



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Utilities and Public Works Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, May 8, 2023

6:00 PM

The meeting took place virtually via GoToWebinar and was called to order at 6:01 PM by Chair Clingan and adjourned at 7:49 PM on a roll call vote of 2 in favor (Councilors Kelly and Clingan), none against and 1 absent (Councilor Gomez Mouakad).

Others present:

Sean Gonsalves – Community Broadband Networks Initiative, Roy Russell – Upgrade Cambridge, Greg Hill – Somerville Stands Together, Peter Forcellese - Legislative Clerk.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Jesse Clingan, Vice Chair Beatriz Gomez Mouakad and Charlotte Kelly

1. Committee Minutes
(ID # [23-0339](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Public Utilities and Public Works Committee Meeting of March 2, 2023.

RESULT: **ACCEPTED**

AYE: Chairperson Clingan, Vice Chair Gomez Mouakad and City Councilor At Large Kelly

2. Order
(ID # [23-0610](#))

By Councilor Gomez Mouakad and Councilor Wilson
That the Commissioner of Public Works report on leaks and building system failures that have caused the shutdown of municipal buildings, excluding school buildings, in the last five years.

A written response (referenced below) has been submitted by the DPW. Chair Clingan commented that the response does not adequately address the issue and that Commissioner Lathan will be asked to clarify her response. Councilor Gomez Mouakad explained that she submitted this item, not as a criticism of the DPW, but rather to obtain data so that the city's infrastructure could be addressed. Councilor Kelly commented that it would be helpful to have a list of the buildings affected and how long they were shut down.

RESULT: **KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

3. Order
(ID # [23-0548](#))

By Councilor Clingan

That this Council's Committee on Public Utilities and Public Works discuss the Somerville Internet Access Task Force's recommendation regarding Municipal Broadband.

Greg Hill, Roy Russell and Sean Gonsalves were invited to speak on this item regarding Municipal Broadband Networks (MBN). Chair Clingan commented that although there are some funding concerns, the committee will continue to explore the city's options. Mr. Gonsalves stated that affordability is the main goal and noted that it lowers internet costs for consumers. Additionally, having a modern telecommunications system is vital to growing municipal economic development. There are already 900 communities being served by these networks, but 30 years after passage of the Telecommunications Act, access has not expanded as hoped for. Mr. Gonsalves mentioned the Los Angeles County expanded its broadband network in 2021 and that Cleveland has put out an RFP for a MBN and, to that end, is using \$20 million of rescue plan funds. In MA, 2 dozen communities in the Berkshires already have MBN. He spoke about the Infrastructure Bill and some of its restrictions, e.g., funds must first be spent in unserved areas, then in underserved areas. The bill allows affordable areas to be treated as unserved or underserved areas, thereby expanding use of the funds. Rescue Plan funds offer the most flexibility for using the money for broadband. Mr. Gonsalves stated that there are a variety of options for funding these networks. Building a MBN is serious business and big companies fear this because fiber networks are considered the gold standard. He affirmed that it's expensive, but asked what the ubiquitous cost of not having it would be.

Mr. Russell told the committee that Upgrade Cambridge is a grassroots organization with the goal of getting the city back on track towards building a MBN. Recommendations were made in the past, but due to an administration change in city government, the matter wasn't pursued. As time passed, Cambridge finally realized that there was a digital issue in the city and decided to investigate further, hiring a consultant who provided recommendations that were fiscally responsible. The estimates cost for a city-wide fiber network in Cambridge could range from \$124 - \$161 million in 2022 dollars. If the city moves forward, it will likely try to get a private partner, allowing it to work out some public policy issues. To attract such a partner, the city would have to invest \$150 million. Mr. Russell noted that the final cost could be lower than estimated and said that understanding the costs is essential to building a system. Cambridge, unlike Somerville, has a single monopoly provider (Comcast) and some smaller wireless providers. Other companies haven't tried to get into the Cambridge cable market due to the cost of doing business there but if a company wanted to come in and was willing to bear the cost, the city could not stop them. Somerville, having 2 major providers, would have an advantage in negotiating terms. His personal opinion is that MBN could be great for Somerville. He thinks there is value in having a local grassroots organization to keep the issue before the

administration, City Council and residents.

