



# City of Somerville, Massachusetts

## City Council Finance Committee

### Meeting Minutes

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**Tuesday, June 10, 2025**

**6:00 PM**

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This meeting was held via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Wilson at 6:02pm and adjourned at 10:20pm on a roll call vote of 5 in favor (Councilors Mbah, Burnley, Clingan, Scott, and Wilson), 0 opposed, and 0 absent.

The committee went into recess at 8:04pm and returned at 8:10pm on a vote of 4 in favor (Councilors Mbah, Burnley, Clingan, and Wilson), 0 opposed and 1 absent (Councilor Scott).

Councilor Scott re-joined the meeting at 8:12pm.

Others present: Mike Mastrobuoni – Budget Director, Ed Bean – Finance Director, Frank Golden – Chief Assessor, Alan Inacio – Director of Finance and Community Development OSPCD, Thomas Galligani – Director of OSPCD, Brad Rawson – Director of Mobility, Dan Bartman – Director of Planning, Preservation, and Zoning, Lisa Davidson – Interim Director of Housing, Ellen Shachter – Director of Housing Stability, Rachel Nadkarni – Director of Economic Division, Luisa Oliveira, Director of Public Space and Urban Forestry, Denise Taylor – Director of Communications and Community Engagement, Steve DeCarlo – Director of CityTV, Steve Craig – Constituent Services Director, Maria Terese Nagel – Director of SOIA, Meredith Gamble – Deputy Director and Language Justice Coordinator, Karin Carroll – Director of Health and Human Services, Ashley Speliotis – Director Council on Aging, Chris Hosman – Director of SomerPromise, Jerome Thomas – Director of Veterans Services, Cathy Piantigini – Director of Libraries, Amanda Nagim-Williams – Department of Racial and Social Justice, Anna Gartsman – Director of SomerStat, Madalyn Letellier – Legislative Services Manager.

#### **Roll Call**

#### **Review of the FY 2026 Budget**

Director of Finance, Ed Bean, began the meeting by discussing updates to new growth projections. He stated an initial projection of \$9 million growth, supplemented by a raise in property tax up to 2.5%. The Director stated the restrictions placed on the budget are tight and the new growth projection is now \$8 million. Chief Assessor, Frank Golden, shared an assessment on life sciences is depreciating faster than the city can collect growth. Vacancies are rising and rent is going down, he shared officers are still in the field collecting data, the big piece being life sciences are not bringing growth as expected.

Councilor Mbah asked how this projection of growth affects programs available in the budget. Director Bean re-stated non-discretionary items in the budget were looked at with a more critical eye and the level-service

funding budget reflects this new projected growth numbers. Director Bean shared the new growth projections for FY 25 reached \$14.1 million.

Within the meeting conversation occurred around the current hiring freeze that is in place until January 1, 2026. Director Mastrobuoni shared the common way to do it is to freeze all departments who have vacancies, when the report was pulled there was an unfair balance in the number of vacancies in Public Works and work with the team to hire in DPW to ensure they can fulfill the services required by the City and have a balanced budget. Further clarification was shared that employees who are on level 5 or 6 positions are not currently slotted to receive a raise while employees at a level 4 and lower level are budgeted for a 2% raise in FY 26.

- OSCP Administration
- Mobility
- Planning, Preservation & Zoning
- Housing
- Housing Stability
- Economic Development
- Redevelopment Authority
- Public Space & Urban Forestry
- Community Preservation Act
- Communications & Community Engagement
- CityTV
- Constituent Services
- SomerViva
- Health & Human Services
- Council on Aging
- SomerPromise
- Veterans Services
- Libraries
- Office of Sustainability & Environment
- Racial & Social Justice
- SomerStat

#### **OSCPD Administration**

Councilor Burnley began questioning as to why certain lines in the budget were increased to about six times the amount from FY 25. Director Inacio shared due to learning opportunities available to staff the department has overspent on various lines related to travel, conferences, in person, online, or professional development opportunities and it can be difficult to forecast the actual expenditure. This is an attempt to cover the wide range of needs that can be found with a staff of about 80 employees.

