



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 11, 2024

6:00 PM

The meeting took place remotely via Zoom and was called to order at 6:02 PM by Chair McLaughlin adjourned at 9:15 PM on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Sait, Davis and McLaughlin), none against and none absent.

Others present:

Chief Charles Femino – SPD, Karin Carroll – Director of Health and Human Services, Kim Hutter – Legislative Liaison, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

Roll Call

Present: Ward One City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin, Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis and Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [24-0888](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee Meeting of June 5, 2024.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

2. Order (ID # [24-1209](#)) By Councilor Burnley Jr. That the Director of Health and Human Services update this Council on the establishment of an Overdose Prevention Center, including a timeline for implementation.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

3. Resolution (ID # [24-1207](#)) By Councilor Davis That the Administration update this City Council on efforts to open an Overdose Prevention Center.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

4. Resolution (ID # [24-1206](#)) By Councilor Davis That the Administration update the Ward Six Councilor in writing on efforts to address open substance use in Seven Hills Park and other areas.

AMENDED: That the Administration update ~~the Ward Six Councilor~~ this City Council in writing on efforts to address open substance use in Seven Hills Park and other areas.

Discussed with items 24-1199, 24-1200, 24-1201, 24-1204.

Councilor Davis spoke about hearing and taking the concerns of residents seriously and said that he feels that the approach taken by the administration is correct, on the whole. While he agrees to taking a sympathetic approach, he believes that there is still a level of acceptable behavior to be expected to reach the proper balance.

Chief Femino spoke about the Police Department's policy of deprioritizing arrests and prioritizing treatment over arrest. He reported that both uniformed and undercover officers have been deployed to deal with the encampments in the city and that 379 police activities occurred in Seven Hills Park (SHP), Davis Square and along the Somerville/Cambridge line to identify people in need of services. Three arrests have been made, with 2 of those for dealing drugs. Information is being gathered from residents and weekly meetings are being held to provide additional services as needed.

Director Carroll told the committee that community health worker teams are up and running and that there have been 18 encounter in the past 3 months in SHP, most of them dealing with accessing health care. Additionally, HHS has conducted overdose prevention and Naloxone training sessions, issued taxi vouchers and held meal events and the Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC) will reach out to other agencies to expand coverage. Director Carroll noted that data is collected and reviewed daily and that the engagement center is seeing 35-40 per day regardless of the weather. Weekly huddles with various city departments are held to identify and address any gaps. With regard to needles, the city is piloting a program utilizing a new dual sharps receptacle, designed specifically for Somerville. She also told the committee that the Mayor met with other mayors and the Lt. Governor re: homelessness and asked for assistance with logjams in the application process. Procurement is underway for the city's warming center, which will operate from December to April and a website with information about the center is up and running. Lastly, Director Carroll said that HHS is planning a vaccination effort for the fall and winter seasons, targeting vulnerable populations and the homeless.

Hannah O'Halloran, Director of Homeless Services at SHC reported that their team continues to provide services to people sleeping outside or congregating during day and that they have been partnering with Healthcare for the Homeless and other agencies to provide services. Executive Director of SHC, Michael Libby, thanked the city for its coordination and assistance.

Councilor Davis asked for more info about sharps collection and Liaison Hutter said that needles are collected in different ways with all collecting performed by ISD and the police. Councilor Davis expressed his desire for a baseline response by conducting daily sweeps of the areas for pickup and collection by the same person. Director Carroll explained that the new prototype box is available, however the city needs to work through the

legalities of who owns what part of park, i.e., Harvard Vanguard, the state, the city, or the MBTA. The pilot will be for 1 unit and if there is a readiness for another, the city can request a 2nd unit. The 2 potential sites being considered are the Davis Square Library and the Seven Hills area.

Chair McLaughlin asked how often the current sharp boxes are being used vs. finding sharps on the ground and Director Carroll replied that she will have to ask for the data to answer that question. Chair McLaughlin asked about any applicable laws that address the improper disposal of needles and Chief Femino said it's considered littering and he doesn't think there is a specific statute that applies to needles. The Chair then asked about the city's policy or laws regarding encampments and Chief Femino said that Somerville does not have an ordinance, as Boston does. Liaison Hutter commented that the city is evaluating best practices on how to address encampments to update policies and keep with Somerville values.

The Chair asked how state and private properties are dealt with in SHP and Chief Femino explained that SPD has concurrent jurisdiction, which allows them to better handle outcomes, but he doesn't know if State Police are involved. Chair McLaughlin asked about the SPD's response if drug use is observed in public and Chief Femino stated that officers have observed this, seized the drugs, and deprioritize arrest for simple possession.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld was sponsored to address the committee. She stated that there are public health and safety issues in the park and that the city has a responsibility to keep our residents safe. Drugs are actively sold and used every day at all hours in the park and because of the constant drug sales and use in the park, there are fights at all hours, stolen bikes, trash, alcohol containers, urinating and defecating at SHP. The people congregating there are not being good neighbors, so what do we do now? She read SPD policy 215 and asked what qualifies as a minor drug possession offense and Chief Femino explained that it doesn't depend on the type of drug, but rather on the quantity, and what is being seen is simple possession for personal use. He went on to say that the purpose for having SPD there is to identify those who are frequently there and to call for services for them. Councilor Pineda Neufeld stated that she has not observed that the message being delivered is that this behavior will not be tolerated. The chief said that officers take action when they observe drug dealing. Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked who to contact in order to change the policy and Liaison Hutter said that comments could be sent to the mayor or the City Council. Chair McLaughlin commented that there's a big difference between deprioritizing drug arrests and having no laws and he asked for more clarification of the policy.

Chief Femino read the order about decriminalizing drug arrests upon which the policy was written and Liaison Hutter noted that the order was put forth by the City Council and that a significant discussion would be warranted to change the policy.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld commented that the interpretation on the ground is different than the conversation taking place now and she thinks that officers are being asked to stand down and that they are not sending the no tolerance message. She asked why it is ok to tolerate an open air drug market in the city and said that the park is no longer used for pleasurable activities. She spoke about some sharps boxes at the park having a large hole on top which allows someone to reach in and take used needles. She also noted that people are using the MBTA grate to dispose of needles and trash and asked if this has been discussed with MBTA. Liaison Hutter responded by saying that she will bring it up with them. Councilor Pineda Neufeld then asked if there is any coordination among surrounding cities regarding the problems at SHP and Liaison Hutter replied that there were conversations, and not coincidentally, other cities were experiencing similar issues. Director Carroll said that HHS is having conversations with Cambridge Public Health, Arlington, Medford and others across the state, but that there is no regional approach to their work.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld inquired about outreach to the business community and Liaison Hutter said that the Economic Development team has reached out to improve communication efforts about what they're seeing. Noting that the encampments are sometimes devoid of people, Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked if the city's policy is to leave abandoned property alone. Liaison Hutter replied that there is a value in letting people retain their belongings and Director Carroll explained that when DPW personnel go through the parks in the mornings, they try to make an effort to find out who owns anything left there. Liaison Hutter noted that although the area may look abandoned, people do return there, and if property is abandoned for days, then SHC will try to store it.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld asked about the SPD's response for verbal and physical violence among the people there. Chief Femino explained that if an officer witnesses an incident or if an incident is called into the station, appropriate action will be taken. He said that the police are trying to address issues for these people who don't want to be in those circumstances. Concluding her remarks, Councilor Pineda Neufeld stated that the city is forgetting to talk about the residents who use the park every day, saying that people are scared, her constituents are scared, and that residents want to utilize the parks the way they were intended to be used. Liaison Hutter said "we hear you" and that's why the city is trying to make changes to address the concerns. Chair McLaughlin said that he's frustrated by the stated policy compared to what is being done and that the police aren't here to solve homelessness.

The public was permitted to comment and the following summarizes their remarks:

- The problems being seen now began when services were pulled back and we need to look at the root causes,
- A tainted drug supply is exacerbating the problem and there is no coordinated site for using drugs safely,
- Moving people out pushes them to something else,
- This is the worst situation ever seen with public intoxication, stolen packages, discarded clothing, human excrement on the ground,
- First responders need more help to do their jobs,
- The Drug Task Force was reduced from 6 to 2,
- The situation is unsafe and can go on,
- Tired of hearing this matter framed in terms of compassionate policing,
- Arrests need to be made for drug use, public drinking, etc.
- It's time to care for the citizens,
- It sounds like we're allowing open drug use,
- People are being intimidated by people who are violent and the city is not reclaiming the park for residents,
- There have been attempted break-ins while residents are at home,
- Threats are being made against those walking through the park,
- There have been businesses break-ins, drug use on premises, drug refuse left behind,
- Business is down because of the impression of the square,
- Need to differentiate between the homeless and drug use problems,
- Would like to see some compassion for residents,
- Another approach is needed,
- Would like to have a city ordinance to allow for proper use of drugs, as well as a temporary facility to house the homeless,
- Taking punitive measures is not best for the community,
- Compassion should be shown,
- Create "spot sites" to ride out drug highs, as was done in Boston,
- The whole world is experiencing homelessness and there are veterans in the park and we think we can say let someone else deal with it.

Chair McLaughlin noted that any comments or concerns may be addressed to the mayor at mayor@sommervillema.gov <<mailto:mayor@sommervillema.gov>> or to the City Council at Citycouncil@somervillema.gov <<mailto:Citycouncil@somervillema.gov>>.

Councilor Davis commented that the bulk of tonight's conversation was about substance abuse and that the city is faced with the challenge of addressing all of the concerns. He read agenda items 3, 4 and 5 into the record and noted that there was no mention of unhoused people in those orders. He pointed out that he has not received the requested written response for item 4. Liaison Hutter will make sure that the response is sent.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

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5. Resolution (ID # [24-1204](#)) By Councilor Davis, Councilor Wilson and Councilor Burnley Jr. That the Administration install or replace needle disposal receptacles in Seven Hills Park and other areas with secure, appropriately designed equipment.
Discussed items 24-1199, 24-1200, 24-1201, 24-1206.
RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
6. Resolution (ID # [24-1201](#)) By Councilor Pineda Neufeld and Councilor Strezo That the Administration greatly increase the trash and needle pickup in and around Davis Square, including Seven Hills Park and the Community Path.
Discussed with items 24-1199, 24-1200, 24-1204, 24-1206.
RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
7. Resolution (ID # [24-1200](#)) By Councilor Pineda Neufeld That the Administration discuss with this Council, its policies and plans to address the widespread and open drug use in Davis Square.
Discussed with items 24-1199, 24-1201, 24-1204, 24-1206.
RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
8. Resolution (ID # [24-1199](#)) By Councilor Pineda Neufeld That the Administration discuss with this Council, the programs and services being offered to the un-housed population in Davis Square.
Discussed with items 24-1200, 24-1201, 24-1204, 24-1206.
RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE
9. Order (ID # [24-0924](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin That the Director of Inspectional Services (ISD) provide the Ward 1 City Councilor with a list of all ISD tickets issued in Ward 1 on May 6, 2024.
RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED
10. Order (ID # [24-0921](#)) By Councilor McLaughlin That the Director of Inspectional Services inspect the Home Depot, Circuit City, and surrounding area for code violations and report back to the Ward 1 City Councilor.
RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED
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11. Order
(ID # [24-0920](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin

That the Director of Inspectional Services provide the Ward 1 City Councilor with any tickets and fines associated with the Home Depot, Circuit City, and the surrounding area in the past ten years.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED