



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

City Hall 3rd Floor, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville MA 02143

Planning Board's Rules of Procedure & Policy

1. General

a. Authority and Purpose

- i. As authorized by M.G.L. Ch.41 §81A-81J and the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) §15.7.3.d, these Rules of Procedure & Policy ("Rules") are intended to ensure the orderly conduct of business at meetings of the Planning Board of the City of Somerville ("Board"), to provide the most efficient use of time, and to facilitate the decision-making process of the Board.

b. Adoption of Rules

- i. These Rules were adopted by the Board on January 19, 2023.
- ii. The Board may, from time to time, amend these Rules accordance with the voting requirements of §4.g.
 - a). The Board shall file a written copy of the amended Rules with the City Clerk within fourteen (14) calendar days of adoption.
- iii. These Rules and any amendments to them are applicable on the date of adoption.

c. Responsibilities

- i. The Board's responsibilities are specified by the SZO as:
 - a). The decision-making authority for all developments that require a Master Plan Special Permit pursuant to SZO §15.2.c.
 - b). The decision-making authority for all developments that require a Subdivision Plan Approval pursuant to SZO §15.3.c.
 - c). The decision-making authority for the adoption of an Urban Design Framework for each sub-area within the Master Planned Development Overlay District pursuant to SZO §8.4.3.d.
 - d). The decision-making authority for all developments that require Site Plan Approval, or a Special Permit in the Mid-Rise 3, Mid-Rise 4, Mid-Rise 5, Mid-Rise 6, High-Rise, Fabrication, Commercial Core, Special, and Overlay districts.
 - e). The Board is responsible for providing recommendations to the Somerville City Council concerning the following:
 - (i). proposed amendments to the text or maps of the SZO;
 - (ii). proposed changes to the official map of the City of Somerville;
 - (iii). the laying out, alteration, relocation, or discontinuance of thoroughfares;
and
 - (iv). the proposed conveyance of land to the City of Somerville.

d. The Board's responsibilities are specified by M.G.L. as:

- i. The Board is responsible for authoring, adopting, and periodically updating of the comprehensive plan for the City of Somerville per M.G.L. Ch.41 §81D.
- ii. The Board, or its designee, drafts the official map of the City of Somerville pursuant to M.G.L. Ch.41, 81E-J.

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- iii. The Board is responsible for authoring, reviewing, and adoption of neighborhood plans or area plans pursuant to M.G.L. Ch.41 §81D.

2. Board Organization

a. Membership

- i. The Board is composed of five (5) full members and two (2) alternate members.
 - a). Unless otherwise specified, “member” refers to both full and alternate members.
- ii. Members are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council for three (3) year terms.

b. Officers

- i. At the first meeting of each calendar year, the Board shall elect from among its full members a Chair, Vice Chair, and Clerk.
- ii. Duties:
 - a). Chair
 - (i). The Chair is the presiding officer for all Board meetings. The Chair’s responsibilities include at least the following:
 - 1). Ensure orderly meetings and public hearings, whether through the use of Robert’s Rules of Order or another means;
 - 2). Call for any necessary votes on matters before the Board;
 - 3). Appoint subcommittees as necessary or desirable;
 - 4). Decide all points of order, unless overruled by majority of the Board;
 - 5). Transact official business of the Board;
 - 6). Request assistance from City Staff as necessary or desirable; and
 - 7). Exercise general supervisory responsibilities of the Board’s work.
 - b). Vice Chair
 - (i). The Vice-Chair is responsible for performing all duties of the Chair if the Chair is unable to perform their duties.
 - (ii). The Vice-Chair may request assistance from City Staff, with notification to the Chair, as necessary or desirable to aid in the Board’s work.
 - c). Clerk
 - (i). The Clerk is responsible for reading public notices at meetings prior to opening a public hearing.
 - (ii). If the Clerk is absent, the Chair shall designate another member to serve as Clerk for the meeting.
 - (iii). The Clerk is responsible for performing all duties of the Chair if both the Chair and Vice-Chair are absent or unable to perform their duties.
 - 1). If the Clerk must perform the duties of the Chair, they shall designate another member to serve as acting Clerk for the meeting.

