



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 2, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via Zoom and called to order by Chair Kelly at 6:02 p.m., and adjourned at 7:26 p.m. on a Roll Call Vote: 3 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Kelly), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

Others present:

Michael Potere – Assistant Clerk of Committees; Nicholas Antanavica – Director of Inspectional Services; Kelley Hiland – Deputy Director, Public Health and Health and Human Services; Neha Singh – Director of Intergovernmental Affairs.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Charlotte Kelly, Vice Chair Lance L. Davis and Matthew McLaughlin

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-1382](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee meeting of September 11, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Chairperson Kelly, Vice Chair Davis and Ward One City Councilor McLaughlin

2. Order (ID # [23-1373](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Scott and Councilor Ewen-Campen That the Director of Inspectional Services update this Council on enforcement of the Dark Skies ordinance that restricts light pollution and reduces energy consumption.

Councilor McLaughlin stated that this Item is in response to several recent constituent complaints and questions regarding the city's light ordinance.

Councilor McLaughlin sponsored Sal LaRiccia and Mario Motta to speak. LaRiccia stated that they have lived in Somerville for many years and are no longer able to see the stars due to light pollution, and asked six questions: (1) who enforces the outdoor light standards, (2) what are the responsibilities of the people installing light fixtures, (3) what is the approval process, (4) who is responsible, (5) how are complaints handled, and (6) who is responsible for handling complaints? Motta stated that they have expertise in advising state and local governments on lighting, and that indirect lighting, as opposed to brighter lights, makes it easier to see and results in lower crimes rates. Motta added that, for residents, having lights shine into bedrooms while trying to sleep can lower a person's melatonin levels, which studies have found correlated to an increased risk of cancer.

Director Antanavica stated that Inspectional Services reviews lighting plans, enforces the ordinance, and responds to complaints. Director Antanavica continued that the ordinance only applies to new construction after it was passed in 2019, and that it cannot be retroactively applied. Director Antanavica also stated that construction plans are reviewed for compliance with the ordinance, but that the department does not have the capacity to later go and physically inspect the lighting for the same. Director Antanavica noted, however, that the department is looking into obtaining light meters that can produce legally admissible readings of light emission for compliance and possible court action in the future.

Councilor McLaughlin asked what could be done to be more proactive about enforcement, and Director Antanavica replied that educating people and developers about the studies regarding the efficacy of less bright lighting in contributing to better security is a good place to start. Councilor McLaughlin asked if there was anything that could be done broadly, or if the department responds to complaints as they come in, and Director Antanavica stated that it is the latter due to the department's staffing limitations.

Director Antanavica also stated that, even though the department enforces the lighting ordinance on project applications, those enforcement decisions can be appealed to the zoning board, where they are often overturned on the basis of abutting residents expressing approval of the proposed lighting.

Councilor Davis asked about the lighting at Assembly Row, and Director Antanavica replied that Assembly Row has its own special zoning that it follows, which preserved the zoning rights as they existed at the time it was being developed.

Councilor Davis asked if enforcement would be triggered when a project is approved and then the developer later changes the bulbs in the fixtures to be out of compliance, and Director Antanavica stated that it would.

Director Antanavica also explained that enforcement of the ordinance has to take into account the level of brightness of the light prior to its passing, but that can be difficult if the previous type of light is not known.

Councilor Davis asked what would trigger the review of changing exterior light fixtures, and Director Antanavica replied that a review would be triggered when an electrical permit is requested.

Councilor McLaughlin asked if the Zoning Board denying an appeal to a light ordinance override would be binding, and Director Antanavica stated that it would.

Councilor Davis asked the administration to review alternative measures for revising zoning review or a way to remove the light ordinance from zoning,

and Director Singh stated that they would look into it.

LaRicca reiterated that education regarding the benefits of lower lighting on public safety would be an important path moving forward.

Councilor Davis asked that the following links regarding the health risks associated with bright public lighting be attached to this Item: (1) <https://www.familyhandyman.com/article/does-lighting-your-property-actually-make-it-safer/> and (2) <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/outdoor-light-night-breast-cancer/>.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Order
(ID # [23-1372](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Wilson
That the Director of Health and Human Services update this Council on homelessness outreach efforts, including the hiring of four clinicians, case managers and home visitations.

Chair Kelly stated this Item would be taken together with Item 6 (ID # 23-1289) and Item 7 (ID # 23-1283).

Councilor McLaughlin stated that this Item is in response to homeless individuals on Broadway and a lack of clarity on whom to contact when there is need for an urgent response to a an issue. Deputy Director Hiland stated that the department does not have the capacity to respond to crisis calls, and that those calls should be directed to the Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC). Deputy Director Hiland also stated that the city's Community Health Workers help residents, including the homeless, navigate available healthcare resources. Councilor McLaughlin asked if there was any plan for the city to undertake the work that is currently being done by the SHC, and Deputy Director Hiland stated that would be a complex program to put together and that the department currently does not have the resources to do so.

Councilor Davis expressed approval for the administration's plans to lay the groundwork for building out crisis response support beginning in the FY 2024 budget, and encouraged the administration to ask the City Council for the resources it needs to accomplish that goal.

Chair Kelly expressed support for providing the SHC with the resources it needs to continue providing support for homeless crisis response in Somerville, particularly to the extent that the SHC is the city's primary service provider in that area, and to make sure its employees are being properly compensated.

Councilor McLaughlin requested specific information on what could be

done about the issue as it is currently impacting Ward 1, and Chair Kelly stated in response that Item 7 (ID # 23-1283) would be kept in committee for further discussion.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Order
(ID # [23-1370](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Davis

That the Director of Health and Human Services create a homeless worker program, similar to the Roca program, that offers compensated community cleanup and other community service jobs to the un-housed.

Deputy Director Hiland stated that this idea is currently being indirectly implemented in Somerville's First Source Jobs Program.

Councilor McLaughlin explained that this Item is to provide the administration with a possible model to develop a program for the city that helps at-risk groups find employment.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

5. Order
(ID # [23-1367](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin

That the Commissioner of Public Works ensure that the new Police sub-station in East Somerville is easily accessible to the public and includes public restrooms.

Director Singh stated that there are some safety concerns regarding opening the restrooms at this sub-station for public use because domestic violence survivors are interviewed there and because it is not always occupied by uniformed officers.

Councilor McLaughlin requested a walkthrough of the building prior to it being renovated so he can see what might be architecturally possible in terms of safely providing public access to a restroom.

Councilor Davis expressed support for this Item, and noted that the public has access to restrooms in other buildings not occupied by uniformed police officers, such as the library.

Chair Kelly also expressed support for this Item, and further noted that City Hall is another building that provides public access to restrooms that is not regularly occupied by uniformed police officers. Chair Kelly strongly encouraged the administration to work with the Police Department to try to find a way to make a publicly accessible restroom available at this sub-station.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

6. Order (ID # [23-1289](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Housing and the Director of Health and Human Services update this Council regarding repeated requests to provide shelter to homeless residents.

Chair Kelly stated this Item would be taken together with Item 3 (ID # 23-1372) and Item 7 (ID # 23-1283).

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

7. Resolution (ID # [23-1283](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Administration update this Council on the progress toward providing direct homeless services to East Somerville residents in temporary and permanent locations within Ward 1.

Chair Kelly stated this Item would be taken together with Item 3 (ID # 23-1372) and Item 6 (ID # 23-1289).

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Referenced Documents:

- PHPS - 2023-11-02 Outdoor light at night linked with breast cancer _ News _ Harvard T.H (with 23-1373)
- PHPS - 2023-11-02 Does Lighting Your Property Actually Make It Safer (with 23-1373)