



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Utilities and Public Works Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, November 16, 2022

6:30 PM

(Posted online: 11/7/22 at 7:30 PM)

Pursuant to Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022, this meeting of a City Council Committee will be conducted via remote participation. We will post an audio recording, audio-video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of these proceedings as soon as possible after the meeting on the City of Somerville website and local cable access government channels.

Copy & paste the following link into your internet browser to view this meeting live:

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/8441919863154212621>

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Clingan at 6:30 pm and adjourned at 8:15 pm. Councilor Gomez Mouakad moved to adjourn, and the motion was passed by roll call vote.

Others present: Hannah Carrillo - Mayor's Office, Nicholas Antanavica - ISD, Charles Breen - Fire Department, Demetrios Vidalis - Water and Sewer, Stephen Haynes - Water and Sewer, Stephanie Widzowski - Clerk of Committees.

Due to an SRA meeting happening concurrently, DPW and OSPCD staff were unable to attend.

Present: Charlotte Kelly, Chairperson Jesse Clingan and Vice Chair Beatriz Gomez Mouakad

Administration

Resolution
(ID # [22-1797](#))

By Councilor Clingan, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Davis, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Kelly, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Scott, Councilor Strezo and Councilor Wilson

That the Administration make information about all licenses and permits viewable without requiring a CitizenServ account.

Dir. Antanavica said that they are looking to make review trees more transparent and allow anyone to access relevant documents. Currently, the Administration provides information to the public on request. Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked if Somerville has zoning compliance sheets for larger projects, and where to find them. Dir. Antanavica said that they have been requesting one-page zoning plans with relevant information from developers and applicants, but that system is in progress. Chair Clingan called for a larger discussion with CitizenServ of what information is being made available and how to search for it.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Resolution
(ID # [22-1763](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin
That the Administration update this Council on developments related to the Request for Proposals for the disposition of the property located at 90 Union Square.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Resolution
(ID # [22-1762](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Scott
That the Administration update this Council on actions taken related to the possible relocation of the Somerville Media Center and Massachusetts Alliance for Portuguese Speakers from the city-owned property at 90 Union Square.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Water and Sewer

Order
(ID # [22-1692](#))

By Councilor Wilson and Councilor Clingan
That the Director of Water and Sewer report to this Council, the account, purchase and usage information requested within.

Dir. Vidalis spoke to some of the requested information at the meeting, and said that he would provide more in written form afterward. He said that Somerville currently has over 15,500 water and sewer accounts, though that number fluctuates depending on construction and condos. Regarding accounts that have seen year-on-year increases greater than 50% for the most recent billing period, he said that of 5,470 accounts within District Two, less than 1.5% of residents showed such an increase over the previous year.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [22-1691](#))

By Councilor Clingan, Councilor Wilson and Councilor McLaughlin
That the Director of Water and Sewer appear before this Council to address the issue of constituents reporting unusually high water bill spikes.

Dir. Vidalis described some scenarios that may lead to a high water bill. The first scenario was triggered by upgrading meters citywide and transitioning between software platforms. The implementation of new water meters created a glitch in the billing software which was unable to be resolved before bills were sent out. Water and Sewer staff worked over the weekend to rectify the situation and removed automation in the computer system to ensure this does not happen again. Another scenario involved households that had been receiving estimated bills based on historical use, since the old meters were not transmitting data anymore. When an actual reading was given, the new statement accounted for previous unbilled water usage, which could have led to a spike for some customers. Others who used less than their historical estimates received credits.

Chair Clingan asked about the software that transmits information from a household to the city's computer system. Dir. Vidalis explained that there are now two systems, one each for new and existing meters. There was a discussion about

that process and how different softwares interact. Then, Chair Clingan asked about whether the software can notify customers when there is unusual water usage. Dir. Vidalis said that the old software, AquaHawk, did, but that system is no longer available and the city is transitioning to WaterScope, which users will need to opt into. Mr. Haynes talked about the reason for transitioning between softwares and the data features of WaterScope. He said that starting next month, their contractor will be going district-to-district to fix meters and is set to finish work in October 2023. Chair Clingan expressed concerns that landlords would be able to monitor their tenants' water use in detail, which Mr. Haynes confirmed. Mr. Haynes also said that Somerville typically has one meter per residential building, so individual tenants would not be able to track water usage data. Chair Clingan commented that it would be useful for tenants to have access to that information.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked if residents are being notified of the upgraded water meters, which have been causing glitches in the billing software. Dir. Vidalis said that they need access to the buildings to install the meters, so residents should be aware. Councilor Gomez Mouakad also asked if there is any grace for seniors on fixed incomes who receive high water bills. Mr. Haynes talked about some assistance programs through the Assessor's Office and through the City of Cambridge, but that their policy now does not allow them to extend that service to their general customer base. They are working on changing that policy for next year.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

ISD

Order
(ID # [22-1796](#))

By Councilor Clingan, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Davis, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Kelly, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Scott, Councilor Strezo and Councilor Wilson

That the Director of Inspectional Services develop a policy requiring all redevelopments to post the information detailed within on the outer perimeter of the property.

Dir. Antanavica said that ISD has been working with the Planning Department to develop standard language for any project that requires planning approval. Standard conditions in place involve requiring redevelopments to post contact information, working times, and a brief description on a sign no smaller than a typical real estate "For Sale" sign. Dir. Antanavica said that they do not yet have language for by-right projects that do not require conditions in place. In that case, it falls to the building code, which states that the permit must be put in a conspicuous place visible from the public way. He said that with additional incoming staff, ISD can add an additional requirement to the ordinance that requires information to be placed at the edge of the property so the public can read it. ISD will verify this with the Law Office, after which they could start implementing new requirements in 2023.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked what happens if there is an incident and the contractor's information is not on the permit. Dir. Antanavica said that either the

Fire Department or SPD will respond, and at that point either someone will have the contact information, or the inspector can find it.

Councilor Kelly asked if there are any concerns over ensuring ISD inspectors will have the resources needed to implement requirements. Dir. Antanavica said that there are always challenges with implementation, and that enforcement would be complaint-based until an inspection is scheduled. Councilor Kelly asked if there is a way to delineate between a property that requests and fails an inspection or is reported via complaints. Dir. Antanavica replied that they could track the number of complaints, but if an inspector sees an issue on an inspection that immediately gets fixed, there would be no complaint. There needs to be a way to indicate that on inspections.

Chair Clingan said that he has two goals: establishing contact and construction information for public knowledge, including specific description of how the surrounding area will be affected, and making plans accessible on CitizenServ.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Fire

Order
(ID # [22-0193](#))

By Councilor Clingan, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Strezo and Councilor Gomez Mouakad
That the Chief Fire Engineer provide this Council with the plan for staffing the future Assembly Square fire station.

Chief Breen said that the Assembly Square fire station will be staffed by an engine company and will need 12 additional firefighters. The station is set to be completed in late 2023, and the Fire Department is now in discussions with the Mayor about the hiring process. Councilor Gomez Mouakad said that she wants to make sure hires are ready before the lease starts. Councilor Kelly asked if recent firefighter appointments are related to the station, to which the answer was no. She also asked if there is a sense yet of when to start hiring for the new positions, and whether the budget items would end up on the FY24 budget. Chief Breen said that he thinks they would start with lead time, but stressed that answers have not been solidified yet.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [22-0185](#))

By Councilor Davis, Councilor Clingan and Councilor Gomez Mouakad
That the Chief Fire Engineer report on the safety risks for all municipal buildings not fully equipped with automatic sprinkler systems.

Chief Breen explained that the requirement for sprinklers is under building code and that the Fire Department only deals with sprinklers in certain types of buildings, such as high rise. Chair Clingan said that he felt the request was more for a risk of assessment than the legal requirements. Chief Breen added that if a building has sprinklers, it is noted in their computer dispatch system and where to feed into the sprinklers. Dir. Antanavica said it is only a matter of time before the

city addresses older buildings, as renovations bring buildings up to modern code. Councilor Gomez Mouakad stated that certain buildings, such as schools, are more vulnerable because of who or how many they house. She asked if the Winter Hill school has sprinklers, to which Chief Breen said he did not think so. Chair Clingan asked Councilor Gomez Mouakad if she wanted the department to report on the safety and vulnerability of municipal buildings. Councilor Gomez Mouakad said it would be helpful, but that reports can take a long time and would prefer spending that time in action. Dir. Antanavica said that it may be easiest for Capital Projects to retrieve this information. Councilor Gomez Mouakad said she would rewrite the order to specify her request.

Chair Clingan asked if the Fire Department does fire or safety drills at other municipal buildings besides schools, to which the answer was no.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Sustainability

Order
(ID # [22-1705](#))

By Councilor Wilson
That the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment update this Council on the status of household hazardous waste collection.

Chair Clingan referred to a memo sent by Liaison Carrillo. Ms. Carrillo explained that the contractor that the city had hired before COVID is no longer offering their services. The city did secure a contractor for a temporary program offered this season and next April to November, and are hoping to secure a long-term contract after that period, but the next steps are not certain yet. She said that the schedule for next year will be ready in January.

Councilor Kelly noted that there have been discussions in the Finance Committee about grants regarding composting waste and mattress pickup, and requested to determine if the upcoming contracts could do multifaceted pickup. She added that she wants to have a discussion however possible about expanding options for composting and other services.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

DPW

Order
(ID # [22-1737](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Kelly
That the Commissioner of Public Works update the Ward 1 City Councilor regarding plans to find a location for excessive snow other than 90 Washington Street.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

Engineering

Order
(ID # [22-1688](#))

By Councilor Clingan

That the Director of Engineering develop safety protocols and notification requirements for any projects, planned or emergency, taking place within a determined radius of a school.

Liaison Carrillo shared an update from Dir. Postlewaite. The Engineering Division has observed construction operations that have complicated school operations the past few years, and Dir. Postlewaite thinks that this is an area that would benefit from more formal communication between Water and Sewer, Engineering and the School Department. The city is developing a communication plan this winter between the School Department and Water and Sewer with the goal to be operational by the start of the spring 2023 construction season. Liaison Carrillo said that she would like to have Dir. Postlewaite at the December 5 meeting.

Dir. Vidalis added that Water and Sewer is developing a plan to minimize impact on schools - for example, by isolating and shutting down water mains. They will collaborate on the plan with the School Department and implement it next year while school is on break. Councilor Gomez Mouakad asked about an incident at the Winter Hill school last Friday. Dir. Vidalis answered that a main leaked and compromised the roadway, and in response Water and Sewer shut it down to prevent further damage.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE