



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

6:00 PM

The meeting took place virtually via Zoom and was called to order at 6:03 PM by Chair McLaughlin and adjourned at 7:47 PM on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Sait, Davis and McLaughlin), none against and none absent.

Anne Gill - Director of Human Resources, Karin Carroll - Director of Health and Human Services, Hannah O'Halloran - Director of Homeless Services (Somerville Homeless Coalition), Kimberley Hutter - Mayor's Office Liaison, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

Roll Call

Present: Ward One City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin, Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis and Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-0255](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee Meeting of February 29, 2024.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Ward One City Councilor McLaughlin, Ward Six City Councilor Davis and Ward Five City Councilor Sait

2. Order (ID # [24-0177](#)) By Councilor Ewen-Campen That the Administration appear before the Committee on Public Health and Public Safety to update the City Council on the status of the Police Chief search.

Chair McLaughlin noted that the search has already been extended twice. Director Gill provided an update on the process and told the committee that the application deadline for the position was March 1st and that the consultant hired by the city interviewed 13 candidates. Those candidates will be vetted and the resumes of the top 7 to 10 candidates will be forwarded to the city next week. Interviews will begin in early April and 3 to 5 candidates will be selected for presentation to the public. Candidates will meet with the Mayor in early May.

Director Gill commented on the difficulty in coordinating the schedules of the search committee members, candidates and other relevant parties, but noted that this process has a tighter timeline than the previous two. She also noted that the process has not changed but the job description has.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Order (ID # [24-0172](#)) By Councilor Strezio, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Scott
- That the Director of Health and Human Services discuss the availability of free city-funded COVID tests going forward after temporary relief funds have evaporated, including any plans and/or consideration of potential sources of COVID testing supplies provided through community partners.
- Discussed with item 24-0168.
- Councilor Burnley said residents have relied upon masks and tests to keep safe and he thinks the city should redirect funds in the FY-25 budget to provide ways for residents to access them. Director Carroll explained that the CDC changed its COVID guidelines and that the state likely will move in the same direction. Because the guidance is changing and because there are 3 similar viruses, (Flu, RSV and COVID), the CDC is moving to a unified treatment plan. Director Carroll noted that antivirals are available and immunity among the community has increased, while deaths and hospitalizations have decreased. COVID tests and masks are not front line protections, although they may be helpful. The city has some vaccines on hand and the priority of the city's HHS Department has been to get vaccines to the most vulnerable populations. Outreach will be performed to make the general public aware of where test kits can be obtained.
- Councilor Sait said constituents are concerned about the relaxed CDC guidance, noting that teachers and front line workers face greater exposure to COVID, which she said is still around. She commented that some people can't afford to pay for tests or stay home when they're sick.
- Director Carroll said she understood the concern and equity piece of the situation, adding that the CDC guidance is an attempt to balance out the risks. Masks help, however, the front line defense is vaccinations.
- Councilor Burnley said that it's his belief that the stop gap is capitalism, with new guidelines being reactions to workplace conditions rather than public health. COVID is not the flu or RSV and its asymptomatic nature makes it difficult to contain. He feels that the city needs to serve the broad community and try to get funds to do so.
- Resident Oliver Wilson expressed disappointment that the Mayor Office is not making these items available and said that the new CDC guidelines are not based in science.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Order (ID # [24-0168](#)) By Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Mbah, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Scott
- That the Director of Health and Human Services work with the Administration to allocate funding to secure COVID-19 rapid tests to be distributed at Public Libraries.

AMENDMENT: Insert "and masks" after "rapid tests".

Discussed with item 24-0172.

This item was amended at the March 8, 2024 City Council meeting to insert "**and masks**" after "**rapid tests**".

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

5. Order
(ID # [24-0149](#))

By Councilor Clingan, Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Scott

That the Director of Health and Human services create an on-call emergency fire response unit to assist in connecting residents with available resources in the event of a displacement or loss of property due to a fire.

Liaison Hutter said that the current process requires an assessment of each situation and that ward councilors are notified about the situations by on-site staff, who then coordinate efforts to provide services to those affected. (Councilor Burnley noted that at-large councilors are also to be notified.) She noted that HHS is not looking to take on this position and pointed out that the Director of Emergency Management position is still vacant. Liaison Hutter will bring this request to the Administration for consideration along with any suggestions.

Councilor Clingan asked who owns, or is responsible for executing, the process and Liaison Hutter replied that the Fire Department is on site first and then notification is made to the Mayor's Office.