#### **Mobility**

No additional questions were asked during the meeting.

### **Planning, Preservation & Zoning**

Councilor Scott inquired about spending on the Ordinary Maintenance (OM) line and professional and technical services (PTS) lines and what did not happen this year. Director Bartman, shared by the end of the year 57% will be used after bills are paid by the end of the year. The Director shared Union Square East, and an incentives program has been rolled into FY 26 as it will be directly impacted by the McGrath Boulevard project occurring by MASS Dot and will engage the residents at the same time as that project. The Director continued to explain various other initiatives, some funded by grants, around marijuana retailers, 90 Washington, Central Avenue, 299 Broadway, a scoping project, and as previously mentioned ongoing incentive projects as way of other projects. Director Galligani provided further details where the Central Avenue project incumbered several staff time into the Spring, a complete Brickbottom neighborhood plan and the staff resources that were allocated to those projects. In response Councilor Scott asked what structural changes have occurred in PPZ that will allow the completion of further projects without the addition of staff. Director Bartman shared his decision to focus staff attention on finishing existing planned projects before moving to the next, and as they begin to close out the staff will be able to shift focus on the next fiscal year and long-term planning projects. Director Bartman Cultural Heritage references the history of the city, and the intent of the project is ensuring the city is appropriately re-using the building for appropriate uses and embracing them and opening them up for tourism and the history that draws people to this area.

### **Housing**

Councilor Burnley inquired how the housing division is working to ensure fair housing laws are being followed and enforced. Interim Director Davidson stated the focus is on being active in the community and ensuring tenants and homeowners are aware of their rights and what they can and cannot do. The division's work is to focus on working with individuals involved to resolve any issues or, if needed, share resources to file any necessary complaints to the appropriate avenue. Councilor Wilson confirmed the Inclusionary and Fair Housing Specialist is set for a July 1 start date. In response to comments from Councilor Mbah Interim Director Davidson that there are multiple funding streams and sources to maintain stability in house, the Affordable Housing Trust is also available to fill in the gap when it is present in housing needs, federal funding has funded the Prevention and Stabilization Program which is like a rental subsidy program. Interim Directo Davidson provided clarity on the Housing Division is Brick and Mortar working with city ordinance and developers and stability is working on the individuals coming into the office who need the care and can utilize services to either maintain their housing or move into housing that is maintainable for them. Director Galligani addressed the pipeline of affordable housing and while there has been a historic boom in housing,

payments are collected in three payments so there is still a sizable amount of revenue. Additionally, the Community Preservation Act (CPA) sure charge was voted on to increase which allows for more funds to be at the Housing uses.

### **Housing Stability**

Councilor Mbah referenced the priorities he had for his FY 26 budget including municipal flex funding, legal assistance, search services, and resources for homeless families and individuals and if the proposed budget is available to be dispersed to individuals directly to assist in housing needs. Director Shachter shared there has been an increase in funding from free cash and there are sufficient rental assistance funds to meet the needs that were satisfied by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in previous years.

### **Economic Development**

Councilor Scott asked about the spending of the OM line and how the division anticipates spending the increase to the PTS line. Director Nadkarni stated the 90 Washington request is a one-time request for FY 26, it is anticipated to reach a payment and development plan that will be shared with the full Council later in the summer. Councilor Burnley asked for confirmation on the liaison for the Wage Theft Committee, the answer is that the Workforce Development Planner is in the budget for FY 26, the Director shared the anticipated start date is October 1, 2025. Positions that are most relevant for communications and outreach for small business include the Senior Planner, Minority and Women Owned business support position, Permitting liaison, and one of the economic planners are focus on engagement and compliance together. Additional direct service programs were listed and the focus moving forward will be to partner with individuals who participate in training offered and companies that exist in the city.

### **Redevelopment Authority**

No additional questions were asked during the meeting.

