



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 29, 2025

7:00 PM

Special Meeting

NOTICE: This is NOT the official version of the City Council's minutes. While reasonable efforts have been made to assure the accuracy of the data provided, do not rely on this information without first checking with the City Clerk.

1. OPENING CEREMONIES

The meeting was called to order at 7:11 PM by Ward Seven City Councilor Judy Pineda Neufeld.

- 1.1. Roll Call Call of the Roll.
(ID # [25-0859](#))

RESULT: PLACED ON FILE

Present: City Councilor At Large Wilfred N. Mbah
City Councilor At Large Jake Wilson
Ward Three City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen
Ward Two City Councilor Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott
Ward One City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin
City Councilor At Large Willie Burnley Jr.
Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait
City Councilor At Large Kristen Strezo
Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan
Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis
Ward Seven City Councilor Judy Pineda Neufeld

2. CITATIONS

3. PUBLIC HEARINGS

4. ORDERS, ORDINANCES, RESOLUTIONS AND MOTIONS OF MEMBERS

5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- 5.1. Order By Councilor McLaughlin
(ID # [25-0742](#)) That the City Solicitor appear before this City Council to discuss the proposed Charter currently in the Mayor's office and update this Council on its progress.

RESULT: LAI D ON THE TABLE

5.2. Home Rule
Petition
(ID # [25-0774](#))

By Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Davis Proposing a Home Rule Petition to establish a charter for the City of Somerville.

Councilor Davis noted that the Council would take up the version it previously submitted, but he discussed the Mayor's proposed suggestions, the first of which was to change the current title of the city attorney to city solicitor. Councilor Davos noted that he would not be proposing this change to the council draft. He highlighted that the goal of the city charter is to address the imbalance of power between the legislative and executive branch and create more oversight over the city attorney. Right now, the only way to address this is through elections. He referenced other municipalities where the City Council hires the city attorney but understands that that is not something the Mayor would agree to. In the current city charter, the city attorney is supposed to be reappointed, but that has not historically happened in practice. The City Council's proposed charter ensures that the council would have the opportunity to reappoint the city attorney. The Council draft of the charter required a majority vote to reject a reappointment, but the Mayor requested that the vote threshold be increased to two-thirds. The Mayor also proposed changing the current term of the city attorney to three years instead of two years, but Councilor Davis suggested that this was unreasonable, especially given that the term length for a Councilor is two years long as well. The Mayor's version also proposed deleting the last clause in Section 9-2, "unless otherwise provided by this charter". Councilor Davis acknowledged that this may not make much of a difference, but since the Council had limited time to go back and review each detail to determine the impact, he was not comfortable with this deletion.

Councilor Davis moved to amend Section 3-5 (b) by inserting at the end of the third sentence, "provided however that a reappointment shall not be rejected except by negative vote of eight members of the City Council." The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 10 in favor (Mbah, Wilson, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley, Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld), 1 opposed (Scott).

Councilor Davis noted that the vote to reappoint someone would be to confirm their reappointment, so eight members must vote *against* the reappointment. He also noted that the Mayor's draft discussed the timing, but this change was not necessary since it is covered in Section 2-8 (a) already. Councilor McLaughlin spoke in agreement with the 2/3 vote threshold to reject the appointment of a city attorney, to address the Mayor's concern about the Council being able to fire the city attorney too easily. Councilor Ewen-Campen spoke in support as well, and also highlighted that there is an additional section of the charter on page 33 which contains a directive to the Mayor to create a new hiring process that includes a member of the City Council. Councilor Scott thought that raising the number of votes from six to eight and requiring a 2/3 vote is not necessary, but he supports the Home Rule Petition regardless.

Councilor Davis moved to amend SECTION 2 to insert “next” and add “or the next regular municipal election at which the city can comply with the applicable Commonwealth ballot requirements.”, so the line reads: “The city clerk shall cause the following question to be placed on the official ballot to be used in the city of Somerville at the next regular municipal election to be held on November 4, 2025 or the next regular municipal election at which the city can comply with the applicable Commonwealth ballot requirements.” The motion was approved by unanimous consent.

Councilor McLaughlin moved to amend Section 3-5 (b) to replace “2” with “3”. The motion was not approved on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (McLaughlin, Strezo, Pineda Neufeld), 8 opposed (Mbah, Wilson, Ewen-Campen, Scott, Burnley, Sait, Clingan, Davis).

Councilor McLaughlin sponsored Legislative Liaison Kimberly Hutter to speak on the matter. Liaison Hutter believes the three-year term length is consistent with other cities in the area. This would also allow this city attorney to gain and maintain institutional knowledge. Councilor Ewen-Campen discussed how some believe the term limits will make people worry about applying for this position if they think they will lose their job in a few years. He believes this isn’t important if the person provides quality advice to the city. Liaison Hutter spoke on one of the strengths of the three-year term being that the city attorney cycle would not be the same as the City Council. The cycles would occasionally overlap, but three years helps the recruitment process. She also discussed how a shorter term length could lead to the position seeming more political in nature and discourage candidates from applying. Councilor Ewen-Campen reaffirmed his belief that a two-year term will increase accountability. Councilor Burnley spoke about the protections of this position that already exist and said that there do not need to be more. Institutional knowledge is important, but he noted that he has not heard the same importance placed on the institutional knowledge of the Council. He doesn’t believe a new Council would put up 8 votes to not confirm a solicitor without good reason. He does not support the three-year term.