If the notification involves a displacement, the Mayor's Office gets the relevant agencies on board. Councilor Clingan wants to find out how people in need know who to contact, since there is no department in charge of this and he wants this brought to the Administration's attention. Liaison Nutter said that some resources are on site, e.g., SFD, ISD, and the Red Cross, adding that displaced persons could be in touch with those onsite agencies and can call the Mayor's Office for additional resources. Chair McLaughlin requested that clarification on the process be provided by next week's City Council meeting.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

6. Order
(ID # [24-0097](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin

That the Director of Inspectional Services address trash and other violations by the Rent-A-Center on Broadway.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

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7. Order (ID # [24-0096](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Inspectional Services inspect 112 Broadway, 176-182 Broadway, and 24-28 Broadway for violations and report the findings to the Ward 1 City Councilor.
- RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**
8. Order (ID # [24-0095](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Inspectional Services update the Ward 1 Councilor regarding any fines associated with 176-182 Broadway, formerly Patsy's Pastries, in the last ten years.
- RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**
9. Order (ID # [24-0094](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Inspectional Services update the Ward 1 Councilor regarding any fines associated with 112 Broadway, formerly the East End Grill, for any violations within the last ten years.
- RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**
10. Order (ID # [24-0093](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Inspectional Services update the Ward 1 Councilor regarding any fines associated with 24-28 Broadway, the former Taco Loco site, due to repeated cleanliness and business violations within the last two years.
- RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**
11. Order (ID # [24-0062](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Strezo, Councilor Wilson and Councilor Davis
That the Director of Health and Human Services provide monthly updates to this Council's Committee on Public Health and Public Safety regarding ongoing efforts to address homelessness.
- Director Carroll informed the committee that the closing of the warming center has been extended. The city will be trying to engage participants in an after action process to evaluate the program. Staff will be talking to folks at the warming center tomorrow to get feedback. Most nights this winter, the warming center has housed 20-25 guests.
- Weekly interdepartmental working group meetings continue. Director O'Halloran has worked with other agencies to bring resources to homeless persons and she said that the partnership with the city continues to grow. Chair McLaughlin inquired if there are plans for next winter or plans to have a permanent location for a shelter and Director Carroll replied that there are no such plans at this point. She alluded to budgetary constraints and the need to review the after action data. In terms of cooling, those shelters are easier to manage since high temperatures are experienced during the
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daytime and engagement centers, e.g., public libraries, are open. Councilor Sait asked if clients know where to go for housing services once the warming center closes and if there has been a conversation to develop plans for a cooling center. Director Carroll said that housing support and referrals are provided to direct people how to avail themselves of services. Resource guides are being provided, as well, for additional resources and food services. Presently, there are no plans for an overnight cooling center as people would be referred to libraries and other centers to get out of the heat during the day, adding that the city will perform outreach to those most vulnerable to heat.

Chair McLaughlin spoke about the April 17th DOT deadline for removing people living under Rt 93. Director O'Halloran said those individuals under Rt 93 have been made aware of the closing and that the Somerville Homeless Coalition is trying to figure out where they may sleep, under cover from the elements. Chair McLaughlin pointed out that the next PHPS Committee meeting is on April 17th, so the committee won't be able to discuss this matter again before the MADOT closing. He will keep pressing for a solution and asked Director Carroll to talk about this situation during the weekly department meetings. Liaison Hutter informed the committee that MADOT will do one mass cleanup on April 17th, and until then, a contractor will pick up trash 2 times per week. Chair McLaughlin asked about the availability of restroom facilities a night and Liaison will gather the information and report back.

Chair McLaughlin asked about any 911 call updates and Director Carroll stated that HHS doesn't have it but has been working with 311 staff about their data. Liaison Hutter said that both the Police and Fire Departments have reported no uptick in calls. Chair McLaughlin spoke about the negative quality of calls being bothersome, noting that 2 arrests were recently made under RT 93 and outside the Stop & Shop and he asked what is being done to address safety concerns as these were serious, violent incidents. He thinks a visible police presence is warranted. Liaison Hutter replied that staff regularly responds to these situations and she will ask for information about incidents under RT 93.

Public comments:

Melissa McWhinney said she is hoping that individualized services can be accomplished with the people living under Rt 93. She also requested that the Homeless Coalitions be provided with a formal evaluation of the warming center metrics a.s.a.p..

Ruth Farris would like to join the after action process and include armory tenants, as well, so they can be heard. Non-profit reps would also like to provide input.

Alex Pirie hopes the evaluation will include data on emergency responses and he would like the city to look elsewhere for warming center space rather than have it at the Armory.

Councilor Sait also believes that armory tenants should be involved and Director Carroll commented that the particulars of who will be involved

haven't been worked out yet, but others will be included.
Mary Cassesso told the committee that understanding the timeliness of an evaluation could be important.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Referenced Documents:

- PHPS - 2024-03-2 ISD Response (with 24-0093, 24-0094, 24-0095, 24-0096)