c. Staff to the Board

- i. The staff of the Planning, Preservation, & Zoning Division of the Mayor’s Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development serves as Staff to the Board (“Staff”).
- ii. Staff is responsible for:
 - a). Maintaining records of Board proceedings;

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- b). Ensuring proper notification and advertisement of public hearings and public meetings in accordance with relevant laws;
 - c). Assisting the Board in running an efficient meeting;
 - d). Drafting and filing of written decisions of the Board;
 - e). Acting on behalf of the Board as specified in these Rules; and
 - f). Acting on behalf of the Board as directed by the Board or Chair .
- d. Subcommittees
- i. The Chair may, at their discretion, establish subcommittees to facilitate the Board's work.

3. Standards of Conduct

a. Meeting Attendance

- i. All members shall attend every Board meeting.
- ii. Notwithstanding emergency situations, any member unable to attend a meeting shall notify the Chair and Staff at least three (3) weeks prior to the meeting.
- iii. Members may attend meetings remotely in accordance with relevant state laws.
- iv. If remote participation in meetings is not available under relevant state laws, the Board and City Staff will work together to establish safe protocols for in-person meetings that comply with applicable laws.

b. Meeting Participation

- i. If a member is absent from one (1) meeting at which an application is discussed, the member may participate in discussions and votes related to the application if, prior to the start of the next meeting at which the application is scheduled to be discussed, they:
 - a). review the evidence presented at the meeting, including materials presented for the case, minutes, or an audio or visual recording of the meeting; and
 - b). submit an affidavit to Staff attesting to that fact.
- ii. If a member is absent from two (2) or more meetings at which an application is discussed, or if the member fails to submit an affidavit in accordance with the previous section, the member shall not participate in any discussion or votes related to the application.
- iii. Alternate members may participate in discussion on any item before the Board but may not vote unless designated by the Chair to act in the place of a full member who is absent, has a conflict of interest, or is otherwise unable to vote on the item.

c. Conflicts of Interest

- i. Members shall act in accordance with the provisions of M.G.L. Ch 268A, as amended.
- ii. Members shall notify the Chair as soon as practicable about any known or suspected conflicts of interest and recuse themselves from the subject case.
 - a). Members should consult the Somerville City Solicitor's Office prior to participating in any matter for which they believe a conflict of interest may exist.
- iii. Recused members shall not participate in the discussion or vote for any matter for which they have a conflict of interest.

- iv. Recused members are encouraged, but not required, to leave the physical or virtual meeting room during the discussion of the case for which they are recused.

d. Open Meeting Law

- i. Members shall act in accordance with the provisions of M.G.L. Ch.39, §18-25, (“Open Meeting Law”) as amended.
- ii. Members should consult with the Somerville City Solicitor’s Office with any questions regarding compliance with the Open Meeting Law.

4. Meetings & Hearings

a. Public Meetings

i. Regular Meetings

- a). Regular meetings of the Board are scheduled on the first and third Thursdays, unless municipal holidays or conflicts with other events require adjustments to this schedule.
 - (i). The Board shall publish an annual calendar prior to the start of each calendar year.
- b). No more than six (6) public hearings shall be scheduled per meeting inclusive of agenda items with another body (i.e., the Land Use Committee).
- c). Members of the Board may request items of general interest to the Board be placed on agendas for discussion under other business. The Chair may, at their discretion, determine whether items shall be discussed, and those items shall be posted in compliance to Open Meeting Law

ii. Special Meetings

- a). A special meeting is any meeting held on a day other than those listed on the annual calendar adopted pursuant to §4.a.i.a).(i). of these Rules.
- b). Special meetings may be scheduled at the discretion of the Chair, or at the request of three (3) members.
- c). Special meetings may include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - (i). meetings to discuss administrative business;
 - (ii). subcommittee meetings;
 - (iii). joint meetings and hearings with other City Boards and Commissions; and
 - (iv). joint meetings and hearings with the City Council.

