



# City of Somerville, Massachusetts

## City Council Land Use Committee

### Meeting Minutes

Thursday, April 17, 2025

6:30 PM

#### Joint Meeting with the Planning Board

This meeting was held in person in the Committee Room and via Zoom and was called to order by Chair McLaughlin at 6:31pm and adjourned at 7:41m on a roll call vote of 5 in favor (Councilors Davis, Sait, Wilson, Scott, and McLaughlin), 0 opposed, and 0 absent.

The Committee went into recess at 6:32pm and re adjourned at 6:34pm on a roll call vote of 5 in favor (Councilors Davis, Sait, Wilson, Scott, and McLaughlin), 0 opposed, and 0 absent.

Others present: : Amelia Aboff – Vice Chair of Planning Board, Michael Capuano – Chair of Planning Board, Jahan Habib – Clerk of Planning Board, Michael McNeley – Member of Planning Board, Lynn Richards – Member of Planning Board, Luc Schuster, Member of Planning Board, Nicholas Antanavica – Director of Inspectional Services Department, Josh Eckart-Lee - Sustainability Planner, Emily Hutchings - Senior Planner OSPCD, Stephen Cary - Planner OSPCD, Madalyn Letellier - Legislative Services Manager.

#### Roll Call

**Present:** Ward One City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin, City Councilor At Large Jake Wilson, Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait, Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis and Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott

#### 1. Public Hearings

##### 1.1. Public Communication (ID # [25-0200](#))

15 registered voters requesting a Zoning Text Amendment to amend the Zoning Ordinance sections 3.1.8c, 3.1.9c, 3.1.10c, 3.1.13k, 3.1.13l, 3.2.12l, and 3.2.12m.

Aaron Weber, a member of YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard), presented a reference document titled *Land Use 2025* during a council hearing in Somerville on April 17, 2025. The presentation included various visuals, and when Councilor McLaughlin inquired about their origins, Mr. Weber explained that while he did not have the specific addresses, all the visuals were taken from within Somerville.

Chair McLaughlin opened the hearing at 6:45pm.

Two residents spoke in favor of the requested amendments, highlighting how they would provide increased flexibility and practicality for builders, which would likely facilitate easier development and redevelopment in the area.

Chair McLaughlin closed the public hearing at 6:46pm.

Public comments will be accepted until 9:00am on Friday, April 25th and can be submitted to [publiccomments@somervillema.gov](mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov) [<mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov>](mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov).

**RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

1.2. Mayor's Request  
(ID # [25-0457](#))

Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Articles 2-5 and 10 of the Zoning Ordinance to remove conflicts with the State Building Code.

Sustainability Planner Eckart-Lee and Senior Planner Hutchings presented the document titled *Land Use 2025 04 17 FINAL SZO Sustainability Interpretation Attachments 10.28.24*. Following the presentation, Planning Board member Amelia Aboff raised a question regarding the use of density housing and whether it exceeds the State Building Code. Planner Eckart-Lee responded that an upcoming report would address the issue and be shared with the public. Planning Board member Lynn Richards inquired about the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum certification as a density bonus and the aspirational standards for sustainable development and affordable housing. She echoed Planning Board Member Aboff's concerns, questioning whether it would be possible to achieve these sustainability standards for regular developments without the need for density or LEED Platinum or Gold certifications. Planner Eckart-Lee clarified that the Office of Sustainability and the Environment (OSE) views these sustainability standards as important but that the goal is to encourage sustainable development through incentives rather than mandates. Planner Hutchings added that the density bonus should not significantly impact the overall development, as it is an opt-in feature, and developers are already committing sustainability efforts. Planning Board member Luc Shuster raised a concern about the tradeoff between smaller apartment sizes and both environmental and housing goals. Planner Eckart-Lee explained that the density bonus serves as an incentive to the development community, promoting more sustainable living with smaller footprints. Councilor Scott asked about the structure of the amendment, specifically regarding the "Passive House Standards."

Chair McLaughlin opened the public hearing at 7:09pm.

Holly Simone expressed concern about meeting high standards while still providing affordable housing. She noted that there is often confusion among residents about the term "affordable housing," as only a percentage of the units will be designated as affordable. Tori Antonino also spoke, raising

concerns about whether the amendments could be adjusted to include more two- and three-bedroom units. She also asked if the percentage of affordable housing could be increased in developments that include density bonuses and inquired about the inclusion of green spaces in these projects.

Chair McLaughlin closed the public hearing at 7:16pm.

Public comments will be accepted until 9:00am on Friday, April 25th and can be submitted to [publiccomments@somervillema.gov](mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov) <<mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov>>.

**RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

1.3. Mayor's Request  
(ID # [25-0590](#))

Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Article 2 of the Zoning Ordinance to allow the Building Official to waive certain dimensional standards for means of egress.

Planner Cary spoke about the referenced presentation, *Land Use 2025-04-17 Accessibility & Egress (with 25-0590)*. Councilor Davis asked for clarification on whether homeowners could add additional egress to their homes. Planner Cary explained that there is now some additional flexibility for building code compliance, allowing the building code to take precedence without homeowners having to go through the public hearing process currently required.

Councilor Scott raised a hypothetical situation in which a member of the public submits a building permit, and instead of going through the variance process, if the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) can now waive the requirement. Planner Cary clarified that if the change were intended to make the porch or building more accessible, the homeowner would be eligible for an exemption. Similarly, if the change were to bring the building into compliance with the building code, the exemption could also be applied. The goal behind this amendment is to ensure that people still adhere to the intent of the zoning ordinance while allowing flexibility when there is no other compliant solution possible.

Director Antanavica explained that the amendment is designed to prevent a loophole where someone might use the accessibility or egress clause to build further into a setback. This provision ensures that it doesn't turn compliant buildings into opportunities for expansion. It is meant for existing buildings needing a compliant addition, where the building code can take precedence without the need for a zoning variance.

Chair McLaughlin inquired about the application of the amendment to Neighborhood Residence (NR) and Urban Residence (UR) zones to prevent developer loopholes and asked about the potential negative consequences.

He also asked why the accessibility component is not citywide. Planner Cary answered that the accessibility component is not restricted and can be sought citywide. Director Antanavica added that the goal is to clean up the zoning to make the code more compliant, noting that for developers of buildings larger than three units, significant additions could go beyond safety concerns and might misuse the clause.

Chair McLaughlin opened the public hearing at 7:37pm.

Holly Simione asked who was consulted regarding the accessibility issues. Tori Antonino supported Holly's concerns and added to the discussion, emphasizing the importance of addressing these issues thoughtfully.

Chair McLaughlin closed the public hearing at 7:40pm.

Public comments will be accepted until 9:00am on Friday, April 25th and can be submitted to [publiccomments@somervillema.gov](mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov) [<mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov>](mailto:publiccomments@somervillema.gov).

**RESULT:     KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

Referenced Documents:

- Land Use 2025-04-17 Accessibility & Egress (with 25-0590)
- Land Use - 2025-04-17 DensityBonusUpdate-04.17.2025 (with 25-0457)
- Land Use - 2025-04-17 Presentation - Somerville YIMBY (with 25-0200)
- Land Use - 2025-04-17 FINAL SZO Sustainability Interpretation-Attachments 10.28.24 (with 25-0457)