



Leading the Way: Sustainable Zoning Update

A Presentation for the Honorable City Council

Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE)
Planning, Preservation, & Zoning (PPZ)
Inspectional Services Department (ISD)





The 2019 Somerville Zoning Ordinance Amendments created the Commonwealth's most stringent sustainability requirements.

The 2019 Zoning Ordinance covers:

- Land use
- Design (appearance)
- Interaction with public realm
- Construction methods
- Energy efficiency

It also incorporated resiliency





In 2023 the Commonwealth enacted the Specialized Energy Code

By doing so, the state caught up to and in some ways, exceeded Somerville's 2019 Zoning requirements

Somerville became one of the earliest adopters of the Specialized Code, continuing to lead the way on sustainable development





The State largely maintains the authority on Building and Energy codes

Building and Energy codes cover:

- Building materials
- Construction methods
- Energy efficiency
- Electrification requirements





An opinion from the Attorney General's Office released in 2021 clarifies the State's authority on building energy use

Inspectional Services has issued a memorandum related to Somerville's authority to enforce sustainability requirements





Where We Are Today

Now that construction methods and energy efficiency are included in the Stretch and Specialized Energy Codes, Somerville's 2019 Zoning Ordinance conflicts with 2023 Specialized Energy Code and 2021 Attorney General opinion.

Additional requirements can be added when they are linked to incentives (such as the Master Planned Development Overlay District), but not as part of base zoning.





Solution: Jurisdictional amendments to the Zoning Ordinance

1. Definition: Net Zero Ready Building
2. Density Bonus
3. Sustainable Development: Green Buildings



Remove conflicting language

1. Reduce confusion, administrative burden, and costs for constituents, developers, and staff
2. Remove discrepancy with density bonus



Section	Section Name	Proposed revisions (summarized)	Reasons for revisions
2.1.1	Glossary	Revise definition of “Net Zero Ready Building” to match Building Code.	Eliminate confusion, defer to Building Code definition, as Building Code regulates what qualifies as net zero ready.
2.4.5.b	Uses and Features: Density Factor	Revise one sentence based on new requirements for Net Zero Ready Buildings.	Net Zero Ready Buildings should no longer be used to determine density and instead LEED Platinum Certifiability should be required.
Multiple	Urban Residence Mid-Rise 3, 4, 5, and 6 High Rise Purpose and Density Factor for each district	Update Purpose statements for each district. Remove density bonus for Net Zero Ready Buildings.	Specialized Energy Code now requires relevant buildings to be Net Zero Ready. Density bonus is no longer a reward – all new buildings in relevant districts will now qualify.
8.4.8.a	Master Planned Development Overlay District: Development Standards	Amend unenforceable language, reserve section for future use.	Current language is superseded by the Specialized Energy Code and is not enforceable under zoning. Retaining the section will allow for the development of new enforceable regulations that support sustainability goals.
10.10.1	Sustainable Development: Green Buildings	Amend unenforceable language, add LEED Platinum Certifiability	Current language is superseded by the Specialized Energy Code and is not enforceable under zoning. Retaining the section will allow for the development of new enforceable regulations that support sustainability goals.



Language Summary

Updated Zoning Ordinance Language



12.1.1 General

Net Zero Ready Building

~~Any building that 1) has no on-site combustion for HVAC system operation and cooking equipment (all electric systems), excluding floor-area Eating & Drinking Establishment principal uses, and is certifiable as Zero Carbon or higher from the International Living Future Institute, or PHIUS+ from the Passive House Institute US or Passive House Institute.~~



12.1.1 General

Net Zero Ready Building

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2.4.5.b.vii.a).i). (Uses and Features, Density Factor)

The density factor permitted for each building type is different for buildings on different sized lots, net zero ready and **LEED Platinum Certifiable** buildings.



3.2.3 Purpose

- a. To permit the development of multi-unit detached and semi-detached residential buildings on individual lots.
- b. To permit contextual modifications to existing detached and semi-detached residential buildings.
- c. To permit the adaptive reuse of certain existing nonconforming buildings for arts & creative enterprise and retail uses compatible with residential areas.
- d. To create dwelling unit types, sizes, and bedroom counts ideal for both large and small households in permitted building types.
- e. To permit increased residential density for apartment buildings meeting the definition ~~of a~~ both net zero ready **and LEED Platinum Certifiable** buildings.

