



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

April 21, 2020

REPORT OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE MEETING AS A COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Lance L. Davis	Chair	Present	
Jesse Clingan	Vice Chair	Present	
Matthew McLaughlin	Ward One City Councilor	Present	
Jefferson Thomas ("J.T.") Scott	Ward Two City Councilor	Present	
Ben Ewen-Campen	Ward Three City Councilor	Present	
Mark Niedergang	Ward Five City Councilor	Present	
Katjana Ballantyne	Ward Seven City Councilor	Present	
Stephanie Hirsch	City Councilor At Large	Present	
Wilfred N. Mbah	City Councilor at Large	Present	
Mary Jo Rossetti	City Councilor at Large	Present	
William A. White Jr.	City Councilor At Large	Present	

The meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Davis at 6:02pm and adjourned at 7:29pm.

Chair Davis noted that the next meeting will take place prior to the City Council meeting, and encouraged Councilors to submit any questions, as the orders will not have been referred to this Committee yet.

Others present: Annie Connor - Mayor's Office; Khushbu Webber - Mayor's Office; Doug Kress - HHS; Christine Koh - SomerStat

209798: That the Director of Health and Human Services appear before this Council with an update on measures to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and to support anyone who may become infected.

The Chair introduced Ms. Koh to share a presentation that included updated data on Somerville's COVID-19 cases and public safety data. Some recent announcements include the creation of the COVID-19 Relief Fund for small businesses, the Somerville Cares COVID-19 Fund, and that street sweeping is delayed until May 4.

Massachusetts remains ranked third for the number of cases, both total and per population, with over 36,000 cases. The Massachusetts DPH site has added daily data updated and graphics, and can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19-dashboard-april-20-2020/download>. Ms. Koh noted that prior to April 14, there was no data released per municipality, but it will now be released weekly, with updated on Wednesdays. The past week saw an increase of over 14,000 new cases and over

1,000 deaths. The increases are slightly slowing, but average trends are approximately 1,800 cases per day.

Noting that there are fluctuations due to reporting, Ms. Koh shared that Somerville has seen an increase in the past week of 123 new cases, which is a 48% increase, and represents approximately 14 new cases per day. The Somerville Public Schools have now distributed over 21,000 meals over five weeks. Shape Up Pantry also served 693 households in the past week, with the demand increasing steadily each week, and high demand for delivery as individuals isolate or quarantine.

Ms. Koh next shared Police data, noting that the Calls for Service data shared do not reflect crimes, but rather calls that were made to the department. There have been sharp declines in traffic-related calls, but increases in calls for assistance, disturbances, and medical attention. The Fire data reflects similar trends, as total calls are comparable to those of the same time in prior years, but the medical calls related to COVID-19 (measured either by symptoms reported or by known affected locations) requiring PPE and additional safety protocols have increased.

Councilor Clingan wondered if the City was considering creating a heat map of affected locations within Somerville, and Ms. Koh noted that a small group has been working with case location data and there are concerns with inconsistent testing and not wanting to be misleading about the prevalence in certain areas. This will be explored further when the data quality improves. Mr. Kress also shared that this may be a useful case study once the pandemic is over, but expressed concerns about stigma and unreliable data in the moment. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked whether there had been changes to the testing capacity since last week and if there were any further efficiencies to the supply chain, which was a noted concern in the past. Ms. Koh noted that the City is not provided data on negative test results or other hospital-level information. Mr. Kress added that there have been additional tests made available, including increased swabbing beginning today available through the Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA).

Mr. Kress recognized the work of staff throughout the City, noting that a few additional orders issued this weekend now allow for grocery purchases through restaurants, and the COVID fund is available through the City's website. He emphasized that social distancing, wearing masks in public, and hand washing remain critical, and commended the community buy-in around these efforts. The Mt. Pleasant Apartments building, which is a privately owned senior facility, demonstrated an increased number of positive cases across the 65 unit building, and the decision was made with the Board of Health to quarantine the building to better understand what is happening and slow the spread. The City is working with the State to bring tests to the residents, and working with the Council on Aging and Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services to ensure that needed services are still delivered to the residents while maintaining safety. There has also been an order for other senior buildings to share their plans, including restrictions to visitors, modifying programming, limiting entrances, removing seating from common areas, allowance of deliveries, and working with partner agencies to address cases within their buildings. These are set to be received within the next 48 hours and will be reviewed. This weekend also saw the de-concentration of shelter residents, and distribution of masks.

