



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

January 19, 2022

REPORT OF THE OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY COMMITTEE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Jefferson Thomas ("J.T.") Scott	Chair	Present	
Beatriz Gomez Mouakad	Vice Chair	Present	
Willie Burnley Burnley Jr.	City Councilor At Large	Present	
Jake Wilson	City Councilor At Large	Present	
Ben Ewen-Campen	Ward Three City Councilor	Present	

Others present: Justin Kates - Emergency Management, Aneesh Sahni - Mayor's Office, Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Christine Blais - Office of Sustainability and Environment, Brian Postlewaite - Engineering, Martin Pillsbury - MAPC, Peter Forcellese - Legislative Clerk, Stephanie Widzowski - Assistant Clerk of Committees.

Councilor Ewen-Campen arrived at 7:05 pm due his presence at another committee meeting.

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Scott at 6:03 pm and adjourned at 8:03 pm.

Approval of the March 17, 2021 Minutes

The minutes were approved on a roll call vote: 4 in favor (Councilors Wilson, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, and Scott), none against and 1 absent (Councilor Ewen-Campen).

RESULT:

ACCEPTED

212903: Requesting the adoption of the 2021 update of the Hazard Mitigation Plan

Chair Scott shared the 2021 Hazard Mitigation Plan during the meeting. (View online at: <https://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/somerville-ma-draft-plan-update-12-16-2021.pdf>)

Chair Scott called on Justin Kates and his colleagues to speak about the Hazard Mitigation Plan. Mr. Kates explained that each municipality is required to have a plan in order to get emergency funding from FEMA. This plan is focused on identifying hazards that could impact the city and community members, describing changes in land use (such as residential construction in areas prone to flooding), and making plans to reduce risk. He said there is a major opportunity to integrate this document with initiatives like the Climate Forward program. The next steps are for

the plan to be approved at the next full City Council meeting, then for City Council to acquire a certificate of approval from MEMA (Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency) to present to FEMA.

Mr. Postlewaite described the ways Engineering has been identifying the intersections of this plan with other departments and projects.

Dr. Blais, whose focus is on resiliency and adaptation, stressed that implementations of this plan also need to be equitable. Through vulnerability assessments, her team found that extreme heat and coastal flooding are both risks for Somerville, and are both exacerbated by climate change. As such, climate change is a major focus of this Hazard Mitigation Plan with expansions in the heat mitigation section.

Mr. Pillsbury touched on the social side of this plan. Somerville has made concerted community outreach efforts, with surveys available in four of the most common languages spoken in the community. They have received about 330 responses from the public.

Chair Scott asked if projects need to be included in this document to get funding, and if inclusion in this plan means projects need to happen in the next five years; Mr. Kates responded that there are other sources for funding, and that there is no mandate to reach these targets if the document is sent out and approved. The Hazard Mitigation Plan is more of a roadmap, he said. Chair Scott asked if the plan was in its final stages. Mr. Kates replied yes, and that if substantive changes needed to be made to the document, it would likely cause MEMA and FEMA to delay reviewing it. Chair Scott asked, given that money for revising this document came from a grant, how soon could adjustments be made, and when could changes be submitted? Mr. Kates answered that changes can be made immediately and new iterations of the plan can be submitted continuously using staff resources over the next five years.

Councilor Wilson asked if Mr. Kates had significant input in the planning of this plan, and if there was anything he would have wanted to see added or changed. Mr. Kates said he had many opportunities to participate, but also many items to propose for the next iteration, one of which to further integrate in the future with Climate Forward. He noted that there is no mandate for a community to enact a climate mitigation plan.

Councilor Wilson asked if there was anything in the document Mr. Kates found especially innovative. Mr. Kates commented that the community input to the degree seen in this plan is not common for other municipalities. Councilor Wilson commented on how much flooding he had seen firsthand in private property across Somerville, and asked if areas other than Lake Street were included in the assessment. Mr. Postlewaite responded that most of the flood hazard locations were right-of-way hazards - barriers to a quick and efficient response by the city to emergencies, such as flooded roads. That does not mean there are no other flooding issues in the city; but these were identified as the most critical.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad thanked the team for their work in this detailed document and shifted the conversation to an intersection of zoning and hazard mitigation. The document notes the water table is rising, and clay and silt soils have a lower water absorption, affecting construction. She asked if that kind of scope could be included in a hazard mitigation plan, noting that this plan seems to focus on roadways, not building, but a mitigation plan cannot stop the inundation from heavy storms. Mr. Kates agreed that natural hazards affect every aspect of the built environment, but some aspects might best be served by policy recommendation. For