b. Meeting Management

i. Public Meetings

- a). Except at the discretion of the Chair, public meetings will follow this procedure:
 - (i). Call to Order
 - (ii). General Business
 - 1). Minutes Approval
 - 2). Reports from subcommittees
 - (iii). Continuances and requests to withdraw applications
 - (iv). Public Hearings
 - (v). Other Business
 - (vi). Adjournment

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- b). Except by a majority vote of the Board, no items of business will be taken up after 9pm.
- ii. Public Hearings
 - a). Except at the discretion of the Chair, public hearings will follow this procedure:
 - (i). Reading of the legal notice
 - (ii). Applicant presentation
 - (iii). City Staff presentation
 - (iv). Testimony from any elected official
 - (v). Public testimony in favor of the application
 - (vi). Public testimony against the application
 - (vii). Questions from the Board
 - (viii). Closing of the public hearing
 - b). Following the closing of the public hearing, the Board will deliberate and vote.
- iii. Joint Hearings
 - a). Except at the discretion of the Chair, joint hearings will follow this procedure:
 - (i). Call to Order
 - (ii). Move to Recess
 - (iii). Public Hearing with City Council or another Committee
 - (iv). Closing of Public Hearing
- iv. Recess
 - a). At the discretion of the Chair, the Board may take a recess at any time during a meeting or hearing.
 - b). Prior to taking a recess, the Chair shall announce the current time and the length of the recess.
 - c). Following the recess, the Chair shall announce the current time and return to session.
- v. Executive Sessions
 - a). The Board may enter into executive session in accordance with M.G.L. Ch 30A §21.
 - b). Prior to entering into executive session, the Chair shall:
 - (i). Take a roll call vote on whether to enter into executive session;
 - (ii). State the purpose for the executive session; and
 - (iii). Announce whether the open session will reconvene following the executive session.
- vi. Public Participation
 - a). Public Meetings
 - (i). Public testimony is permitted during public meetings only at the discretion of the Chair.
 - b). Public Hearings
 - (i). Public testimony will be taken during every Public Hearing.
 - 1). Unless otherwise stated by the Chair, written testimony will be accepted until noon on the Friday before the Public Hearing.
 - (ii). The Chair may, at their discretion, limit the amount of time each individual may provide testimony during a public hearing. The Chair shall not limit this amount of time to less than two (2) minutes.

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- (iii). Following the close of a public hearing, additional public testimony is permitted only at the discretion of the Chair or if substantively new information is received by the Board.
 - 1). The Chair shall use their best judgment to determine whether any information received following the close of public testimony is substantively new.
 - c). Standards of Conduct
 - (i). Prior to providing public testimony, all individuals must provide their name, street name, and city of residence for the record.
- c. Notice Requirements
 - i. Public meetings must be advertised in accordance with M.G.L. Ch.30A §§18-25 and SZO §15.1.7.
 - ii. Public hearings must be advertised in accordance with M.G.L. Ch.40A §11 and SZO §15.1.7.
- d. Attendance
 - i. Board Members
 - a). A quorum of the Board is required to conduct any business.
 - (i). For any administrative permits and all administrative matters of the Board pursuant to M.G.L. Ch.40B and M.G.L Ch.40A §9, a quorum is three (3) members.
 - (ii). For any discretionary permits such as a Special Permit or Master Plan Special Permit, pursuant to M.G.L. Ch.40A §9, a quorum is four (4) members.
 - b). If a quorum is not present for an item of business, the Chair shall continue that item to the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Board at which a quorum is anticipated.
 - ii. Applicants
 - a). Applicants may appear on their own behalf or be represented by an agent.
- e. Motions by the Board on Applications
 - i. Continuance of Public Hearings
 - a). The Board may vote continue the public hearing to a future meeting.
 - (i). If the Board votes to continue the public hearing to an unspecified date, the Applicant shall pay an additional notice fee in accordance with §5.a.ii. of these Rules.
 - b). The Board may require that the public hearing be re-advertised.
 - (i). If the Board votes to require an application to be re-advertised, the Applicant shall pay an additional notice fee in accordance with §5.a.ii. of these Rules
 - ii. Request to Withdraw
 - a). The Board may vote to allow an Applicant to withdraw their application without prejudice.

