Madalyn Letellier

From: [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, October 21, 2025 10:19 AM
To: Public Comments
Subject: comment on #25-1557 Finance Committee
Attachments: stabilization for Brickbottom #25-1557.docx

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Honorable members of the City Council. Attached is citizen comment on the Brickbottom related stabilization fund proposal. Thanks for your attention.
Bill Valletta (Brickbottom resident)

Memo
To: Somerville City Council Finance Committee
From: Bill Valletta (Brickbottom resident, urban planner)
Date: 21 October 2025
Subject: Comment on the proposed Brickbottom Infrastructure Stabilization Fund (#25-1557)

The proposal to consolidate into a single account the stabilization accounts, earmarked for Brickbottom District Infrastructure, appears to be a useful action, if its outcome will be to clarify the available funds for the zone and specify the purposes for their use toward realization of a realistic, economically viable plan.

The resolution specifies $763,814.81 that will be transferred into the new account. But it does not answer any questions about the origin of these funds or the re-defined purposes to which the new account will be applied. In order to answer these questions, this Memo, looks at the already-existing accounts, which are reported by the city Department of Finance:

Table 1: Stabilization and other Reserve Account Commitments for Brickbottom

Account		**Origination**				**Account balance currently**		
#	**Name**	**Date**	**$ paid in**	**Defining action**		**ACFR FY24**	**July 2025**	**Sept. 25**
7110	Linwood St Sidewalk stabilization	04/03/13	11,750	ZBA#2010-70-R1		13,089	13,650	
		The variance for Herb Chambers to use warehouse as auto sales/repair building; imposes condition of payment in lieu of creating on-site handicap parking pads for 71 Linwood Street. Payment received was to cover cost of on-street handicapped spots, which were never created. (Bd.Ald #19-4374) Today, 71 Linwood has reverted to Eversource utility use.						
7131	259 McGrath stabilization	02/01/17	3,750	ZBA#2008-38-R2		3,745	3,915	
		Reconstruction of garages on Linwood Street required Herb Chambers to reimburse the city for street tree replacement when construction would end. The trees today are mostly dead of elm disease and the street and sidewalks are used as for employee parking and truck deliveries.						
--	161 Linwood stabilization	?	?	ZBA#2015-49		--	--	
		Herb Chambers sewer system mitigation payment for construction at 161 Linwood was required in ZBA 2015-49 as a condition of the variances. The amount was to be based on a cost per gallon of new inflow over 2,000 gallons. No record of any money having been paid in and no set up of a stabilization account						
7900	Trash Transfer stabilization 10 Poplar Street	2013	500,000	Bd. Aldermen #19-5098		666	685	
		Original appropriation of free cash into the fund was $500,000 at end of FY2013. Subsequent expenditures were made for environmental testing (#19-07519 in 2014) and various hazardous waste clean-up tasks (#1909158 in 2015; #20-6970 in 2018, etc.)						
--	CPA Art Farm commitment	2019	542,675	CC #20-7285		542,675	542,675	
		CPA committed funds for design of the Art Farm, calculating the amount as 15% of the estimated $4 million capital cost. Since 2019, the Art Farm project cost has been re-stated as $11 million in the Capital Investment Plan (2023-2029). Another estimate of $20 million was stated by the project engineers at a public meeting in 2023?						
--	Chestnut Street Multimodal Safety stabilization	2025	99,127	CC #25-0524		--	99,127	
		Mitigation payment by developer of lab building at 100 Chestnut Street Informal city agreements with the developer of the new lab building for "intermodal safety and access improvements…" The ZBA conditioned site plan approval (P&Z #21-006/007) specified improvements of: (1) pedestrian and bicycle connection to the Community Path, already completed in 2024 (2) sidewalk, street trees and bicycle lane in front of the building, already completed 2024 (3) interim roadway protected bikeway along full extent of both thoroughfares – not yet completed						
	MassWORKS grant for Brickbottom over the rails bridge	07/10/25	3,600,000	CC #24-1078; #25-1207		--	--	$3.6 million
		The city applied for a grant of $19 million to cover part of a $39 million over-the-rails bridge between Brickbottom and Inner Belt at the East Somerville T-station, to be part of a multi-building, mix-use complex. The grant award initially described the funding for the bridge design, but in the final agreement documents, its purpose is vaguely described as "enhancing" the "corridor" to the T-station. In fact, the "corridors" have already been built inexpensively and quickly, and small numbers of people are using them daily.						

These seven accounts, earmarked for Brickbottom, can be found either on (a) the city Finance Department website list of Stabilization Accounts, (b) Note 9 of the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (AFCR) – last published for the end of FY2024; or (c) City

Council Finance committee grant receipt account creation actions. More specifically, the accounts include:

- five stabilization accounts that were funded with developer contributions = $117,400;
- committed Community Preservation Trust funds for Art Farm = $542,675, and
- the Mass Works grant for transportation improvements linked to the T-station = $3.6 million.

It is unclear from this record how a combination of these funds with or any additional monies adds up to $763,814.18. The City Council will need to put on the record a clear statement of the sources of the funds, in particular, each of the prior accounts that is being closed out or diminished.

The Table also shows the origins of the funds in each of the accounts – that is, the findings of mitigations or conditioned permits, issued by the Planning Board or ZBA, the Community Preservation Commission or state grantor. If these monies are being re-purposed then it seems necessary for the City Council to put on the record a clear statement that either:

- the previous purpose has been satisfied and the money now withdrawn is residual or surplus;
- the previous purpose has been unfulfilled and in the new consolidated account, its future appropriation will satisfy the original purpose or a similar public need.

A general lesson to be learned:

Beyond the immediate action of a rational re-purposing of funds, the City Council and administration should draw a general lesson from the data presented here. The record should be read as evidence of the weakness and lack of coherence of the city's basic planning strategy:

We have tried to fulfill our visionary zone plans by accumulating piecemeal cash and in-kind improvements/amenities, secured by one-time surpluses or grants or by regulatory-conditional and quasi-contractual instruments, imposed on landholders and investors.

This has been the strategy applied in the Brickbottom zone for more than twenty years. In essence, we have idealized a future visionary zone of tree-lined boulevards and bike lanes -- ignoring the reality of how the lands and buildings in Brickbottom are actually used, and how owners and businesses are actually making market-based investment decisions.

We have then tried to fulfill the vision by seizing each opportunity for funding or in-kind work to put into place another element of the visionary networks of sidewalks, bike lanes, trees and public space improvements – expecting that they would accumulate and build on each other and the momentum of improvement would induce further urban design and functional change.

In reality, however, the data shows that the earlier improvements on Linwood and Poplar Streets were not sustained. The trees died or got knocked over by trucks; the sidewalks did not get improved, the disabled parking spaces did not happen; the funds for planning and design sat for years, losing value to inflation. The improvements proved incompatible with the actual uses of the land, buildings and streets, and with the pace and cycles of investment.

If twenty years pass and strategy does not appear to be working, it seems necessary to revisit the fundamental ideas and determine if they still make sense.

Therefore, when taking this action to consolidate and re-purpose funds, the Council should accept the responsibility of putting into the record a clear statement of what the new purposes of this money are to be. More wishy-washy statements about improvements to be determined later will not be sufficient. The experiment will continue to fail.