



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Open Space, Environment and Energy Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, September 19, 2024

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Mbah at 6:04pm and adjourned at 7:35pm with a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Scott, Wilson, Mbah), none opposed, and two absent (Councilors Burnley, Sait).

Others present: Christine Blais – Director of Sustainability and Environment, Julia Damiano – Environmental Policy Manager, Office of Sustainability and Environment, Natasha Frazier – Assistant Clerk of Committees, Neha Singh – Director Intergovernmental Affairs.

Councilor Burnley was appointed as a member of this committee for this meeting only.

Roll Call

Present: City Councilor At Large Wilfred N. Mbah, City Councilor At Large Jake Wilson, Ward Two City Councilor Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott and Willie Burnley Jr.

Absent: Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-0650](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Open Space, Environment and Energy Committee Meeting of May 6, 2024.

RESULT: **ACCEPTED**

AYE: City Councilor At Large Mbah, City Councilor At Large Wilson, Ward Two City Councilor Scott and Burnley Jr.

ABSENT: Ward Five City Councilor Sait

2. Order (ID # [24-0042](#))

By Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Davis and Councilor Ewen-Campen
That the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment provide this Council with any updated plans and timelines for a municipal composting program.

Chair Mbah provided an overview of the municipal composting program within the context of the 2024 Climate Forward Plan and the fiscal-year 2025 budget, which he noted are two actions taken by the City since the last Open Space meeting. Chair Mbah stated that the 2024 Climate Forward Plan’s zero-waste plan offers support for composting, but that composting is not part of the Plan’s top ten priorities and wanted to hear about the Administration’s views on composting as a priority. Manager Damiano stated that there is significant community support for City-wide composting. She stated that the City consulted with neighboring

municipalities, including Medford and Boston, and applied for a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to support composting in Somerville. She stated that 2,500 households in four Somerville neighborhoods have been selected to participate in a pilot program that will be operational in the third or fourth quarter of fiscal year 2025, and that participating households will receive supplies for composting. The selected neighborhoods are Davis Square, Union Square, East Somerville, and Winter Hill. The USDA grant prioritizes environmental justice communities, but this was not a requirement for the grant.

Chair Mbah asked about the timeline for the composting program, and Director Blais described each phase of the program, noting that a comprehensive timeline exists which begins in November 2024. Chair Mbah inquired about how funds appropriated from the City Council for this program are being utilized. Director Blais stated that this funding is unspent and is not required to be spent by the end of the year. She stated that the use of these funds will be determined later on.

Councilor Wilson asked questions about the use of means testing for this pilot program. He also expressed that he wishes this initiative would have been a priority during budget season without means testing. Councilor Scott sought clarity about why this program is being rolled out as a means tested pilot program, rather than implementing this program on a City-wide basis which would help with rat control.

Director Blais stated that pilot programs are common and help make the final program more successful. Manager Damiano stated that OSE worked with ISD to identify communities with the most rat complaints and noted that three of the four neighborhoods selected for the composting program are also the neighborhoods with the most rat complaints. The fourth community was selected for environmental justice reasons.

Councilor Scott noted that there are 33,000 households in the City and that 2,500 of them will participate in the program. He sought clarity on the funding sources for the composting program, which Manager Damiano described, noting that the budget for the program is \$500,000 in total. She also stated that it would cost approximately \$1.5 million to \$2 million to implement the program City-wide. Director Blais noted that part of the reason the pilot program is expensive is because it is providing composting materials for people's homes and is not just the cost of pickup and processing. Councilor Scott expressed his preference for an ongoing program, noting that a program cost of \$2 million could make a dramatic, long-term impact.

Chair Mbah asked about how waste costs have changed over time, which Manager Damiano described. Councilor Burnley stated that the definition of

an environmental justice community in the State of Massachusetts is a community whose median income is not more than 65% of the statewide annual median household income, where minorities make up 40% or more of the population, where 25% or more of households lack English language proficiency, and/or where minorities comprise 25% or more of the population and the annual median household income of the municipality in which the neighborhood is located does not exceed 150% of the statewide annual median household income. Councilor Burnley asked if there is any way to include more houses in the existing pilot program within the same budget. Manager Damiano stated that more impact is not possible under the same budget. Councilor Burnley asked if an RFP has been issued and who the possible vendors are. Manager Damiano named three possible vendors. Councilor Wilson noted that the finance committee changed its waste disposal contract from a per ton rate to a flat rate. Discussion of this item is expected to continue in the next Open Space meeting.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

3. Resolution
(ID # [24-0086](#))

By Councilor Ewen-Campen

That the Administration explain the issues that are preventing Reavis Field from opening and how the process may be expedited.

Chair Mbah noted that the field is now open and in use. Councilor Wilson explained the history of why there was a delay in this field opening and expressed his respect for the process that was followed by all parties.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Order
(ID # [24-1029](#))

By Councilor Mbah

That the Director of Parks and Recreation, the Director of SomerPromise and the Out of School Time Coordinator, report to the City Council on the status of children and teen participation in the summer recreation and education programs.

Chair Mbah stated that in his personal experiences and hearing from constituents, that there are significant complexities to the registration process for recreation programs and that swimming programs in particular fill up extremely quickly. Chair Mbah noted that he has a number of questions about the data that is included in the attachment to this item. Chair Mbah asked a number of questions seeking to understand this data. His questions focused on identifying barriers to enrollment and participation in recreation programs, including the role of internet access and language barriers. He also expressed interest in following up to understand what happened to participants who were not able to register for their desired programs and activities. He also sought to understand if there are issues on the staffing side, particularly for swim programs, and expressed interest in understanding demand for these programs and pool use availability in general. Chair Mbah further noted the issue of affordability of summer

programs, highlighting that many families cannot afford private summer programs, but also face barriers to participating in public programs, too. He expressed concern for the role of transportation as a possible barrier. Chair Mbah stated that he is hoping that exploring these issues will help achieve a more inclusive, just, and equitable community.

Director Singh stated that she will convey these questions to the Directors of the relevant programs and noted that language barriers are on the list of priority questions. She stated that a memo will be submitted regarding these questions.

Councilor Wilson stated that what he hears from parents is that registration timelines are a very important factor in terms of enabling participation in programs. He noted that registration for summer programs often happens very early, and that camps can fill up in the preceding December and January. He noted that early registration allows the City more time to prepare to meet staffing needs. Councilor Scott echoed his support for earlier registration windows, and noted discrepancies between high demand for swim classes yet low actual participation in some classes, such as there being only one student in a class. He also raised the possibility of in person registration if online registration remains an issue.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

5. Order
(ID # [24-1198](#))

By Councilor Mbah

That the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment discuss with this Council the next steps for implementing the Climate Forward Plan.

Chair Mbah provided an overview of the Climate Forward Plan, noting that it identifies ten priority actions that are expected to produce the most impact in terms of pollution reduction, energy savings, sustainability, and resiliency. He asked about the timeline of this plan and the role of external grants and advocacy groups in shaping this plan. He noted that the highest priority appears to be net-zero emission standards for buildings and asked questions about the implementation of this in light of existing funding and plans. He would like to know what the City Council should anticipate receiving regarding this in the future. He also asked questions about a program that will evaluate energy efficiency for Somerville residents, and offer technical and financial assistance to reduce energy waste. Director Blais noted that she received Chair Mbah's questions in advance and has prepared written responses. The item will be discussed at the next Committee meeting.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Referenced Documents:

- OSEE - 2024-09-19 Summer Rec Programs