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- (i). If the Board denies an Applicant's request to withdraw without prejudice, the Board shall then vote to approve, approve with conditions, or deny the application based on the available information.
- iii. Incomplete Applications
 - a). Pursuant to SZO §15.1.5.c.v., if the Board deems an application scheduled for a public hearing to be incomplete, the Board shall do one (1) of the following:
 - (i). deny the application;
 - (ii). allow the Applicant to withdraw the application without prejudice according to SZO §15.1.5.d and §4.f.ii of these Rules; or
 - (iii). allow the Applicant to waive the procedural time requirements according to SZO §15.1.8.d Continuance.
- iv. Approve, Approve with Conditions, or Deny
 - a). The Board may vote to approve an application as presented, approve an application with conditions, or deny an application.
 - (i). The Board may deny an application for administrative permits only when:
 - 1). the submittal fails to furnish adequate information required for approval.
 - 2). the imposition of reasonable conditions would not ensure compliance to standards, as applicable; and/or
 - 3). the submittal, although proper in form, includes or creates an intractable problem so intrusive on the needs of the public in one regulated aspect or another and cannot be adequately mitigated.
 - b). The Board shall summarize its findings regarding each of the review criteria set forth by the SZO. The Board may also make additional findings beyond those required findings.
 - c). If voting to approve an application with conditions, the Board shall identify the conditions of approval.
 - (i). If the Board references staff memoranda issued regarding an item when voting to approve with conditions, it will be understood as referencing all staff memoranda related to the application unless otherwise specified.
- v. Additional Process
 - a). Applicants may be directed to hold an additional Neighborhood Meeting.
 - (i). Neighborhood Meetings must comply with the procedural requirements of SZO §15.1.3.
 - b). Applicants may be directed to visit the Urban Design Commission for additional Design Review.
- f. Written Decisions and Recommendations
 - i. Following a Board's decision to approve, approve with conditions, or deny an application, Staff shall prepare a decision summarizing the findings made by the Board and identifying any conditions the Board included in its decision.
 - a). The written decisions of the Board must be filed with the City Clerk within ten (14) calendar days of the Board's vote.
 - ii. Recommendations to City Council
 - a). The Board shall make a recommendation to the Somerville City Council by twenty (21) days after the written testimony period has closed for any Joint Hearings held with the Land Use Committee pursuant to SZO §15.7.3.c.

- (i). The written recommendations shall be prepared by Staff to be filed with the Somerville City Council for consideration.

g. Voting

- i. Voting must be initiated by the Chair, or their designee, asking for a motion.
- ii. The number of members that must vote in favor of a motion for it to pass is the same as the number of members required for a quorum, as identified in §4.d.i.a.
- iii. The record shall show the vote of each member upon each motion, or if a member is absent or fails to vote.

h. Minutes

- i. The Board shall maintain accurate meeting minutes, including a record of all votes taken at a meeting.
 - a). Meeting minutes for any executive sessions must be maintained separately.
- ii. The Board shall approve minutes for a meeting within three (3) regular meetings.
- iii. Approved minutes shall be publicly accessible.