Identical changes to:

- 4.1.3
- 4.2.3
- 4.3.3
- 4.4.3
- 5.1.3



Main Mass	
Facade Build Out (min)	80%
Facade Build Out Abutting NR (min)	70%
A Floor Plate (max)	–
With Forecourt	16,000 sf
Without a Forecourt	7,000 sf
Ground Story Elevation (min)	2 ft
B Story Height (min/max)	10 ft 20 ft
C Number of Stories (max)	2 4
Roof Type	Gable, Hip, Mansard

Applies to:

- 3.2.10 Apartment Building
- 4.1.7 Apartment Building
- 4.1.8 General Building
- 4.2.7 Apartment Building
- 4.2.8 General Building
- 4.3.7 Apartment Building
- 4.3.8 General Building
- 4.4.7 Apartment Building
- 4.4.8 General Building
- 5.1.7 General Building
- 5.1.10 Mid-Rise Podium Tower
- 5.1.11 Block Building

Facade Composition	
A Ground Story Fenestration (min/max)	15% 50%
B Upper Story Fenestration (min/max)	15% 50%

Use & Occupancy	
Density Factor (min)	–
Lot Area < 5,000 sf	1,500
Lot Area >= 5,000 sf	1,125
Net Zero Ready and LEED Platinum Certifiable Building	875
Outdoor Amenity Space (min)	1/DU



10.10.1 Green Buildings

Reserved.

- ~~a. New construction or modification of any principal building type greater than twenty five thousand (25,000) square feet in gross floor area must be LEED Gold certifiable.~~
- ~~b. New construction or modification of any principal building type greater than fifty thousand (50,000) square feet in gross floor area must be LEED Platinum certifiable.~~
- ~~c. Development subject to the provisions of this Section must meet the standards of the most current LEED building rating system. During the twelve (12) month time period after the adoption of a new version of LEED, permit applications may be submitted demonstrating compliance to either the immediately previous or newly adopted version of the LEED building rating system.~~
- ~~d. Development review applications for development subject to the provisions of this Section must include:
 - ~~i. A completed LEED checklist for the appropriate LEED building standard to demonstrate how the proposed development is anticipated to meet the standards of this Section.~~
 - ~~ii. A narrative indicating the mechanisms proposed to achieve each of the credits and prerequisites of the appropriate LEED building standard and demonstrating the anticipated methods by which compliance with the requirements of this Section will be achieved at the time of construction.~~
 - ~~iii. An affidavit by a LEED-Accredited Professional (LEED-AP) Project Manager or by appropriate consultants stating that to the best of their knowledge, the project has been designed to achieve the stated LEED building standard.~~~~
- ~~e. Prior to the issuance of the first building Permit and prior to the issuance of the first Certificate of Occupancy, the LEED checklist and narrative description outlining compliance with the certification level required by this Section must be updated to identify any design changes made subsequent to Site Plan Approval and submitted to the building official accompanied by an affidavit by a LEED-AP Project Manager or appropriate consultants stating that, to the best of their knowledge, the project has been designed to achieve the stated LEED building standard.~~





Next Steps

1. Complete Planning Research
 - A. MAPC LEED Gap Analysis Report – to be completed June 2025
 - B. Fossil Fuel Free Incentives Study – to be completed Fall 2025
 - C. Electrical Capacity Study – to be completed Fall 2025
2. Future Zoning and General Ordinance Proposals



Thank you!



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Appendix





Topic	Ordinances	Impact
Energy & GHG emissions	Building Code: Specialized Energy Code	High-performance buildings, limits fossil fuels, reduces emissions
Building standards	Building Code: Specialized Energy Code	High-performance buildings, limits fossil fuels, reduces emissions
Heat reduction	Code of Ordinances: Tree Preservation Ordinance (Ch. 12, Art. VI) Zoning Ordinance: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Green Score (§10.4)• Heat Island Reduction (§10.10.3)	Retains tree coverage Zoning Ordinance: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High-value plantings and reduced hardscape• Roofs and parking lots must achieve level of solar reflectance
Biodiversity and ecosystems	Code of Ordinances: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tree Preservation Ordinance (Ch. 12, Art. VI)• Native Planting Ordinance (Ch. 12, Art. X) Zoning Ordinance: Green Score (§10.4)	Code of Ordinances: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protects high-value trees• Native species requirements that facilitate habitat creation/expansion Supports native species and habitat creation
Open space	Zoning Ordinance: Master Planned Development Overlay District (§8.4)	Civic spaces required in high-priority areas
Mobility: Low/no-carbon and EV	Building Code: Specialized Energy Code Code of Ordinances: Complete Streets Ordinance (Ch. 12, Art. VII) Zoning Ordinance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vehicle parking maximums (by district and §11)• Bicycle parking requirements (by district and §11)• Mobility management programs (§11.4)	Electric vehicle requirements Prioritizes pedestrians, transit, bicycles, deprioritizes private vehicles Zoning Ordinance: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deprioritizes private vehicle use• Supports bicycle use• Supports walking, biking, transit use over private vehicle use
Stormwater management	Code of Ordinances: Stormwater runoff ordinances (§11-145/146/165) Zoning Ordinance: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Landscaping (§10.3)• Green Score (§10.4)• Green Roofs & Storm Water Management (§10.10.2)	Limits & reduces runoff; facilitates stormwater quality rules for site construction/operations Zoning Ordinance: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Landscape requirements that prioritize stormwater management• See above• Incentivizes green roofs that reduce runoff
Flood mitigation	Zoning Ordinance: Floodplains Overlay District (SZO) Engineering standards	Limits development in floodways. Minimal impact, no developable land in 1% FEMA flood zone Construction and infrastructure requirements