Councilor Mbah asked if data were available for the residents who had recovered and whether those individuals are now immune. Mr. Kress noted that 135 individuals have been identified as recovered, but there are no definite answers as to whether there is immunity. Recovery is measured through improvement of symptoms, specifically fever, to a level where medication is not required. Councilor Mbah also asked whether there were plans for a campaign to encourage use of masks, and Ms. Webber shared that the Communications Department is sharing guidance about when and how to use masks, and elaborated that there have been many questions regarding the administration's advisory on face masks. The goal is for it to be a phased roll-out, noting that masks have been in short supply,

and that the policy, including the possibility of mandatory masks in certain spaces, is still being evaluated. Due to supply chain concerns, it does not appear that the City will be able to provide masks to the public at large, but prioritizing vulnerable populations is an important aim. Approximately 3,500 face masks were distributed to seniors today. Councilor Ewen-Campen suggested that certain locations and certain activities should be prioritized for where to make masks mandatory, and Ms. Webber noted that this is part of the evaluation underway.

Councilor Niedergang shared concerns that employees in grocery and other stores are not wearing masks and many runners are not either, and also wondered if face coverings other than masks are sufficient. Ms. Webber cautioned against putting too much emphasis on any particular study, as the virus is so new and the information is continually evolving. Mr. Kress reminded that the emphasis is less on the covering itself and more on the way the face is covered (i.e. the nose and mouth should be covered with no gaps). There are tutorials for doing this properly with materials such as a bandana. Councilor Rossetti added that there has been recent guidance from the Attorney General's office about local mandates on this issue.

Councilor Scott noted that many people in the community have been working on supply chain issues who could potentially help the City procure supplies if that is what is holding the administration back from making them a requirement. Councilor Ballantyne asked for clarification about whether the administration would provide masks to all residents and how enforcement would be conducted and by whom. Ms. Webber noted that these are all questions that the administration has as it considers implementing a mandatory order. It is unrealistic to supply masks to all residents, but ensuring access for vulnerable populations will be a priority.

Councilor White expressed a concern that if action is not taken, there may be a high price to pay in increased infections. He urged caution, as the community is dense and social distancing has proven difficult in some cases, in particular with runners. Chair Davis added that the social distancing messaging should be emphasized, particularly targeted toward runners, as that is just as critical as masks.

Councilor McLaughlin noted an additional concern of visitors at senior buildings, and also asked specifically about the caretakers at the Mt. Pleasant facility and whether they have been tested. Mr. Kress noted that they are being tracked and monitored. This staff monitoring is included in the directive for plans to be submitted for all senior facilities. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked about internet accessibility concerns and Ms. Connor noted that the Internet Task Force has drafted recommendations, one of which is that setting up a municipal broadband network is prohibitively expensive and also presented significant legal challenges. In light of that, some recommendations included a dig-once policy, which would have an underground fiber link installed during other construction projects. The next step is for someone with technical expertise to review and prioritize the recommendations. After surveying the School population, there are approximately 450 families (about 15%) without internet access. A combination of Verizon mobile hot-spot devices and offering the Comcast internet essential service are in place to fill this gap. Over 100 families have signed up for the Comcast service and the hot-spot devices will be distributed to families who are not eligible for that service. Additionally, the Somerville Public Schools have loaned 1,091 Chromebooks to students from grades 3-12 and 117 Kindle Fire tablets for Pre-K-2 students. For any students in need, requests should be sent to Jeff Curley, and other residents can reach out to the City through 311.

Councilor Hirsch asked if there was a timeline for making decisions about summer programming. Ms. Connor will continue to work with staff to determine an answer, noting that this is an important issue for many families.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Handout:

- 200421 Situation Update for City Council (with 209798)