Councilor Davis spoke about how the 8-vote requirement to reject an appointment would be hard to reach without good reason. He believes that a three-year term is too long for the Council to have any real oversight over the city attorney. He suggested the two-year cycle, but to have it be on the off years for Council elections to allow for continuity. Liaison Hutter reminded the Council that they are still able to report the individual to Human Resources if there are any concerns. In response to Councilor Davis’s suggestion, she stated that a two-year cycle wouldn’t work because the timing is based on when the individual starts in the position. Councilor McLaughlin mentioned how there has been politicization of appointments in

the past. He expressed the belief that the benefit of the charter is much more important than trying to decide between a two- or three-year term. At the end of the day, the city attorney will still have to report to the Council, so there will still be more oversight. Councilor Strezo spoke in support of the three-year term and thinks the Council has enough oversight over the city attorney that the term length isn't as important. Councilor Davis spoke again about the importance of a two-year term because he believes that the Council truly has no other power if there is an issue with the city attorney during their term. The administration has asked the Council to trust that they will provide oversight and information required in the charter. If this does not happen, all the Council can do is look to the city attorney. If a city attorney chooses not to advise the executive branch to provide information, there is nothing the Council can do.

Councilor Wilson spoke about how the Councilors and Mayor are serving in their positions with the understanding that they only serve for two years. He noted that this has not limited candidates and asked Steve McGoldrick from the UMass Boston Collins Center for Public Management about the data on three-year terms in the state. Mr. McGoldrick did not have specific data but mentioned that Chapters 39 and 49 of the General Laws cover the terms of office for city officials. Most towns have appointments that are up yearly. Very few are two years and many are three years, very rarely 5 years. He suggested asking the administration why the current term lengths are set the way they are across the city. Councilor Wilson spoke in support of a two-year term due to the nature of the city attorney working between the executive and legislative branch.

Councilor McLaughlin moved to add SECTION 5 and SECTION 6 at the end of the charter, reading: SECTION 5. The city clerk shall cause the following question to be placed on the official ballot to be used in the city of Somerville at the next regular municipal election to be held on November 4, 2025 or the next regular municipal election at which the city can comply with the applicable Commonwealth's ballot requirements: Shall the term of office for the mayor of the city of Somerville be for 4 years?

SECTION 6. Section 5 shall take effect upon acceptance by the majority of the voters of the city voting in the affirmative and the term of office of the mayor shall be for 4 years for the term commencing in January 2028, but not otherwise. If the majority of the voters of the city vote in the affirmative, the charter shall be amended in the sections relating to or referencing the term of the office of mayor. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 7 in favor (Wilson, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Pineda Neufeld), 4 opposed (Mbah, Scott, Burnley, Davis).

Councilor Ewen-Campen said he does not support the four-year term as part of the charter and believes this should be voted on by the public separately. He mentioned that his constituents support a four-year term for Mayor and

do not like voting for a Mayor every two years. Councilor Clingan supported the ballot initiative as well. He initially voted against the four-year term but does support putting it on the ballot and allow the citizens to decide. Councilor Scott expressed concern about the structure of the charter and believes it is unclear what this achieves. He also cited legal concerns if voters choose to accept a four-year term, but not the charter if the questions are split.

City Solicitor Cindy Amara clarified the meaning of Sections 5 and 6. She stated that this is one piece of legislation that is being submitted to the state. By a 2/3 vote, the state will accept or reject the charter. It then gets put on the ballot for voters to decide. Councilor Strezo spoke in support of allowing voters to decide to move the process along. Councilor Burnley commented that his constituents think this process is taking too long. He believes that this should be put on the ballot and doesn't believe that language in the charter itself needs to be amended in order to do so. Councilor Wilson expressed that it is most impactful to see what the voters think, and he spoke in support of including the question on the ballot. Councilor Scott emphasized that a question of policy should not be decided by the voters and bypass the Council. He believes if the Council does this, it creates a new authority. He appreciated the desire to hear the will of the people, and shared that it should be accomplished through the structures that are already established. If the Council chooses to allow people to vote on this, he will prepare a list of additional items to bring to the voters as well.

Liaison Hutter reiterated that many constituents and Councilors requested that this be put on the ballot and said that this has been recommended by the administration and experts. Councilor McLaughlin reinforced that the benefits of the charter outweigh the debates over two- or four-year terms. He said that this is something the Council can do, and they should leave it up to the will of the people and put two questions on the ballot, the charter and the term. Councilor Mbah spoke against putting the term on the ballot. Councilor Davis expressed that a four-year term is not appropriate due to an imbalance of power but believes they should still allow voters to decide.

Councilor McLaughlin moved for the previous question. Councilor Scott invoked his right under Section 15 of the city charter to postpone the item. It was therefore laid on the table.

RESULT: LAI

6. REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

7. COMMUNICATIONS OF THE MAYOR

- 7.1. Mayor's Request (ID # [25-0853](#)) Requesting approval of a Home Rule Petition to establish a charter for the City of Somerville.

RESULT: LAID ON THE TABLE

8. COMMUNICATIONS OF CITY OFFICERS

9. NEW BUSINESS

10. SUPPLEMENTAL ITEMS

11. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was Adjourned at 8:35 PM.