### **Public Space & Urban Forestry**

In response to allocation questions from Director Mbah, Director Oliveira, shared Community Preservation Act (CPA) money is allocated to staff requests and what the requests from the community come in. The Director continued that there is an acquisition fund through the CPA that is entered annually, and the other main source of funding is through development. Councilor Burnley inquired about PTS and what work was done on FY 25. Director Oliveira stated the red does not mean an overspend in budget, the issue is the budget timeline does not align with tree planting and so money is carried over each year to pay for the planting of trees.

### **Community Preservation Act**

No additional questions were asked during the meeting.

**Communications & Community Engagement**

Councilor Scott asked why PTS is only spent up to 57%. Director shared 88% at expended or incumbered and based on still outstanding invoices the department will end up at 89-90% spent by the end of FY 25. This is large in part to an upgrade to Drupal being pushed to the next fiscal year. In response to a pre-submitted question, Councilor Burnley asked if the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) would be one-time expenses, Director confirmed they are one-time costs in the budget. Discussion around submitted departmental goals and plain language programming occurred, Director Taylor shared there has been collaboration to train staff to create content in plain language through a provider which is reflected in the expenses in the budget. Additional efforts are being made to create and disperse a photo library, visual aids, and graphics which are allocated \$10,000 for graphics to either improve design or describe images. Concerning the trend of communication related to the re-opening of the Winter Hill school will remain consistent with the weekly updates and staff time engagement will decrease once the decision about the number of schools and the location. There are additional opportunities for the public to engage in the process, and this is all related to staff time and a dollar amount tied to the current consultant that is being utilized.

**CityTV**

Councilor Burnley inquired about closed captioning pertaining to the City Council and Director DeCarlo confirmed vendor and procurement questions should be addressed to the City Clerk's department.

**Constituent Services**

No additional questions were asked during the meeting.

**SomerViva**

Deputy Director Gamble was present to share the ordinance as a priority for the upcoming fiscal year and with work with law and the council on the drafting. SOIA confirmed the partnership for plain language training and the budget is prepared to share those costs in the next fiscal year. Councilor Scott inquired about why the OM is still relatively low, Deputy Director confirmed there are funds that have been encumbered to spend over 90% of the budget and is projected to spend through the end of the fiscal year.

**Health & Human Services**

In response to questions from Councilor Mbah Director Carroll, shared there have been some struggles with grant funding and federal funding, and uncertainty remains around federal funding moving forward. Director Carroll spoke to the positions within the budget and are preparing the staff to respond to any crisis that may arise within the community. Councilor Burnley asked what \$3,000 in PTS for communication support is being utilized for. It is budgeted to support the Health Communication Officer

position to support media and messaging campaign and CANVA to support outreach efforts in conjunction with a collaboration of resources. Director Carroll shared the removal of line items from FY 25 because they were not utilized, and harm reduction strategies continue to be a focus within the department by working with outside partners and vendors.

### **Council on Aging**

Councilor Mbah inquired about the increase to the salary line for FY 26. Director Speliotis said the increase is a direct result of the compensation study findings, with no plans to expand staffing in FY 26. The Director shared the department has seen some funding restrictions trickling down from the federal funding, but the department is continuously finding alternatives sources to meet the needs of the community through the city and the state.

### **SomerPromise**

Chair Wilson asked a follow up question from the submitted memo, if there are specifics for how the department will meet the demand for out of school time programming. Director Hosman shared the Out of School Time Task Force has been able to identify the expansion of Somerville Community Schools Programming to identify families where registration may have been a barrier to understand the actual need. What the department has decided to explore is bringing in private partners to address growth and quality to have high quality care within the Schools programming, as well as work with community partners, and increase access to registration services. Director Hosman elaborated that fees, regardless of placement, are on a sliding fee scale and the model should eventually be a self-funding model. Chair Wilson addressed the concern of out of school time residing completely in SomerPromise, Director provided his thoughts that the current mixed delivery model is the way to build out the system and there are options for children to succeed.