Mr. Hill told the members that his group is small but garners a lot of interest in its posts on social media. He mentioned a report that said Somerville wasn't a good candidate for MBN because of "overbuilding." Mr. Gonsalves said that he hasn't done an analysis on Somerville and explained that the term "overbuilding" simply translates to competition and he doesn't think that fiber networks constitute "overbuilding." Councilor Kelly agreed with the speakers that this issue is less about logistics and more about political will. She noted that during COVID, the digital divide in the city was real. Chair Clingan stated that although councilors may be open to MBN, the public would have to be involved. Mr. Russell again said that this is not something to be taken lightly and that a municipality should have an understanding of costs and benefits before moving forward. Chair Clingan asked how rate increases would work and Mr. Russell said that an annual increase was factored into Cambridge's estimates.

Marianne Walles, a meeting attendee, spoke about having a feasibility study done for targeted areas, i.e., those areas with poor service. Mr. Gonsalves said that the reliability issues Ms. Walles referred to aren't seen with fiber networks and Mr. Russell commented that a MBN could start in those areas and then expand outward. Ms. Walles commented that providers aren't living up to what they promised to deliver and Mr. Gonsalves pointed out that there is no regulatory body that verifies internet speeds. Susan Eldridge, a meeting attendee, told the committee she heard about this subject and noted that there are poor service areas, adding that she can't imagine anyone not wanting to do a feasibility study at the very list. She asked what the next step would be.

Chair Clingan noted that the idea of MBN had been broached by a previous City Council but wasn't pursued due to cost. Now he thinks that it's time to move forward. Chair Clingan explained that any request for feasibility study would come from the Mayor. It might be possible to have a request submitted to the administration through the participatory budget process. Chair Clingan stated that the mayor needs to hear from the community on this matter. He asked what opportunities are available for providers when a new building goes up and Mr. Gonsalves pointed out that many communities don't have regulations requiring new buildings to have telecommunication connectivity. As for next steps, he said that a feasibility study would provide granular data. Additionally, there should be a data collection process, a good consultant helping out, coalition building, a citizen group ready to play a big role in pushing the process, power mapping, discussions with the business community and engagement of various stakeholders.

More information is available at:

upgradecambridge.org <<http://upgradecambridge.org>>

[<https://communitynets.org/>](https://communitynets.org/)

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/citymanagersoffice/files/broadbandtaskforce/2023municipalbroband/municipalbrobandincambridgefeasibilityandbusinessmodeloptionsfinal20230315.pdf> [<https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/citymanagersoffice/files/broadbandtaskforce/2023municipalbroband/municipalbrobandincambridgefeasibilityandbusinessmodeloptionsfinal20230315.pdf>](https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/citymanagersoffice/files/broadbandtaskforce/2023municipalbroband/municipalbrobandincambridgefeasibilityandbusinessmodeloptionsfinal20230315.pdf)

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

4. Order
(ID # [23-0525](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Pineda Neufeld
That the Commissioner of Public Works remove or raise above human reach, the overhead wires tied to a porch railing at 76 Curtis Street, and report back to this City Council who is responsible for the wires.

A written response (referenced below) has been submitted by the DPW. Chair Clingan wants to follow up on this item.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

5. Order
(ID # [23-0524](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Clingan
That the Commissioner of Public Works remove, or raise to a safe height, the cables attached to a utility pole at 54 Ten Hills Road, and report to this City Council who owns the pole.

A written response (referenced below) has been submitted by the DPW. Chair Clingan wants to follow up on this item.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

6. Order
(ID # [23-0328](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Ewen-Campen
That the Commissioner of Public Works immediately remove, or raise to a safe height, the cables attached to a pole at the intersection of Harvard and Monmouth Streets, and report to the City Council who owns the pole.

A written response (referenced below) has been submitted by the DPW. Chair Clingan wants to follow up on this item.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

7. Order
(ID # [23-0327](#))

By Councilor Strezo and Councilor Ewen-Campen
That the Commissioner of Public Works immediately remove the wires wrapped around the pole near 57 Atherton Street and report to the City Council who owns the pole.

A written response (referenced below) has been submitted by the DPW.

**RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK
COMPLETED**

Referenced Documents:

- PUPW - 2023-05-08 DPW Responses (with 23-0524, 23-0525, 23-0610, 23-0347, 23-0328)
- PUPW - 2023-05-08 - Comments - R Russell (with 23-0548)