



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Legislative Matters Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, October 15, 2024

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Davis at 6:01pm and adjourned at 7:26 pm with a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Scott, Burnley, Davis), none opposed, and 2 absent (Councilors Ewen-Campen, Mbah).

Others present: Christine Blais – Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment, Kimberley Hutter – Legislative Liaison, Kimberly Wells – City Clerk, Natasha Frazier – Assistant Clerk of Committees.

Councilor Ewen-Campen was unable to attend due to a conflict. Councilor Mbah left at 6:52 PM.

Roll Call

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

Absent: Ward Three City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-1383](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Legislative Matters Committee Meeting of September 17, 2024.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

2. Resolution (ID # [24-1269](#))
By Councilor Mbah, Councilor Sait, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Ewen-Campen
That the Administration make it easier for residents to host block parties by simplifying and shortening the approval process, and take steps to provide monetary awards or grants of \$100 for approved block parties.

Chair Davis stated that historically City Council approval for block parties was the common practice, and while the City Council was generally supportive of block parties, City Council approval is not in fact technically required. He stated that removing the City Council from the block party approval process will streamline this process for the community. Clerk Wells noted that there is a memo attached to this agenda item that explains the suggested response to this request in depth. She stated that there is no legislative process requiring the City Council to approve block parties. From a process perspective, Clerk Wells suggested that the City Council put forth an order to direct the City Clerk to take steps which would explain to future City Councils why this change was made. She explained how the streamlining process depends on the creation of a new type of license,

known as a block party license. This will help expedite block parties because they will no longer be dependent on City Council meetings. Instead, they will undergo a review process that will also include resource distribution for required supplies (i.e. tape, barriers) for the block party event to ensure the block party meets public safety standards. Additionally, the City is looking into the possibility of contracting with vendors to provide kits to block party organizers that include games for the event, as it has been determined that the city cannot provide cash directly to applicants as requested.

Clerk Wells stated that the review process takes the type of intended road closure for the block party into consideration. The review process for block parties on local roads will likely be expedited so long as they meet certain requirements. Councilor Scott asked about the local road designation and described how every year he submits an application to close Springfield Street for Halloween, which is not a local road. He asked if block parties will be rejected if they are not on a local road. Clerk Wells stated that people can apply for any street to be closed for a block party; the review process might just take slightly longer to evaluate impact.

Chair Davis and Clerk Wells discussed the difference between block parties and public events, noting that block parties are expected to generally undergo a more expedited review process than public events. Clerk Wells then discussed the expected application timeline for block party permits, stating that it can range from a few days to 4-6 weeks based on the specifics of the request and relevant external factors such as competing events. However, the estimated average it is 2 weeks. Councilor Mbah raised additional questions about the timeline, noting how when the City Council is on recess this impacts their ability to approve block parties under current circumstances. Chair Davis stated that the proposed process would allow members of the public to seek approval for block parties without having to obtain approval from the City Council.

Councilor Burnley asked about how creating a different designation for block party permits will expedite the approval process. Clerk Wells described what might cause a license approval to be delayed. Councilor Burnley asked about the content of the kits, which Clerk Wells described as supplies for large-scale games one might expect to see used at the beach or in a park. Councilor Burnley emphasized his desire for effective communication about block parties that will be accessible to all members of the community. Councilor Scott asked if the Clerk's office can share communication about block parties with the Council, who can then share this information directly with members of the community. Clerk Wells was supportive of this idea and agreed that her office will submit a Communication for each City Council meeting outlining the recently approved block parties.

Chair Davis reiterated that it is the Administration who has authority to

approve the closure of streets for block parties, and that the City Council would simply like to know about upcoming block parties to inform constituents. Chair Davis asked why this change in process is proposed to be effective January 1st, 2025. Clerk Wells explained that it will be easier to track in the future administratively. Additionally, this will give the Clerk's office enough time to build out the updated process, which she anticipates will be ready towards the end of this calendar year.

Chair Davis moved **That, effective January 1, 2025, the city council shall no longer review and approve applications for block parties, and that the city clerk shall assume responsibility for final approval of applications for block parties.** The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Scott, Burnley, Davis), none against, and 2 absent (Ewen-Campen, Mbah).

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Mayor's Request
(ID # [24-1457](#))

Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Section 6-97 of the Code of Ordinances to change the effective date for the Fossil Fuel Free Ordinance.

Director Blais stated that OSE submitted an application to the Fossil Fuel Free Program by the deadline of November 10th, 2023, with the unanimous support of the City Council and has not yet heard back about the status of the application from the Department of Energy Resources. However, the effective date of the originally anticipated Ordinance change, January 1st, 2025, is now less than three months away and per DOER, best practice is to give six-month notice before there are changes to building codes. Therefore, the proposed amendment to the Ordinance would ensure there is a six-month buffer period following either acceptance into the Fossil Fuel Free program or approval of the Home Rule petition by the State legislature.

Chair Davis and Director Blais noted that if the language in the Ordinance remains January 1st, 2025 and approval is not received by January 1st, Somerville would not be able to enact this Ordinance because the State's approval is required. Furthermore, it would not allow for the recommended 6-month adjustment window. Councilor Burnley asked what is happening behind the scenes on the staff side to prepare for this anticipated change. Director Blais described how staff respond to anticipated building code changes every few years and have historically followed the six-month guidance from the State. She described how there is coordination between departments and how Citizenserve is an important part of this process.

Chair Davis asked if there is a possibility that Somerville will receive approval before the end of the calendar year. Director Blais stated that OSE is ready for Fossil Fuel Free in Somerville and that the groundwork is in place. Chair Davis expressed his support for the amended language and his hope that the Fossil Fuel Free Ordinance can be approved.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED

Referenced Documents:

- Leg Matters - 2024-10-15 Block Party Process Memo (with 24-1269)