessibility is being considered in future playground plans and redesign projects.

Parent advocate Shu Talon, a member of the Special Education Parents Advocacy Committee, spoke about the desire to have accessible swings installed in playgrounds. Holly Simione, Chair of the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, spoke as a resident of Somerville and the on behalf of the delay in installment of swings is that city staff are awaiting recommendations from the community on the types of swings that should be installed. Holly went on to share that the swings should be considered during the budget to account for maintenance and upkeep of these swings. Councilors Pineda Neufeld and Chair Strezo acknowledged that comment and said they would put their heads together to include in their budget priorities. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked what type of swing is being looked at for children with low muscle mass. Resident Nicole Cannon spoke to a specific type of swing, a JennSwing, that provides more trunk support, or something similar that offers multiple types of support for children.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

4. Order
(ID # [25-0247](#))
- By Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Clingan, Councilor Davis, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Mbah, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Sait, Councilor Strezo and Councilor Wilson That the Director of Economic Development report on the economic impact to small businesses in Somerville as a result of recent federal immigration policy changes.

Director Nadkarni shared updates on the small business community and the diverse set of businesses that are prevalent as the number is approaching 500. The big picture is connecting businesses with resources and navigating city processes. Director Nadkarni highlighted that the small businesses are coming off a wave of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, but the city was recently awarded a grant from the state to provide technical assistance through a series of workshops and 1:1 coaching for businesses. Training will be focused on general business administration, marketing, and operations. Access to accurate information remains a priority as the city pays close attention to the ever-changing landscape in state and federal policy. Chair Strezo started the conversation to address the continuous changes occurring at the federal level and wondering how economic development is preparing to address concerns from business owners. Director Nadkarni shared the approach that has been to listen to concerns and point members to the resources that are available to them. Deputy Director Whiteside shared hope for the department to continue to build trust within the community and do their best to provide up to date information. Councilor Pineda Neufeld inquired about campaigns and resources that are available to small business, Director Nadkarni highlighted the “It Takes All Shapes to Make a Square Campaign” was developed to remind residents to shop local and the green line is open for Boston residents to reach Somerville easier and are exploring the ways to highlight businesses that feel safe doing so.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

5. Order
(ID # [25-0232](#))
- By Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Wilson That the Director of Economic Development begin the process for developing a Teele Square commercial area plan.

Director Galligani gave updates on area plans that have recently been concluded and those that will be done shortly, including Brickbottom, Assembly Square, and Davis Square plans. Further development of commercial area plans is contingent upon an updated Capital Improvement Plan and what future investments look like, coupled with staff bandwidth to begin a new project. Next steps are to research future investments and discuss with city departments when a new plan is feasible to be explored. There was continued conversation following Councilor Pinda Neufeld’s inquiry about how long it takes to develop a commercial area plan. Director Galligani shared insights that each area plans are made with the community in mind, thinking about zoning, land use patterns, and that can take 6-9

months or more.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

6. Order
(ID # [25-0354](#))

By Councilor Pineda Neufeld

That the Executive Director of the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development consider increasing permanent supportive housing across the city.

Director Galligani opened this agenda item with updates to what the landscape of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) looks like currently. His updates included there are currently 68 PSH units in the city, the ongoing partnership with Somerville's Homeless Coalition, and there are several projects to add considerable units. Among the properties in the development and planning processes are 270 Washington (St. Patrick's shelter), to create 40-50 units, 101 Highland Ave (YMCA), adding about 62 units, and 24 Webster Ave and 297 Medford Street have been raised as possible sites to include PSH units and ongoing discussion is happening between the developer and the Housing Division. Following the Director's updates Joyce Tavon, CEO of Mass Shelter and Housing Alliance, provided a definition of PSH that it is for the unhoused and homeless population, typically serving long-term housing needs coupled with disabilities. She went on to share that her organization is hopeful of providing some monetary support to the projects that are currently being developed.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld to Director Galligani asked if this is the highest number of permanent supportive housing in the city, Director Galligani shared he is more curious how this compares with surrounding communities and how this will continue to address the need as a regional issue. Joyce Tavon supported the answer sharing her organization does an analysis of housing based on the information submitted to HUD and would be happy to support Somerville in any comparison work. Melissa McWhinney, a member of the public sponsored by Councilor Pineda Neufeld, shared personal experiences on accessing this type of housing and the support that is available to those who are seeking housing.

Finally, Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if there are any other innovative ways communities have added permanent housing. Director Galligani shared all solutions that are put together in a scrappy way, pulling together resources from community partners to accomplish additional housing units.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- HCD - 2025-03-04 Inclusive Playground Memo (with 24-0070)
- HCD 2025-03-04 FY23 FHC Annual Report Presentation (with 24-1446)