



## CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS CLERK OF COMMITTEES

March 30, 2020

### REPORT OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE, MEETING AS A COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Attendee Name	Title	Status	Arrived
Lance L. Davis	Chair	Present	
Jesse Clingan	Vice Chair	Present	
Matthew McLaughlin	Ward One City Councilor	Present	
Jefferson Thomas ("J.T.") Scott	Ward Two City Councilor	Present	
Ben Ewen-Campen	Ward Three City Councilor	Present	
Mark Niedergang	Ward Five City Councilor	Present	
Katjana Ballantyne	Ward Seven City Councilor	Present	
Stephanie Hirsch	City Councilor At Large	Present	
Wilfred N. Mbah	City Councilor at Large	Present	
Mary Jo Rossetti	City Councilor at Large	Present	
William A. White Jr.	City Councilor At Large	Present	

The meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Davis at 6:05pm and adjourned at 7:45pm.

Others present: Doug Kress - HHS; Annie Connor - Mayor's Office; Khushbu Webber - Mayor's Office

**209798: That the Director of Health and Human Services appear before this Council with an update on measures to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and to support anyone who may become infected.**

Ms. Webber asked HHS Director Kress to share what the administration has been working on since the previous meeting. Mr. Kress presented a short overview, with a reminder that a primary goal of Health and Human Services is contact tracing for anyone who has tested positive, in order to reduce the virus's spread. He also emphasized that a primary way to slow the spread of the virus is for everyone to continue to stay home. The growth in the number of cases in Somerville has slowed slightly but the availability of tests remains limited. He also noted that we have not reached the peak and there are currently 56 cases in Somerville, with 9 that have moved to the recovery stage. Other work that the department is focused on includes addressing housing challenges, both to ensure safety for first responders and to reach the homeless community. This includes working with Tufts University to make dormitory facilities available for first responders who wish to isolate themselves from families at home to reduce the risk of spreading the virus and could also include separate facilities for use by individuals or families experiencing homelessness that need to be isolated from shelters. There are regional efforts with Cambridge, Everett, Malden, Arlington, Revere, and CHA around this as well, and they have reached out to MEMA for assistance. They are also working with businesses on efforts to promote social distancing and limit the

number of individuals in stores at a given time. There will also be opportunities explored to help support small businesses. The receipt of two grants of \$100,000 each was approved by the Council last week, and the department will continue to seek additional funds through DPH and FEMA.

Many people have reached out about volunteering, and Director Kress emphasized that right now it is important to stay home and encourage friends and others in our circles to do the same. There are opportunities through the City as well as the medical reserve corps website (<https://www.mamedicalreservecorps.org/>) that individuals can sign up for, noting that many of the opportunities may not be available until the future. The department is researching nonprofits that are accepting financial donations, as well as supporting partner agencies such as the VNA. Some of the mental health work is also being addressed through social media and public broadcasting, including resources around dealing with grief.

Councilor Mbah asked how the tests are allocated and Mr. Kress noted that they are only available with a referral from a primary care physician (PCP), and PCP's are assessing a risk level to determine how to best allocate the available tests. Mr. Kress also emphasized the need for social distancing even when outside, and even with those in our own homes to the extent that it is possible. This is a droplet virus that lives for longer on hard surfaces due to the moisture. Frequent hand washing is the best way to combat this spread. Councilor Mbah suggested distributing information about how long the virus lasts on various surfaces. Councilor Rossetti asked for more information about the housing being made available through Tufts for first responders, and Mr. Kress confirmed that it will be an option for first responders who may not want to go home and possibly subject their families to the virus. Councilor Rossetti asked further if Tufts planned to also make facilities available for recovering patients, and Mr. Kress clarified that it is still under review, but would be in separate buildings from the first responders. Councilor Rossetti also wondered if the potential 75% reimbursement would be from the federal stimulus package, and Mr. Kress believes it would be a different pot of money provided by FEMA. He will verify where those FEMA funds are coming from and report back to the Committee.

Councilor Scott wondered if there was additional assistance for constituents who have filed for unemployment or other resources and are awaiting a response or encountering issues and asked if there was a liaison, similar to those within the Office of Housing Stability, who could be contacted. Mr. Kress suggested the Office of Economic Development but will look into which particular staff members are the appropriate point of contact. The city's COVID-19 response website remains a good first resource for information ([www.somervillema.gov/coronoavirus](http://www.somervillema.gov/coronoavirus) <<http://www.somervillema.gov/coronoavirus>>).

Councilor Clingan added that the Job Creation and Retention Trust has shifted funds to make COVID-19 assistance grants available. The application can be accessed here: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdKymKLBmTDiJLxcDAFfQCZ6NBPxlciF4k51YA5kysE Wd6nxA/viewform>.

Ms. Webber added that Mr. Galligani and OSPCD have been holding town hall meetings with small businesses to keep them informed about resources that are or will be available, including micro-loans available through the state and resources through the federal stimulus package. Councilor Scott asked what can be done about businesses or individuals who are ignoring the social distancing order or essential guidelines and whether there is a repository for complaints. Mr. Kress suggested that 311 is the best option, and they will inform the proper department to address the situations.

Councilor Niedergang shared that a resident reached out with a concern that the Fire Department has not received extra training or preparation and asked what is being done for first responders and Mr. Kress noted that there is training through the departments around use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other techniques. Health and Human Services is developing guidelines for businesses including grocery stores and pharmacies around how best to implement the social distancing guidelines. The State has not provided any specific guidelines/procedures for this so Somerville will be leading the effort to formalize a process that can be used by other municipalities as well. Addressing the homeless population

has been a regional approach, with tents that would include separate space for quarantine and isolation. Mr. Kress has been working with shelters and other group living facilities, but there are no specific alternate living spaces (such as hotels) at this time.

Councilor Clingan noted a concern that there are instances where construction is still underway, and Ms. Connor noted that there is an exception for construction in dwelling units that are occupied that are essential for that unit to be occupied (such as kitchens). The work must cease once the unit can be safely occupied. Councilor Scott suggested that ISD is aware of these situations and can be contacted with concerns.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked whether there is an update on the Council's request to close selected streets to make space for pedestrian recreation while maintaining social distancing, particularly in light of crowding on the Community Path. Ms. Connor stated that the Administration will not be pursuing this option. She noted that the main reason for this is that it would create logistical and capacity burdens for both public safety and public works staff who need to focus their attention on more pressing matters. There are also concerns that the novelty will draw people to these areas, creating additional crowds. There will be a wayfinding and public relations campaign to suggest ways to be outside that avoid the community path and other areas that have been highly concentrated. Councilor Hirsch asked for further guidance on whether there is enough evidence that the six foot distance is sufficient to encourage people to gather while remaining separate or whether it should be discouraged completely. Mr. Kress shared that the distance is generally enough; the key is that it must be far enough to avoid any droplets that may be transmitted, so barriers of any kind are helpful.

Councilor Hirsch also asked if there was a backup staffing model in the event that many first responders are infected and Mr. Kress noted that both Police and Fire departments are working on continuity of operations plans. Councilor Hirsch also shared a reminder about the importance of Health and Human Services functions as the City Council plans for future budgets. Councilor White noted a concern with mental health issues as residents are alone for long periods of time and asked that counseling resources be shared. Mr. Kress noted that the Council on Aging and Housing Authority are working to cultivate opportunities to provide programming. Councilor White noted further that jogging or running too close to others poses a risk and encouraged informing the community to be courteous of others and maintain distance. Chair Davis added that there may be a need to prohibit running or jogging in high-traffic areas such as the community path, and that the messaging that runners need to follow social distancing guidelines (among themselves and with regard to people they are passing) needs to be much more explicit. Councilor Hirsch added as well that there is a perception that traffic is faster because there are fewer vehicles on the road and Ms. Connor will convey that to the Police Department.

Chair Davis asked whether the City property taxes would still continue to be due as scheduled. Ms. Connor and Ms. Webber will research that further to provide an answer. Councilor Hirsch also asked for advice on whether there is a recommendation to wear masks when going out, and Mr. Kress noted that it is a personal preference but if the choice is made to wear one, it is important to do so properly, including covering both the nose and mouth, leaving it in place, and washing hands when putting on and removing. There is concern that the mask will not offer protection when used improperly. Also, first responders could really use surgical masks if individuals have those available. Councilor Scott thanked the city staff as well as the community members who are making masks and hand sanitizer, among other contributions.