5. Applications

a. Submission Requirements

i. Documents

- a). The Board shall adopt submittal requirements and a fee schedule for all applications to be heard by the Board.
- b). Staff shall establish and maintain all necessary application submission requirements.
- c). The submission requirements must, at a minimum, identify documents and information necessary to enable the Board to make findings for any relevant review criteria in the SZO.
- d). Unless a waiver is requested pursuant to §5.a.iii. of these Rules, all required documents must be submitted to have a complete application and be scheduled for a Public Hearing.

ii. Fees

- a). All required fees must be submitted to have a complete application.
- b). Withdrawn applications are not entitled to a refund of any required fees.

iii. Waivers

- a). Applicants may submit a written request for a waiver from any of the information required for an individual application.
 - (i). Written requests must be submitted to Staff and must include at least the following information:
 - 1). Identification of the specific item(s) a waiver is being requested from; and
 - 2). The Applicant's reasoning for why the Board should grant the waiver.
 - (ii). Upon receipt of a written request pursuant to this Section, Staff shall place the request on the agenda of a regular meeting within thirty (30) days.
 - 1). If the Board does not meet within thirty (30) days, the Chair shall grant or deny the waiver request on behalf of the Board.

b. Submission Deadlines

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- i. Prior to Advertisement
 - a). An application may be submitted at any time according to the procedures established by the SZO.
 - ii. Following Advertisement
 - a). The Applicant shall submit all information at least seven (7) calendar days prior to the hearing at which it will be discussed.
 - (i). Information submitted within seven (7) calendar days of a hearing may only be discussed at the hearing at the discretion of the Chair.
 - b). The Applicant shall submit any information that requires review by Staff at least fourteen (14) calendar days prior to the hearing at which it will be discussed.
 - (i). Staff shall provide an updated memo to the Board no later than the Friday prior to the hearing.
 - (ii). Information submitted within fourteen (14) calendar days of a hearing may be reviewed at Staff's discretion.
 - c). Staff shall provide all information submitted regarding an application to the Board no later than the Friday prior to the hearing at which it will be discussed.
- c. Application Review
- i. Determining Completeness
 - a). An application is deemed complete when the Applicant has submitted all required documents set forth in the submission requirements (see §5.a. of these Rules).
 - b). Staff shall review applications to determine completeness and shall promptly notify the Applicant with the results of their review and a tentative hearing date.
 - (i). If an application is incomplete, Staff shall identify the reason(s) for that determination to the applicant.
- d. Withdrawal of Applications
- i. Prior to the advertisement of a public hearing, an Applicant may withdraw their application without prejudice at any time.
 - ii. Following advertisement of a public hearing, an Applicant may withdraw their application with prejudice at any time, or may withdraw their application without prejudice with the approval of the Board (see §4.e.ii of these Rules).
- e. Extension of Procedural Requirements
- i. The Director of PPZ shall serve as the decision-making authority for requests to extend procedural requirements in accordance with SZO §151.8.d.
 - ii. Agreements between the Applicant and the Director of PPZ extend any time limits for procedural requirements must be recorded in writing.
- f. Minor Site Plan Approvals
- i. The Director of PPZ shall serve as the decision-making authority for all Minor Site Plan Approvals.
 - a). Applicability
 - (i). Pursuant to SZO §15.7.3.d.iv.c, the following development activities are minor, do not require all of the typical review procedures necessary for Site

Plan Approval, and may be permitted through an administrative plan review process referred to as Minor Site Plan Approval:

- 1). Lot Line Adjustments
 - 2). Lot Mergers
 - 3). Lot Splits
 - 4). The construction or modification of any ground floor awning, entry canopy, lobby entrance, or storefront following the original site plan approval for the building.
 - 5). Screenings for rooftop mechanical equipment
 - 6). Modifications of parking lots limited only to zoning-compliant pavement markings and zoning-compliant landscaping changes.
- b). Review Procedures
- (i). Notwithstanding SZO §15.3.2.d, Minor Site Plan Approval requires only the following review procedures:
 - 1). Step 1: Pre-Submittal Meeting
 - 2). Step 5: Development Review Application
 - 3). Step 6: Application Review
 - 4). Step 9: Decision
 - 5). Step 10: Appeal Period
 - 6). Step 11: Certification of Decision
 - (ii). Minor site plan approvals do not require neighborhood meetings, design review, public notice, or a public hearing.

6. Consultant Review

a. General

- i. If the Board determines that, in order to review an application, it needs technical assistance beyond what Staff can provide, it may hire outside consultants in accordance with M.G.L. Ch 44, §53G.
- ii. The Board may engage engineers, planners, traffic consultants, attorneys, urban designers, financial analysts or any other appropriate professional who can assist the Board in analyzing the project and to ensure compliance with all relevant laws, ordinances, and regulations.
 - a). Specific consultant services may include, but are not limited to, application analysis and review, identification of impacts on neighboring properties or the surrounding neighborhood or district, hydrogeologic and drainage analysis, traffic and environmental analysis, permit conditioning, and environmental or land use law. Services may also include on-site monitoring during construction, or other services related to the project as deemed necessary by the Board.
- iii. The consultant will be chosen by, and report only to, the Board and, at the Board's discretion, Staff.

b. Selection

- i. Prior to selecting a consultant, the Board shall vote to approve a written scope for the services it wishes to receive.

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- ii. Following the Board's approval of a written scope, Staff shall work with the City's Chief Procurement Officer to identify qualified consultants to provide services to the Board.
 - a). At the request of the Chair, Staff shall provide an update to the Board regarding the status of the consultant selection process.
 - iii. Following selection of a consultant, Staff shall notify the Applicant by electronic mail, first class mail, or hand-delivered notice.
 - a). The notice must contain at least the identity of the consultant(s), the amount of the fee to be charged to the applicant, and a request for payment of said fee in its entirety.
- c. Fees
- i. Required fees must be received in their entirety prior to initiation of consultant services.
 - a). Following initiation of consultant services, the Board may require additional fees if necessary review requires a larger expenditure than originally anticipated.
 - b). Except in the case of an appeal pursuant to §6.d. of these Rules, the Board shall consider the application incomplete if the Applicant does not pay the consultant fee specified by the Board within ten (10) business days.
 - (i). The Board shall notify the Applicant that the application is incomplete and that no additional review or action will be taken on the application until the Applicant has paid the requested fee.
 - (ii). The Board may deny the application if the Applicant fails to pay the consultant fee specified by the Board within ten (10) business days of the notice that the application is incomplete.
 - ii. Fees must be deposited in a dedicated account and kept separate from other money.
 - a). The Board may expend fees, including accrued interest, from this account without further appropriation.
 - b). Fees may only be spent on consultant review for the specific application for which fees were collected.
 - iii. Any fees, including accrued interest, that are not expended during the course of review of the application will be returned to the Applicant or their successor in interest.
- d. Appeal
- i. Prior to payment of the fee in accordance with §6.c. of these Rules, the Applicant may appeal the Board's selection of a consultant to the City Council.
 - a). The appeal must be made in writing to the Somerville City Clerk within twenty (20) days of notice being given in accordance with §6.b.ii. of these Rules.
 - (i). A copy of the appeal must be simultaneous delivered to the Board and Staff.
 - b). The grounds for such an appeal are limited to the following:
 - (i). That the outside consultant has a conflict of interest, or
 - (ii). That the outside consultant does not possess the following minimum required qualifications:
 - 1). An educational degree in or related to the field at issue, or

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- 2). Three (3) or more years of practice in the field at issue or a related field.
 - ii. The required time limits for action upon an application by the Board will be extended by the duration of the appeal.
 - iii. If the City Council has not issued a decision on the appeal within thirty (30) days of the filing of the appeal, the selection made by the Board will stand.