



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Housing and Community Development Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 21, 2024

6:00 PM

This meeting was held in the Committee Room and virtually via Zoom, was called to order at 6:03 pm by Chair Strezo, and adjourned at 8:00 pm with a roll call vote of three in favor (Councilor Clingan, Mbah, and Chair Strezo), none opposed, and none absent. Councilor Mbah joined the meeting at 6:05pm.

Others present: Director of Housing Stability Ellen Shachter, Director of Housing Michael Feloney, Deputy Director of Housing Lisa Davidson, Executive Director of OSPCD Thomas Galligani, Legislative Liaison Kimberly Hutter, Legislative Services Manager Madelyn Letellier.

Roll Call

Present: City Councilor At Large Kristen Strezo and Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan
Absent: City Councilor At Large Wilfred N. Mbah

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-1539](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Housing and Community Development Committee Meeting of October 21, 2024.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: City Councilor At Large Strezo and Ward Four City Councilor Clingan
ABSENT: City Councilor At Large Mbah

2. Order (ID # [24-0075](#))

By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Office of Housing Stability appear before the Housing and Community Development Committee to discuss the current status of residents facing displacement and the number of households seeking rental assistance.

Ellen Shachter, the Housing Director for OSPCD, provided updates on various housing initiatives in Somerville. She highlighted the ongoing request for services in 2024, which are consistent month-to-month, including the high number of evictions. In the past four years, 149 eviction executions have occurred in Somerville, compared with Cambridge (331) and Malden (440), despite its smaller size. Additionally, 18% of renters in Somerville are paying over 50% of their income on rent and utilities. Director Shachter discussed several rental assistance programs, including \$4.4 million in ARPA funding and \$5 million allocated through free cash.

These funds are distributed between the Community Action Agency and the Somerville Homeless Coalition, with projected funding shortages for both agencies by 2026. Shachter also noted the success of the Municipal Voucher Program, which has helped 26 families who were ineligible for other assistance, and the Guaranteed Basic Income Program, which provides 200 families with \$750 per month through June 2025.

Director Shachter also addressed challenges in housing for older adults, with a subsidy program to help those waiting for long-term housing. She outlined efforts to address displacement records and seal eviction records, which can impede future housing opportunities. Director Shachter discussed the Access to Council Initiative, which allocates money in the state budget to provide full tenant representation. Councilor Mbah inquired about the demand for housing, to which Director Shachter explained that the need for services has remained steady, though evictions are lower than pre-pandemic levels. The increasing cost of housing and wages continues to drive demand. Mbah also questioned the effectiveness of affordable housing lotteries, noting delays and eligibility issues; Director Shachter responded that many of the units are occupied by voucher holders, and efforts are underway to ensure units are accessible to the lowest-income individuals.

Councilor Clingan asked about preventing displacement of Somerville residents, to which Schachter assured that most resources prioritize residents and discussed policies to better match displaced residents with affordable housing. Councilor Clingan also raised concerns about the effectiveness of the condo conversion ordinance, which Schachter acknowledged has limited authority, but she is working to explore ways to strengthen it within legal constraints. Schachter also addressed discussions around a rental registry, clarifying that the Housing Department is working to identify what information is most crucial for landlords while balancing climate goals and affordability. Finally, Councilor Strezo asked about CAAS funding for displacement prevention, to which Director Shachter explained that flexible rental funds are being used to fill gaps and prevent homelessness, including covering back rent and future rent payments for up to six months.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

3. Resolution
(ID # [24-1009](#))

By Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Clingan and Councilor Burnley Jr.

That the Administration work with the vendor to review the certification and re-certification processes for affordable housing units and identify ways to streamline the process and make it less onerous for residents.

Michael Feloney, OSPCD Housing Director, and Lisa Davidson, Deputy Director of Housing, provided an update on the income certification process used for affordable housing programs within the division. The primary objective is to standardize income documentation across various programs,

using the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) system as a baseline. The process aims to assess income for all household members over the age of 18, evaluating between 6 to 11 different categories of income. In response to feedback from residents and colleagues in the Office of Housing Stability (OHS), the Housing Division has worked to streamline this process, ensuring it remains clear and accessible for applicants seeking affordable housing. The revised process reduces the number of required pay stubs from three months to two, provides greater flexibility regarding employer verification forms, and eliminates the need for notarized documents. Additionally, unexplained deposits greater than \$100 must be accounted for to ensure that applicants are not receiving unreported regular income, which could affect their eligibility.

Deputy Director Davidson further explained that income, as defined by HUD, refers to money reliably coming into a household on a regular basis. She also clarified how the Housing Division communicates changes in the process to residents. For those applying for housing, an application packet is provided, which outlines the necessary documentation and procedures for income certification. Some private developers use vendors to handle income certifications, while others manage it in-house or through the Housing Division. When the City is not directly involved with a vendor, they can only offer feedback and not intervene in the vendor's process. However, the Housing Division closely reviews income certifications to ensure that properties are renting to income-eligible households, and there is always an option for applicants to appeal income calculations if they believe an error has been made.

Councilor Mbah inquired about how often the eligibility criteria are updated, particularly in relation to the Area Median Income (AMI) levels set by the Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance. Deputy Director Davidson responded that these levels are updated periodically and that cities with similar inclusionary zoning programs serve as models for understanding the challenges and compromises involved. She noted that the Housing Division is conducting a housing needs assessment and would need a feasibility study to assess the viability of specific income levels for future development proposals. Finally, the discussion also touched on how recurring unexplained deposits, which are defined as deposits of the same amount from the same source occurring three times in one month, are considered as income under the certification process.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

- 4. 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.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 5. Order (ID # [24-0071](#)) By Councilor Strezo
That the Director of Planning, Preservation and Zoning discuss the potential for density bonus incentives, such as \$150,000 for homeowners to build affordable housing for rent or homeownership.

Director Galligani highlighted that this proposal is modeled after successful initiatives in New York State, following Chair Strezo's introduction of the item and where she has seen similar programs run successfully, with the goal of increasing the efficiency of affordable housing production and maximizing the use of subsidy funds. The focus is on leveraging subsidized funds to attract additional resources, ensuring that every dollar spent in Somerville goes further. This strategy aims to both increase the overall housing stock and retain affordable housing options for residents. Part of the approach includes exploring ways to help residents stay in their current homes, particularly through home improvement programs that assist elders in aging in place. The proposal will be evaluated alongside existing housing programs in Somerville to ensure it complements the city's broader housing strategy.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 6. Order (ID # [24-1008](#)) By Councilor Pineda Neufeld
That the Director of Economic Development discuss with this Council ways to provide small businesses with financial and technical support when impacted by construction and other emergencies.

Legislative Liaison Hutter was present in place of staff in absence of a substantive update, the administration is working with Economic Development to apply for grant funding and develop a better understanding on what is feasible.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE