

Madalyn Letellier

From: Harriotte Hurie [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, December 26, 2025 12:10 PM
To: Public Comments
Subject: For public comment to City Council: My letter to Mayor Wilson's transition team, titled "Troubling concerns regarding RSJ's administration of the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities"

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December 26, 2025

To: the Honorable Mayor-Elect Jake Wilson's Transition Team

Greetings transition team and committees,

My name is Harriotte Ranvig, resident of [REDACTED] since 1983. I have been blind since I was 14 years old. I am a retired professor and I have also been both a professional disability advocate and now I am a volunteer advocate as the vice chair of the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD) since January 2023 and prior to that I was an associate member for more than a year.

I'm sending my feedback to you via this letter because filling out forms on the web is not readily blind-computer-user accessible.

I am proud of the work we do as a commission. Not unlike city council members, we work more hours than our current role descriptions would state.

Our bylaws state our mission is to continuously make Somerville a more and more accessible, equitable, and enjoyable place to live for people with disabilities of all kinds. Importantly, this also includes people who may become disabled in the future, whether inevitably due to aging, or sooner due to disease or accident.

As a senior myself, I am keenly aware that elders often are uncomfortable to describe themselves as having a disability.

As a Commission, we have experienced a number of barriers imposed by the current administration, particularly in the form of our assigned liaison department (Department of Racial & Social Justice), that

holds us back from fulfilling our statutory mandate. Our hope, through this transition, is that the Wilson Administration will assist the SCPD in restructuring how we operate as a City Commission.

The current administration has held the SCPD, the Women's Commission, and the Human Rights Commission under the Department of Racial and Social Justice (RSJ).

Some of the difficulties we have been challenged by are listed below. In conversations with members of the other RSJ-liased commissions, we've learned that we all have experiences similar blockages:

1. Communications- Misunderstandings leading to very little trust, an inability to establish and sustain collaborative communications with RSJ, and RSJ rarely being open to a problem solving discussion.
2. Procurement- the process of procuring items for SCPD projects
3. Availability- RSJ staff were rarely available without an appointment.

RSJ has repeatedly instructed SCPD leadership that we are not permitted to directly communicate with other departments within the city, especially those whose work directly impact people with disabilities and their access to the city's offerings: PSUF, Mobility, Traffic and Parking, etc. RSJ has insisted that all our communication must pass through the ADA Coordinator, creating a needless and unfortunate bottleneck.

It feels as if we've been placed in a situation where we (SCPD) are to speak only when spoken to, as if we were children. We are never brought to the tables where decision-making that affects people with disabilities happens. We are told that our input is welcome only via the same channels as members of the public, through the usual public meetings at which city staff present designs that seem mostly complete or design concepts already chosen, for a "check-the-box" illusion of public approval.

Thus, SCPD members' individual and collective research and life experiences are not brought to benefit the citizens and visitors of Somerville in the city's choices and actions. Without this foundation, we have made far less progress than would have been possible, yet more than most might imagine over the past three years, especially in our education and social projects. Projects include: SCPD's research and advice on how to format city documents for embossing in Braille; SCPD's scholarship program for Somerville high school graduates, now entering its fourth year; SCPD's ongoing collaboration with the city's I/T department on the accessibility of the city's website, etc.

Much of our commission work was hindered by excessive delays in having commissioners appointed and placed in the correct seats according to our bylaws, which state the commission shall have 13 members.

There have also been long delays in our attempts to meet with administration staff members, as well as the Mayor, with the intention of working through some of the difficulties we were experiencing. Our hope currently is that the Wilson administration will listen to our concerns and assist us in restructuring in a way in to allow us to fulfill our statutory mandate.

When the SCPD requested that disability related calls to 311 be forwarded to us (minus any personal identifying info of course), the requested information was not provided to us by the ADA coordinator. We've requested but have been denied our own city email address. Instead, the ADA Coordinator's email is listed as our email address. This is insufficient in our experience, as we have learned we are not forwarded all the email that is intended for us as a commission, including some building variances that by state law we have a right to comment on. Our chair learned of this only due to casual conversations with state-level disability advocacy groups that also receive those variances, who expected SCPD to voice opinions.

Most of the communications we've received from RSJ were perfunctory and carried the tone of doubt in how SCPD's leadership and commission function. On March 18th, 2025, the SCPD held its usual monthly hybrid meeting with 5 of its members joining via Zoom. The ADA coordinator, seemingly very upset with the content of the meeting discussion, informed Holly that she could not present her Chair report, summarily closing the meeting by snapping her laptop shut, killing the Zoom meeting, and told the SCPD members physically present that we had to immediately leave the building. The YouTube video of that meeting is still available. The ADA Coordinator would not allow Holly to give her report because it would contain a description of the disrespectful statements made to our chair and treasurer by the RSJ and PSUF directors as well as the ADA coordinator in a meeting held in the last week of February 2025. There is no recording, although there is a partial CART transcript of the meeting in which those statements were made. As all of us have learned with Open Meeting Law, topics and events related to each commission and board may not be shared with the entire membership except in a public meeting where deliberation can take place. Thus, this was the first opportunity to share with the entire commission the aforementioned leadership meeting with the accusatory statements made to our treasurer regarding financial transactions for the commission.

Since March we have used a personal Zoom account and our meetings have been held at the West Branch Library as a public meeting. The following paragraphs describe a sample of barriers we have encountered.

Working with RSJ regarding the choice for the most accessible swings and their purchase SCPD was blocked. The Public Space and Urban Forestry department made the final selection and installation of accessible swings without any further consultation with SCPD.

the pay out of the college scholarships for Somerville High School Graduates has been hindered by RSJ's stated policy that every one of the scholarship recipients had to have submitted their documentation before any checks would be cut. SCPD Leadership advocated to have this process expedited and some checks have been cut. We are working on simplify the documents necessary for the recipients to be able to more quickly and effectively submit them.

Research efforts to obtain a Braille embosser by the SCPD began 4 years ago. The final result is that although the city owns a Braille Embosser, since March 2023, the city did not give it a home until RSJ moved from the city hall building to their TAB office on Holland Street. further there were excessive delays in getting staff training on how to use the embosser, no actual commissioners were allowed to be trained on the embosser. The locked door policy for City Departments instituted during the covid pandemic, continues to this day with RSJ. This means for any face to face interactions with RSJ staff, an individual must have an appointment.

As a Commission, we look forward to working together with the Wilson Administration in making the necessary changes that will allow the SCPD to become more effective in accomplishing our mission as set out by MA State Statute.

Respectfully,

Harriotte Ranvig
Somerville resident and lifelong disability advocate
[REDACTED]