example, zoning revisions might be most effective for building construction. Policy changes are also usually less expensive than hard infrastructure projects like these, but they require more community collaboration. He referred the question to Dr. Blais, who spent the last four years researching rental standards. She said they are looking at the issues described above. One approach is to focus on buildings' resilience to water and moisture by improving inside air quality and reducing mold. Expanding the scope to housing would also make Somerville eligible for new sources of funding.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad wanted to know the thought process behind the plan. The document notes that it is expensive to put an electrical grid underground. As Somerville increasingly converts from gas to electric, what will the grid look like in the future? She expressed concern that the hurricane mitigation seemed insufficient as hurricanes can severely damage aboveground electrical structures. Extreme heat can also cause brownouts, something to expect more frequently in the future. Is an underground grid the answer moving forward to these threats? Dr. Blais answered that they want to create a more resilient electrical grid safely and affordably while maintaining reliability. She and her colleagues are studying this more and looking to create a citywide energy plan. Mr. Kates added that one challenge with planning is how to decide whether an investment can be made by Somerville or by private entities. He said it is essential to work with providers like EverSource, and that it would be great to increase Somerville's ability to generate electricity for less reliance on outside power.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad asked about Somerville's capacity for solar panels, noting that because solar fields cause some environmental destruction, it is best to use already developed space. Dr. Blais responded that there are some challenges to local solar installation: many of the city's roofs are not very large, and trees, adjacent roofs and chimneys obstruct the light. The city also needs to upgrade its electric panels. Despite these setbacks, Dr. Blais and her colleagues are looking forward to incorporating solar into Somerville's infrastructure. They are looking to get energy standards for existing buildings, which can include installing renewable energy, but making buildings weather-proof and efficient comes first. Chair Scott affirmed all of these topics as important going forward.

Councilor Burnley thanked everyone for creating a plan with a central focus on climate change, and expressed the Council's excitement to move forward in finding solutions to climate-induced problems. He stressed the importance of not only mitigating the effects, but aiming to eliminate the cause of climate change itself. With that in mind, he asked if the grant used for the Hazard Mitigation Plan can be used proactively to eliminate hazards before they become a problem - for example, creating more permeable surfaces across Somerville. Mr. Kates provided context: this plan focuses on hazard mitigation and what can we do to reduce risk for those hazards. Somerville is seeing a movement towards targeting not just existing hazards, but future ones. Permeable surfaces and nature-based solutions fall into the adaptation category more than hazard mitigation. The third category would be climate change mitigation - reducing emissions and other actions. Climate change mitigation is the most challenging, but this is where creative thinking is important. MVP (Municipality Vulnerability Preparedness) grants focus on climate change mitigation. It would be difficult to promote projects in this third category to FEMA.

Councilor Burnley acknowledged these ideas go beyond the scope of this plan, but urged the city to act as proactively as possible. He asked if there were any recommendations for mitigation strategies. He also recalled plans for a multi-lingual notification system and asked how that would operate. Mr. Kates answered that FEMA requires hazard mitigation plans to focus on risk

reduction. For Somerville Climate Forward, he suggested a notification system that keeps residents informed during and after emergencies. For now, the emergency alert system has a multi-pronged approach. The next step is to create redundancies: backup systems in case of a failure so that residents still get the information they need. Dr. Blais added that city staff collaborated with over 75 community members and stakeholders in working groups and put their feedback into a report. This work aligns with the hazard mitigation plan. However, it is due for an update, and the new update needs to incorporate equity.

Councilor Burnley asked if FEMA grants could be used to create programs for risk reduction, to which Mr. Kates replied that some FEMA grant programs can be used for community preparedness, but the Hazard Mitigation grant program would not consider those kinds of projects. Mr. Kates went on to describe how the Hazard Mitigation Plan is considered part of the emergency management program, and that a mix of participants was involved. Stakeholders in risk reduction were identified, experts such as Dr. Blais were hired, and community members gave feedback to be incorporated into the plan. Councilor Burnley commented that a fourth of a previous team was police officers and that he had not seen a proportion of one department that high in other meetings. He also asked for an explanation for the one public comment on the published plan. Mr. Kates replied that police had been so numerous on one team because there had not been any one representative from the force; therefore, everyone who had attended even one meeting had been listed. To address the public comment, he explained that community feedback happens throughout the process, but once the plan draft is published, it is advertised en masse on social media and other channels. The public comment came at this late stage. He noted that it is hard to get the public to provide input and respond to a document like this. However, the success of Climate Forward bodes well for the Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Chair Scott expressed appreciation for Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad's comment about zoning. This plan calls out a need to increase housing density in high elevation areas. Areas of highest risk of inundation are also areas where a lot of new construction is happening. He listed a few disappointments with the current plan. First, there seems to be a change of emphasis from moving grids underground to aboveground projects. He urged the administration to work on a relocation plan for transmission line infrastructure, which may include refusing the permit for the site. Second, Chair Scott was disappointed that impacts on the elderly is only mentioned once in the current plan, whereas the 2017 plan dedicated more time to that issue. He stated that he does not want to delay this process. His last concern were for minor typos and errors. He asked if adjustments at this stage were possible and the importance of those adjustments. Mr. Kates answered that they want to submit the best version of this document. Small changes to spelling and grammar are acceptable even after the document is approved, with the proper notation. He said he and his colleagues happy to take revisions. Chair Scott said he will follow up separately about typos.

Chair Scott reiterated that there is no mandate to do the things in this document, nor is there a timeframe spelled out for these actions. Therefore, he recommended approval for this item.

Councilor Burnley seconded, stating that these climate impacts are imminent, and he is looking forward to working with the administration on hazard mitigation and beyond.

Councilor Wilson also expressed favor for recommendation.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad reinforced her interest in intersection with zoning, expressing her desire to discuss in the future. She and Chair Scott will draft an item to refer to the Land Use committee.

Chair Scott announced that the Charles River Watershed foundation has an event on Feb 2nd about their modeling processes. Chair Scott applauded the hardworking climate scientists behind this work.

RESULT:	APPROVED. [UNANIMOUS]
AYES:	Scott, Mouakad, Burnley Jr., Wilson, Ewen-Campen

212844: Affirming the federal Green New Deal resolution by establishing goals, identifying actions necessary to meet these goals, and calling for the federal government to enact policies to advance a Green New Deal.

Councilor Burnley expressed his gratitude to have had a discussion about eliminating climate change during this meeting. He said that the 2018 version of this item intended to support and affirm the federal Green New Deal (GND) while committing to creating one for Somerville. Chair Scott said that as the committee identifies topics and goals to delve into, it can create working groups or resolutions. For now, their focus should be on idea generation.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad called attention to Section 7B of the Resolution, which calls for a transition from gas to electric power in residential buildings. She said that electrical heating is more expensive and can create a financial burden on residents - the committee should account for this. She asked Councilor Burnley how he saw this differently from Climate Forward. She stressed that she wants to make sure a GND resolution compliments existing plans in Somerville.

Councilor Burnley responded that addressing the outcomes of climate change is economically practical because the alternative - not addressing them - is far too costly. He noted that natural gas is the primary heating source for Somerville. The current reality for many residents is one he experienced when living in a residence fueled by oil: work with a system that they may not agree with, or freeze. He called attention to programming to make houses more energy-efficient, such as adding air-tight windows and improving insulation. Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad recommended changing “encourage” to “prioritize” in Section 7A. Chair Scott added that the City Council has already passed a weatherization resolution.

Councilor Burnley went on to describe how the GND is about centering justice: racial, environmental, and economic. It is about creating jobs for low-income residents and students, and about discussing how high a priority climate change mitigation is for the community. Chair Scott posed that it would be productive to invite specific staff to join this discussion.

Councilor Ewen-Campen called it a challenge and an opportunity to keep these overarching topics in view, but also break it into concrete, smaller steps that the Council can work on. He suggested to refer back to their guiding documents, and said that he looks forward to working with everyone on this.

Councilor Burnley agreed that it will require a lot of collaboration, particularly with the administration, but he is hopeful that Mayor Ballantyne is the one who brought this item forward originally and would likely support the item now.

Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad shared a memory of students installing solar panels in 2003, and Councilor Wilson added that the new high school would be a good subject for solar panel installation. Chair Scott recommended keeping this item in committee.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE