



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Land Use Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 21, 2026

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Ewen-Campen at 6:14 pm and adjourned at 7:27 pm on a roll call vote of 5 in favor (Councilors Davis, Clingan, McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen), 0 opposed, and 1 absent (Councilor Sait).

Others present: Fiona DiMartino – Deputy Director of Planning, Preservation, and Zoning, Samantha Carr – City Council Land Use Analyst, Madalyn Letellier – Assistant City Clerk, Legislative Services.

To open the meeting members of the committee gave their thoughts and reflections on these amendments after hearing from the public and after the public hearing.

Councilor Davis shared a general sense of skepticism over the amendments in front of the body related to accessory dwelling units. He stated his viewpoint that the amendments show that the Zoning Ordinance may not be in line with what is happening and is not carrying out the intent for backyard cottages. Councilor Clingan gave context to the intent in 2019 to upzone in Neighborhood Residential (NR) districts and give tenants the opportunity to rent and stay in place. He echoed concerns like Councilor Davis. Chair Ewen-Campen spoke to the narrative presented at the public hearing. Mainly around gentrification and units that are unaffordable being built. The Chair spoke to gentrification being a larger issue than the building types being allowed in the city and what started as an opportunity to create extra space for residents has changed significantly.

Roll Call

Present: Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis, Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan, Ward Two City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin and Ward Three City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen
Absent: Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [26-0860](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Land Use Committee Meeting of May 7, 2026.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: Ward Six City Councilor Davis, Ward Four City Councilor Clingan, Ward Two City Councilor McLaughlin and Ward Three City Councilor Ewen-Campen
ABSENT: Ward Five City Councilor Sait

2. Public Communication (ID # [26-0330](#)) 29 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 3.1.12 Backyard Cottage.

Deputy Director DiMartino was present to present to discuss the current

standards for backyard cottages. Currently regulations allow for up to 1,500 square feet in state law and the amendment before them suggests a limit of 900 square feet. Deputy Director DiMartino said the language is written in alignment with size standards but not the language of the zoning ordinance. Deputy Director stated the view from staff is that additional clarification can be added and elaborated on in this section of zoning. There is a plan for staff to amend the ordinance to combat the way these amendments have evolved that was not intended back in 2019. Councilor Davis mentioned the possibilities of loopholes for developers who have the funds to find ways around zoning requirements. Chair Ewen-Campen spoke to some of the loopholes that exist to the building height and uncertainty around what is the right height and dimensions for backyard cottages. Councilor McLaughlin spoke to an opposing view than what has been expressed so far. He shared buildings that were built many years ago and developments that were fitted in to accommodate people who wanted to live and work in the city need to be considered. Councilor McLaughlin spoke to the desire to keep things consistent, developers will find ways to evade zoning laws and whatever gets put forth now should be strict enough to ensure the intent is being carried out. In response to Councilor Clingan, Deputy Director DiMartino said there are many considerations in mind to ensure these buildings are economical as well. The Deputy Director spoke to the limit of 900 square feet and if the Council does move forward with this amendment the various standards that would need to be revisited if approved. She spoke to the fact that this amendment does not always limit how high a building can be built.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- 3. Public Communication (ID # [26-0329](#))

14 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend the Zoning Ordinance Section 3.1.12 Backyard Cottage.

Chair Ewen-Campen summarized the amendment and its intent to stop the creation of condos, which could limit an individual’s ability to buy in the city. Councilor McLaughlin spoke to his experience personally as he lives in a condo and this is the only way he would be able to afford to buy in the city. Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Clingan agreed that the council should focus on regulating the size of buildings and not on if the building is renter or owner occupied. Deputy Director DiMartino stated the Zoning Ordinance does not regulate condo units and following state law the city cannot regulate ownership. The Deputy Director shared the administration is working on fixing definitions within the zoning ordinance and plans to bring the amendments before the body following recess.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

-
4. Public Communication (ID # [26-0328](#)) 14 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 12.2.2 regarding affordable dwelling units.

Councilor McLaughlin asked if this amendment is allowable in the city, the Deputy Director highlighted some initial concerns in the language. Deputy Director stated concerns about the proposal violating uniformity guidelines, affordable housing requirements, and if created it would reduce the number of qualifying lots under the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) Communities Act. Deputy Director posed back a question to the committee on whether the city can versus if they should pursue this amendment. She shared staff is continuing to investigate studies and gather information on what the exact implications would be for the city if accepted.

In response to members of the committee City Council Land Use Analyst Samantha Carr shared additional information on the uniformity clause. The uniformity clauses intent is for all regulations to be the same for all property types within a zoning district. Land Use Analyst Carr explained once a lot is split the regulations can be violated in several ways and the uniformity clause is lost.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

5. Public Communication (ID # [26-0327](#)) 29 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend Zoning Ordinance Section 15.7.2.d Zoning Board of Appeals Board Rules.

Deputy Director DiMarino summarized the amendment and its goal to shift approval over lot splits back to the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). She stated it is currently an administrative process and does not require public hearings to build. She urged against making the process include discretionary approval but stated feedback that has been received from residents about wanting more exposure to the process and more oversight on construction. The Deputy Director continued later in the conversation that there are other ways outside of the administrative process to address concerns from residents.

Chair Ewen-Campen asked if the lot size is not working for residents and could that be changed as a solution. Councilor McLaughlin brought the conversation back to focusing on what accessory dwelling units (ADU's) should look like and how best to stay in compliance with state law.

In response, Deputy Director DiMarino stated the Planning Department is working on how this amendment would interact with site plan approval process, the affordable housing overlay, and bringing more knowledge to residents about by right development without making it so everything requires a permit process. She stated this is something she can bring back to the committee in a formal written opinion.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE