



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

March 24, 2021

REPORT OF THE LEGISLATIVE MATTERS COMMITTEE

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

The meeting was held via Zoom and was called to order by Chair Davis at 6:35pm and adjourned at 7:11pm.

Councilor McLaughlin was absent due to another community meeting.

Others present: R. Mason - Outreach Coordinator; Ayerim Decena - Legislative & Policy Analyst

210235: Calling upon this Council to create a Police Commission and a Community Police Review Agency.

Chair Davis shared that the background for this item stemmed from the nationwide protests last year. He noted that this meeting will be led by Mr. Mason and Ms. Decena, and the Committee will have an opportunity for discussion in a future meeting.

Mr. Mason clarified that this meeting is intended to introduce some of the ideas around civilian oversight, and to start a community process to establish what it should mean in Somerville. He expressed an understanding of the community's frustration and acknowledged that there is much work to be done, and emphasized the City's desire to do and be better.

Ms. Decena shared that in this new role, she is working on reviewing different oversight agencies across the country in order to understand their powers and authority, pros and cons, in order to help create the infrastructure of a civilian oversight committee in Somerville. She noted that there will be further events to gather community feedback, and elaborated that the process of creating a Civilian Oversight

Committee is one step in the process of reallocating approximately 7% of the proposed Police Department budget to social services. Ms. Decena added that 81% of Somerville residents expressed support for establishing a civilian review board. She also noted that we now know that effective civilian oversight can hold the police department accountable for officers' actions and can improve the quality of the department's internal investigations, which can lead to transparency of the police department and build community trust.

Currently, there are over 150 forms of civilian oversight agencies in the United States, including four in Massachusetts, which are in Boston, Cambridge, Pittsfield, and Springfield. The National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE) has also categorized civilian oversight into four groups with specific goals and purposes of each group. They are: review-focused models, investigative models, auditor/monitor models, and hybrid models. Ms. Decena emphasized that although these models can serve as examples of kind of civilian oversight Somerville can have, what would work best for Somerville is what the community needs and that may be something different or a combination of these models.

To summarize the types of oversight models: review-focused models rely on completed police department investigations of police misconduct and review those investigations. Investigative models have the ability to conduct their own independent investigations of police misconduct. Auditor/monitor models focus on overall systemic reform and investigate different police activity and procedures. Hybrid models combine aspects of the other models to fulfill the needs of individual communities. Ms. Decena highlighted that an important aspect of civilian oversight of police is community input and participation. Starting with community input, the type of model that's needed can be determined/drafted, which is where Somerville is now. She urged everyone to complete the community survey available on the City of Somerville's website.

Mr. Mason introduced several community members to share their perspective.

Tracey Pratt spoke on behalf of Just Us Somerville. At a rally in June, the organization shared demands, which included "that the City of Somerville establish a Civilian Review committee that looks at police policies and is composed of those community members most impacted by police." This has been updated to state: Just Us Somerville urges the City of Somerville to establish a Civilian Oversight and Review Committee composed of a diverse group of city residents and includes members of underrepresented communities that are statistically most vulnerable to excessive use of excessive force practices; i.e., African descended, Latinx, immigrants and youth/young adults. The functions of the Civilian Oversight and Review Committee shall be but not limited to: work independently of police administration and police unions; examine Somerville Police Department policies and practices that have the potential to unnecessarily harm members of the community or are discriminatory in nature and make recommendations for change (this includes policies that allow excessive use of force); develop a mechanism to receive community complaints; decide how complaints will be handled; monitor the establishment of a system for reporting, investigating and/or referring hate crimes; review, investigate and make recommendations to police chief in cases police misconduct; subpoena people and records when necessary; report findings and recommendations to a person or entity not under the authority or influence of any law enforcement agency. If this committee is to be effective at its functions, it must be provided with resources including but not limited to: reasonable budget; appropriate support staff; legal consultation; compensation; reasonable authority.

Adaline Lining shared that she grew up in a small town in Maine, where she was the only person of color and not afraid to call the police. Her awareness of her identity has since evolved and she expressed

support of civilian oversight because it brings a fresh set of eyes which will help identify opportunities to change how things have been done. The opportunity to have diverse perspectives and opportunities for feedback strengthens one's practice and allows for reflection and change. She shared the belief that everyone can benefit from opportunities to reflect and grow and the hope that the civilians that opt to do this work provide that positive experience for police. She urged that this is a step in an ongoing conversation about how to collaborate as a community.

Matthew spoke on behalf of Defund SPD, which began in response to over 4,000 Somerville residents signing a petition to defund the police. He shared that civilian oversight of police has never been a priority for Defund SPD for one major reason: oversight agencies don't have any power. If Somerville is to go forward with civilian oversight of police, there are two crucial factors that would make Somerville's version of oversight meaningful. First, the members of the oversight board have to be elected residents. The board needs to be free from conflicts of interest which means people who work in law enforcement or have close personal or professional relationships with those who do are disqualified. Second, the people on the oversight board need to be paid for their work. The amount they get paid should be a livable hourly wage that at least matches the median pay of Somerville police officers. Matthew stressed Defund SPD's expectations that no new police officers may be hired without the approval of the civilian oversight board. The board must have the right to reject all proposed new police hires if they feel additional police officers are not required for the safety of the community. They should also have the power to eliminate entire divisions within the police department including the department as a whole and redistribute the responsibilities to non-law enforcement professionals if necessary. The right to fire cops without interference from police unions is just as important as control over who gets hired. Defund SPD wants to create new systems that handle our community's biggest challenges such as housing and food insecurity, addiction, domestic violence, and more. Somerville won't have the resources to address these issues if it continues allocating three times as much money to police as it does to all social services combined.

Mr. Mason invited the community to sign up for a small group discussion at civilianoversight@somervillam.gov or send written comments to citycouncil@somervillema.gov.

RESULT:

KEPT IN COMMITTEE