



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Legislative Matters Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

6:00 PM

The meeting took place remotely via Zoom and was called to order at 6:01 PM by Chair Davis and adjourned at 8:02 PM on a roll call vote of 5 in favor (Councilors Strezo, Mbah, Ewen-Campen, Scott and Davis), none against and none absent.

Others present:

Amara Anosike – Chief of Staff – SPS, Brendan Salisbury – Legislative and Policy Analyst, Christine Blais – Director - Office of Sustainability and Environment, Meredith Stivers - Assistant City Solicitor, Stanley Vieira - Athletic Director – SPS, Dr. Vanessa Boukili - Senior Urban Forestry and Landscape Planner, Neha Singh – Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

Roll Call

Present: Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis, Ward Two City Councilor Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, Ward Three City Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen, City Councilor At Large Wilfred N. Mbah and City Councilor At Large Kristen Strezo

- Committee Minutes (ID # [25-0287](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Legislative Matters Committee Meeting of February 18, 2025.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: Ward Six City Councilor Davis, Ward Two City Councilor Scott, Ward Three City Councilor Ewen-Campen, City Councilor At Large Mbah and City Councilor At Large Strezo

- Order (ID # [25-0066](#)) By Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Scott and Councilor Sait That this Council discuss proposed amendments to the Tree Preservation Ordinance, as outlined in item #24-0493.

This item was discussed with ID # 25-0566.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

- Public Communication (ID # [25-0077](#)) Chris Dwan submitting comments re: Urban Forestry Committee recommendations.

This item was discussed with ID # 25-0566.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

4. Mayor's Request (ID # [25-0452](#)) Requesting approval of the Surveillance Technology Impact Report for Hudl Focus cameras.

SPS Chief of Staff Anosike explained that the School Department is seeking to install this technology, which complies with all applicable laws, for use at the high school as a learning tool for coaches to improve the performance of student athletes. She explained that the technology will only be available to coaches and that the audio will be disabled and that videos will not be published or shared publicly or with outside parties. Chief Anosike reported that a majority of schools are currently using this technology.

Director Vieira confirmed that only SHS coaches, all of whom are paid and have undergone CORI checks, will have access to the technology and that he will receive an email notification each time the equipment is started and stopped and that the technology would only be utilized during practices and games. Chair Davis requested that this information be added to the report.

Chair Davis also noted that the report does not mention that athletes may be asked to watch the video footage, possibly at their homes, and he requested that this point be included in the report, along with the possibility of recording a video from home when being watched.

Councilor Strezo inquired about SORI checks, and Director Vieira stated that he was unsure if those were conducted, and he committed to verifying that. Councilor Strezo also requested confirmation of these checks to be included in the report. Councilor Scott commented that the HR practices/policies of schools are more relevant the School Committee than the City Council. Chair Davis asked about SafeSport training, and Director Vieira acknowledged he would investigate this further. Director Vieira would like the technology to be in use by the fall and Director Singh stated that she will collaborate with SPS staff and submit a revised impact report at the next City Council meeting for review.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

5. Mayor's Request (ID # [25-0257](#)) Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Sections 2-304 through 2-310 of the Code of Ordinances to update the Commission on Energy Use and Climate Change.

Director Blaise explained that this amendment is designed to authorize the Commission on Energy Use and Climate Change. The ordinance was initially approved in 2001 and has never been amended. Since that time, the Office of Environment and Sustainability has grown to have 10 full-time staff, and accordingly, there's a desire to update the ordinance to expand its scope. The commission identified the limitations of the current ordinance and what should be changed to modernize it. The proposed amendments are

consistent with the goals of Climate 2024. The main changes are that the ordinance creates a new body, changing the commission’s name to the Climate Action Commission, thereby allowing it to take on a broader range of issues. The number of members on the commission has been increased from 7 to 14 (including 1 city staff position) and will allow people who work but don’t live in Somerville to become members. Additionally, an ex-officio position for a Somerville Public School person will be added, along with youth representative positions. To ensure that the commissioners could have meaningful impact, the voting privilege of city staff has been eliminated, thereby leaving just 13 voting members. Director Blaise noted that the present commission would continue until the new commission is established.

Councilor Mbah asked if the City Council has a representative on the commission and Director Blaise said it’s not in the proposal because the idea was to give more voices to the public, but it could be considered. Councilor Mbah commented that the Council could have a representative or it could be briefed on the work of the commission via a memo/update sent to the Council. Director Blaise pointed out that the original ordinance did have a reporting requirement to the City Council, however, no report was ever sent, so the requirement was omitted and could be put back if desired.

Councilor Strezo inquired about the process for selecting student representatives and asked if a criteria could be in the environmental justice region and Director Blaise explained that language to that effect is not reflected in the ordinance because having at least one member interested in a specific issue should be addressed in the commission’s by-laws rather than the ordinance and because it’s important to have diversity regionally, as well. Positions for the commission will be advertised following the city’s format, i.e., print and social media, and postings in multiple languages.

The committee discussed language in section 2-305 (c) regarding the number of youth representatives, with Chair Davis stating that he’s not comfortable with the proposed language and would like it to be clearer.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE

6. Mayor's Request
(ID # [25-0566](#))

Requesting ordainment of an amendment to Chapter 12, Article VI of the Code of Ordinances to modify the Tree Preservation Ordinance.

This item was discussed with ID # 25-0066 and 25-0077. Dr. Boukili address this item saying that the ordinance was last overhauled in 2019 and that the major change at that time was the addition of a permit process for tree removal and for the formation of the Urban Forestry Committee. The proposed amendments are aimed at protecting the city’s urban forest. Multiple meetings were held with several city departments to ensure that the proposed changes were possible and could be enforced.

Among the most significant changes are protections of shade and other trees during construction, requiring permits to prune trees, a 90% waiver of the fee for removing private trees, simplified language, and some minor text modifications.

Councilor Scott questioned section 12-113, asking how enforcement relates to state statutes. Assistant Solicitor Stivers noted that the state statute varies from how the city handles enforcement but gave assurances that it is still in place for public shade trees. There were discussions about the injunctive relief clause and the issuance of stop work orders and Assistant Solicitor Stivers noted that there were conversations with ISD about what the city can enforce vs. what the state can enforce and Dr. Boukili explained that the city can't issue a stop work order for removal of trees without a permits because it's not stated in the building code, so the approach is to use a different mechanism to have people pay for damage to trees.

Councilor Scott asked about waivers and Dr. Boukili explained that they are for owners cutting down a significant tree on their own property, adding that it's sometimes challenging to determine the size of the tree cut down. In the case of someone who has previously cut down a significant tree without a permit, the city would use its best judgement and not give future waivers to that person. He also noted that Washington, DC had a strong ordinance regarding historic trees and Dr. Boukili said staff didn't think about adding a section for them, but it's worth considering.

Chair Davis commented that it doesn't make sense to him that a stop work order can't be issued when a tree is cut without the proper procedure having been followed. Attorney Stivers said it's a gray area and has been discussed and looked at closely and Dr. Boukili said that the city wanted to be able to do more so a daily fine structure of \$300 per day was added. Councilor Mbah noted that ISD has issued stop work orders in the past and said that imposing fines on developers/contractors is not a deterrent to them. Chair Davis referenced section 12-108 and said that his intent was to be able to deny a tree replacement plan if its success was questionable and he asked that this be clarified to give the city more authority.

Councilor Ewen-Campen inquired about repeat offenders and Dr. Boukili explained that people are allowed 30 days to get a permit after a tree is cut down and if it has happened before, the 2nd permit would not be issued. She also said that she would have to check to see if the city is capturing name changes by developers. Councilor Ewen-Campen also asked if it's acceptable for someone who cut down a large tree without a permit to replace it by planting several small trees. Dr. Boukili noted this is more of an administrative situation and although planting many trees might meet the letter of the law, it doesn't meet the goal, adding that it might be possible to add language regarding tree size or spacing requirements.

Councilor Ewen-Campen noted that the City Council recommended that youth representatives forego Council approval to get them seated faster and Dr. Boukili explained that it's a requirement that needs to be followed.

Councilor Mbah asked about incentives for private landowners to plant trees and Dr. Boukili replied that, although there's nothing in the ordinance to that effect, there have been discussions about ways to help. Councilor Ewen-Campen commented that planting trees increases property value significantly so the city doesn't need to offer incentives.

Chair Davis noted the loopholes are large and many of the reasons people have for wanting to remove a tree are allowed, and even though the loopholes are bigger than intended, he doesn't think there's a need to change that here. He also stated that he is open to reconsidering the approach to Norway Maples, since they are invasive and do harm the ecosystem.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE