



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

CLERK OF COMMITTEES

April 15, 2020

REPORT OF THE CONFIRMATION OF APPOINTMENTS AND PERSONNEL MATTERS COMMITTEE MEETING AS A COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

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

Others present: George Proakis - OSPCD, Sarah Lewis - OSPCD, Khushbu Webber - Legislative Liaison, Rositha Durham - Clerk of Committees, Peter Forcellese - Legislative Clerk.

The meeting took place virtually via GoToWebinar and was called to order at 6:00 PM by Chairman Rossetti and adjourned at 11:25 PM, [approved on a Roll Call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Mbah, White, Ballantyne, Hirsch, Niedergang, Davis, Scott, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin and Rossetti) and none against.

Mr. Proakis addressed the committee and provided some background regarding pending cases before the Planning Board and said that some of the projects coming in near future are projects that work well during a recession. He noted that Somerville has historically fared well during recessionary times and the city wants to position boards so they may move forward. He explained that it takes about 200-250 days from the time a permit is issued until a shovel is put in the ground, and once permits are granted, funding opens up for the developers. The federal government might be providing some funds to shovel ready projects to boost the economy, so it's important for the Planning Board to move things forward. Mr. Proakis explained that the big picture is to look at each project and hold virtual meetings, and hopefully by end of April, move forward on the project at Assembly Square. To accomplish this, the new Planning Board members need to be in place. Currently, there are 4 vacancies on the Board and the 4 candidates on tonight's agenda are being put forth to fill those slots. One of the positions will expire in June and will have to be reposted very soon.

Councilor Niedergang commented that he wants to have a discussion about what the City Council wants in planners and what the Administration is looking for. Councilor Hirsch asked if the recent zoning overhaul has changed the qualities of the Planning Board and Mr. Proakis said that it didn't radically change the qualities looked for in members other than some nuances of what falls under planning vs. zoning. Councilor Ballantyne asked which of the vacancies was being filled by each candidate in terms of skill sets, i.e., she wants to know why certain candidates were selected for certain positions and she would like feedback sent to the Appointment Advisory Committee. Councilor White inquired about the length of terms and Mr. Proakis replied that the 2 remaining members on the Board have less than 3 years remaining on their terms, so it won't be a problem with the recent change in terms from 5 years to 3. Councilor Niedergang asked if candidate Rob Buchanan is approved this evening and another candidate is not, would that elevate Mr. Buchanan to be a full member, rather than an alternate? Ms. Webber explained that if there is an already vacant position and an alternate is confirmed, that alternate would fill the vacancy until a replacement is approved, however, alternates do not become full members.

Prior to voting on the Planning Board appointments, the committee had a brief discussion. Councilor Niedergang said that he wants an accounting from the Administration and the Appointment Advisory Committee as to why Mr. Buchanan was recommended for the position of alternate member. Ms. Lewis replied that the slots were selected by the AAC and that she would try to get the information. Councilor Niedergang continued by saying that the onus rests with the Mayor and that the Administration should be vetting the applicants, not just pushing through politically connected cronies. Councilor Scott agreed with Councilor Niedergang and added that the Council is aware of how many of its resolutions to the Mayor fall to the wayside. Councilor Ballantyne also agreed with Councilor Niedergang, saying that it's the Administration who provides the candidates.

Councilor Ballantyne's motion *that the Administration advise the City Council at its next meeting on April 28, 2020, why the four candidates for the Planning Board (referenced in item# 209701, 209702, 209703 and 209704) were placed into those particular slots,* was approved on a Roll Call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Mbah, White, Ballantyne, Hirsch, Niedergang, Davis, Scott, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin and Rossetti) and none against.

Councilor Niedergang thanked Planning Board members Joseph Favaloro and Gerard Amaral for continuing to serve on the Board after being rejected for reappointment.

Approval of the February 19, 2020 Minutes

Accepted on a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Mbah, White, Ballantyne, Hirsch, Niedergang, Davis, Scott, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Rossetti) to none against.

RESULT:	ACCEPTED
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Approval of the February 25, 2020 Minutes

Accepted on a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Mbah, White, Ballantyne, Hirsch, Niedergang, Davis, Scott, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Rossetti) to none against.

RESULT:	ACCEPTED
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Approval of the March 4, 2020 Minutes

Accepted on a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Clingan, Mbah, White, Ballantyne, Hirsch, Niedergang, Davis, Scott, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Rossetti) to none against.

RESULT:

ACCEPTED

209158: That the Mayor appoint a member from the Commission of Energy Use and Climate Change to the Planning Board and Design Review Committee, to provide their expertise on these bodies.

Ms. Webber spoke with the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment , Oliver Sellars-Garcia, and his opinion was that this is a good idea in theory, but was concerned that there is nobody on the CEUCC commission with the skills to make them qualified members of Planning Board and DR Committee, and if they did, they would not have time to serve on both. He believes that there is a value to the suggestion but feels that there should be an active recruitment to fill positions. Ms. Lewis stated that it's difficult to craft a board with the requirements wanted and that the desire is to have a broad board made up of different occupations, e.g., in real estate and law.

Councilor Ballantyne expressed her disappointment and asked Ms. Lewis to comment on the list of candidates submitted by Mr. Sellars-Garcia. Ms. Lewis explained that it wasn't that those individuals didn't have the skills, it was that they didn't have the time to serve. Ms. Webber said that because there is a high interest in serving the city, Mr. Sellars-Garcia referred the names to Ms. Lewis who sent them to the Appointment Advisory Committee (AAC) for consideration for the Planning Board positions, however those individuals didn't show the same interest in the CEUCC or DRC as they did for sustainability/environmental positions.

Councilor Niedergang supported Councilor Ballantyne's comments and said he doesn't know what qualifications the administration is looking for and he feels that there should be an architect on the Planning Board. Ms. Lewis pointed out that Amelia Aboff, a current Planning Board member, is an architect. Councilor Scott stated that he believes that appointees to the Planning Board should have an understanding of climate change issues. Chair Rossetti asked Ms. Lewis to provide a written response to Councilor Ballantyne's question.

Councilor Ewen-Campen said that there is a weakness in sustainability and affordability issues on the Planning Board and he would like to see candidates with qualifications in these areas. Ms. Lewis replied that no applications were received from individuals who were strong in these two areas of expertise. Councilor McLaughlin commented that his priority is to have a candidate with affordable housing experience. He also mentioned that the City of Boston is considering a charter change in order to qualify the composition of various boards. Councilor Mbah inquired about the composition of AAC and was informed that it comprised 3 members, 2 of whom are appointed by the mayor and 1 appointed by the City Council president.

RESULT:

WORK COMPLETED

209701: Requesting confirmation of the appointment of Jahan Habib to the Planning Board.

Candidate Jahan Habib addressed the committee and spoke about why he would like to serve on the Planning Board (PB). Councilor Davis asked Mr. Habib who he would represent when an applicant came before the PB and he replied that he would represent the city, its residents and the ones not in the room.

(The meeting recessed at 7:11 PM to allow Mr. Habib to re-connect to the meeting via phone. The meeting reconvened at 7:17 PM.)

Mr. Habib was asked about the core values he would use when making determinations and he replied that he would base his decisions on how a project fit in with affordable housing, transportation, SomerVision 2040 and the recently passed zoning code and would try to provide the greatest good by upholding what has been codified. He added that he wouldn't let community pressure unduly influence his decisions. He explained that, with his background, he has been on both sides of the process and will use that experience to make decisions based on what's best for Somerville and would advocate for economic diversity and maintaining community.

Mr. Habib is a principal in a real estate holding company that's involved in purchasing, rehabilitating, renting and keeping investment property in southern New England and has never put personal or business interest above those of his tenants. His properties (15 units in 4 communities) are all affordable housing units and local housing agencies are notified when a property becomes available. The decision of who to rent to is based on the applicant's ability to pay, what the applicant is trying to establish, whether they are seniors, etc.. Mr. Habib stated that he would rather maximize stability rather than profit. To determine what a unit should be rented for, Mr. Habib looks at HUD guidelines and tries to come in 60-80% below the median income.

Hypothetically, if he were to develop a major property in Worcester, it would be multi-purpose with 1st floor commercial activity and 30% affordable housing. His preference for commercial space would be non-chain stores, if possible. The project would also have transit links but would not include luxury housing or projects lacking economic diversity.

He told the committee that he is familiar with the city's SomerVision 2040 plans and the considerations associated with them and that he's interested in the plans for the InnerBelt. He is concerned about how the economic picture will change and affect property owners and renters. When considering the city's budget in his decisions, he would prioritize housing and allocate emergency housing assistance to keep people in their homes.

Asked where he sees himself in 5 years, Mr. Habib said that he would like to advance in his job and would like to stay here in Somerville, although he can't afford to buy here. He also told the committee that he has engaged in an ad-hoc group to provide assistance to those who need it during this (COVID-19) time, he is a part-time MBA student at BC, works with youths to impart information and support, helps to build pathways to help people find places to live and has volunteered with the Red Cross and Big Brothers of Boston.

Councilor Ewen-Campen made a motion to approve this appointment.

RESULT:	APPROVED. [6 TO 5]
AYES:	Scott, McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen, Davis, Ballantyne, Hirsch
NAYS:	Rossetti, Mbah, Clingan, Niedergang, White Jr.

209702: Requesting confirmation of the appointment of Ella Samson to the Planning Board.

Councilor Davis recused himself from this item.

Ms. Samson addressed the committee and said that she brings unique qualities to the table and would bring common sense and pragmatism to the roll. She would use her experience and apply critical thinking to make the position data oriented and aligned with SomerVision 2040.

She is interested in giving back to the city that she has called home for the past 3 ½ years and feels that she can bring a fresh set of eyes and perspective to the Planning Board. She is impressed with the implementation priorities laid out in SomerVision 2040 but believes that there is more room to address issues of homelessness, violence, education, non-acceptance and access to medical care as they related to the LGBTQ community.

Ms. Samson stated that she has no urban planning experience but applied for this position because it looked interesting and because she wants to give back to city in a different way. She was born in the Netherlands, graduated from Wharton with an MBA, has had a few start-ups and owned a small business. She is passionate about small business, elderly and the LGBTQ community.

Members expressed that although the Planning Board may not be the perfect fit for her, there are other commissions that would welcome her passion and commitment.

Councilor Scott made a motion to approve this appointment.

RESULT:	NOT APPROVED. [2 TO 8]
AYES:	Scott, Clingan
NAYS:	Rossetti, Mbah, McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen, Niedergang, Ballantyne, White Jr., Hirsch
RECUSED:	Davis

209703: Requesting confirmation of the appointment of Sam Dinning to the Planning Board.

Mr. Dinning works for law firm that does a lot of work with zoning boards and the like and believes that Planning Boards can shape the cities through accountability. He returned here from Seattle, where he said there has been a lot of change and where much of the culture of the city was lost.

Responding to a series of questions, Mr. Dinning stated that it's easier to talk about social justice values than to put them into practice. One needs to be thinking about community overall and has to know how far to push to get what works in the best interest of the community. He believes that affordable housing waivers should be viewed with skepticism and would have to clear a high bar to be considered. Asked about having architects on the Panning Board, he stated that they know the details in ways that others don't.

With regard to the recently passed zoning codes, he thinks the roll of the Planning Board would be similar to what it is now since SomerVision 2040 provides a good look at what the city and communities are looking for, however, he feels that the goals aren't quantitated enough in some cases. The zoning document, at 550 pages, makes it something most people won't read, so the Planning Board needs to be familiar with it and play more of a gate-keeper role. It's important to balance economics with community by being strong to your values and showing benchmarks.

Mr, Dinning has been involved with voter work, fundraising for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Legal Aid Bureau and a bone marrow donor drive.

Councilor White motioned to approve this appointment.

RESULT:	APPROVED. [UNANIMOUS]
AYES:	Rossetti, Scott, Mbah, Clingan, McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen, Niedergang, Davis, Ballantyne, White Jr., Hirsch

209704: Requesting confirmation of the appointment of Rob Buchanan as an Alternate to the Planning Board.

Councilor Hirsch recused herself from this item.

Mr. Buchanan addressed the committee and said that he has been a resident of Somerville for 11 years and is attracted to public service and getting involved in the community. He was motivated by working with people who were distressed and he serves as a board member with Cambridge Health Alliance. He applied for one of the vacant full member positions on the Planning Board, in part, because of how badly audience members were treated by a prior member of the Planning Board.

He sees himself as a consensus builder, and although he's not always successful, he doesn't shy away from taking a position. Having an historical perspective of the battles that have taken place in the city, he said that many abutters will throw anything at a developer to change or stop a project, therefore, careful review is necessary. If a project lived up to the letter of the law but wasn't good for the city, he would have no problem telling developer to go back to the drawing board.

Mr. Buchanan told the committee that rarely has a project gone through the process without some level of change imposed by a city board. He feels that the Partners Health Care project could have been so much more for both parties.

Asked about affordable housing waivers, Mr. Buchanan explained that he would need to know why the request was being made and what the city would be getting in exchange for the waiver and whether it would be better than what would have been gotten through the zoning code, as written.

Members strongly expressed their disappointment that this candidate was not recommended by the Administration as a full voting member of the Planning Board.

Chair Rossetti motioned to approve this appointment.

RESULT:	APPROVED. [10 TO 0]
AYES: Rossetti, Scott, Mbah, Clingan, McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen, Niedergang, Davis, Ballantyne, White Jr.	
RECUSED:	Hirsch

Handouts:

- Email - S Lewis (with 209701, 209702, 209703 209704)