<b>RESULT:</b>	<b>KEPT IN COMMITTEE</b>
----------------	--------------------------

**209934: That the Administration update this Council on the City's disaster preparedness assessment for emergencies during this pandemic and how this reduces our first responders' workforce.**

Mr. Kress detailed plans for housing, testing, addressing homeless populations, first responders, and outreach (see 209798). Councilor Mbah asked further what the plan is for vaccination deployment, as well as a more robust response to climate change or the next emergency that might arise.

**RESULT:**

**KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

**209939: That the Administration create a task force to begin mid- to long-term logistical planning for a possible reduced workforce, in case this State of Emergency continues for an extended period.**

Ms. Connor shared that the administration has been working on this, including repurposing and reorganizing staff. There is a recognition of a need to plan for the potential of a second wave of infection, as well as what it might look like to plan for a staggered return to the workforce, and for long-term impacts that may involve relaxing social distancing measures and then restricting them again. Councilor Scott suggested that the plans should include balloting by mail and asked whether state approval would be required. Ms. Connor noted that the state is also looking at measures for remote operations, and this group (Ms. Connor, Ms. Webber, Ms. Monea, and Ms. Desir) will be researching this among other issues.

**RESULT:**

**WORK COMPLETED**

**209940: That this Council collaborate with the Administration to create a one-page coronavirus information sheet that can be physically delivered to every resident and small business owner, containing public health information, emergency resources, and instructions on where to get more information.**

Ms. Connor asked for more information about the need for distributing information this way and whether it would be through the mail or physical delivery. Councilor McLaughlin noted that there are many residents, particularly seniors, who do not use the internet and are not being reached to receive this information. Councilor Mbah noted that information about how the virus can be contracted and how to shop safely would be useful. Councilor Niedergang added that the mutual aid network has also encouraged the use of fliers to share information, and noted that distributing in multiple languages would be helpful. Councilor Ewen-Campen emphasized that this can target the most vulnerable people in our city, who may not have the internet or be following the administration's updates.

**RESULT:**

**KEPT IN COMMITTEE**

**209941: That the Administration coordinate with local charitable organizations to create a centralized fund to provide direct support to front line workers, residents, and local businesses most in need.**

In addition to what Mr. Kress outlined in item 209798, Ms. Webber added that similar to the funds that have been established in Boston, Cambridge, and Newton, the City is exploring the legal issues around what can be done to connect the resources of nonprofits and Somerville residents.

**RESULT:**

**WORK COMPLETED**

**209936: That this Council calls on landlords and real estate agents to avoid showing occupied units to avoid the spread of coronavirus.**

Ms. Connor noted that this was done through an order issued today by the Mayor and the Board of Health putting a moratorium on evictions and also on showing or otherwise entering apartment units that are occupied, unless there is an emergency. Details can be found at: <https://www.somervillema.gov/evictionmoratorium>. Mr. Kress added that the department is looking for assistance from the state on rent support to better address the underlying issues. Councilor Scott asked what actions are being taken to advance efforts at the state and federal levels and if the Mayor is committed to calling for a mortgage moratorium and corresponding rent cancellation for the duration of the crisis. The city is supporting Representative Connolly's bill at the state level and the Mayor is vocally supporting actions to stabilize the situation, including signing onto a letter from a renter's group, the Renter's Rising Coalition.

<b>RESULT:</b>	<b>KEPT IN COMMITTEE</b>
----------------	--------------------------

**209944: That the Director of SPCD, the Commissioner of Public Works, and the Director of Parks and Recreation consider turning some or all Neighborways into modified pedestrian-only areas (allowing cars only for residents and their essential visitors), to relieve the current congestion on the Community Path and some sidewalks.**

See 209798

<b>RESULT:</b>	<b>WORK COMPLETED</b>
----------------	-----------------------

**Handouts:**

- Eviction Announcement 3.30 (with 209936)
- Renters Rising Coalition letter (with 209936)