### **Veterans Services**

Director Jerome was present to speak on the declining population of Veterans in the community due to passing and moving out of the community due to the cost of housing. Director clarified veterans' benefits claims are coming in for the senior population, not for unemployment.

### **Libraries**

Councilor Burnley inquired what led to the department being over budgeted in FY 25, Director Piantigini shared the personal services line related to the compensation study and the increase in salaries is what is indicated for the increase in budget spending but is not over-spent. Councilor Clingan asked about the \$295,000 on other lump sum payments line, Director stated that is the salary lines related to retro pay. The Director also stated the uniform line is negotiated with the Union contract and is agreed upon during bargaining. The Director responded to inquiries about renovation of the Central Library,

and she is mindful of the needs across the city buildings and there are opportunities in the future to obtain grants to make improvements until a full renovation is possible.

The Director, in response to a question from Councilor Burnley, stated there would be two positions affected by the hiring freeze until January 1, 2026. Councilor Mbah referred to the additional dollars that were needed in response to aggressive behaviors from teens at the libraries, Director stated that it could be visible in the OM line.

Additional conversation ensued around the existing contract for security presence in the library that runs through the end of the month. It was a process obtained through procurement and the process will be repeated to have another security guard through FY 26.

### **Office of Sustainability & Environment**

Chair Wilson and Councilor Burnley inquired about the composting and food waste programming that is in their budget, Director Blais confirmed food waste will be a continuation of a PILOT that was run at schools in the previous year, capturing food that was left in the kitchen and will be utilized as organic waste disposal. The Director spoke to how there is an interest in getting the district wide and the amount requested reflects the amount of time and resources that will be needed to begin the district wide programming. Conversation confirmed rat teams are in discussion and collaboration with this programming. While there is no specific start date for the various programming efforts are in place to ensure a successful ramp up for an 18-month program run time.

Councilor Scott and Councilor Mbah inquired about OM spending levels and what was not utilized in that line of spending and how that impacts programs being implemented. Director Blais stated projections are down due to the disposal waste program not running this fiscal year nor did a fossil fuel zoning initiative, the volume of responses around requests for proposals was a learning opportunity around the initial roll out, and within the personal services there are vacancies that are impacting the budget. Director Blais continued conversation about efforts made to take advantage of federal funding through grants that are ongoing and equated to about \$2 million in funding that service a wide variety of programming.

Questions were raised around the potential impact of the hiring freeze for vacant positions and the Director shared hiring dates are pro-rated for staff starts as the hiring process can take some time as is the standard practice.

### **Racial & Social Justice**

Councilor Scott started questions about the Racial and Social Justice (RSJ) fund and what expenditures are coming out of the funds. Director Nagim-Williams shared the fund sits at \$1,115,615, and the fund is funding

three positions to work towards dismantling racism and social inequities. Confirmation was made that there are some instances where, when required due to the complexity of the project, embossing is still being outsourced, but employees have been training to emboss agendas and minutes for the City Council meetings. Conversation covered the department's commitment to being a safe and welcoming space in our current political and economic climate. To staff up the vacant Deputy Director position is set for a September 1 start date with the knowledge that the search will be extensive to find the right person for the role. Other vacancies will be held off in the hiring freeze until January 1, 2026, and cross training is occurring in the office to ensure fair allocation of tasks and workload on current employees.

### **SomerStat**

Director Gartsman provided a high-level overview of the close-out of data collection efforts around ARPA funded efforts in a study that should be available in the second half of FY 26. Director Gartsman stated the staff possibly affected by a hiring freeze would mainly be interns for 6 months and are manageable to be able to plan and coordinate with the departments they are currently assisting. In response to Councilor Burnley questions around an increase in travel expense, the Director shared the costs were related to a conference that she does not anticipate sending two staff again in the future fiscal year.

Link to Departmental Responses:

<https://city-somerville-ma-budget-book.cleargov.com/19991/fund-summaries/fy-26-council-response-memos>