

Participation and the Dynamics of Power:
Neighborhood Meetings in the Somerville Site Plan Approval Process

A thesis submitted by

Fiona M. Gain

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning

Tufts University

August 2025

Advisor: Christine Cousineau

Reader: Laurie Goldman

Abstract

This thesis investigated the resident participation facilitated by the Neighborhood Meeting as part of site development review in Somerville, MA. As incorporated into the city's form-based code, the Neighborhood Meeting can maintain community engagement of the city's zoning code at the site level. Furthermore, review of the design and implementation of the Neighborhood Meeting through case studies addresses the tension between substantive engagement and efforts to promote efficient development in the Mid-rise Districts of Somerville.

The institutionalization of public engagement in the form of the Neighborhood Meeting incorporates public feedback in the early stages of site plan review. Somerville's extensive structure for community participation offers a great opportunity to learn about the quality of engagement that occurs before the submission of site applications. The potential for misalignment among involved parties could undermine the city's conception of the Site Plan Approval process and the role of the Neighborhood Meeting in application development.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor, Christine Cousineau, for fostering the beginnings of this thesis in her teaching and supporting me through many of the milestones I encountered during this program. Thank you to my reader, Dr. Laurie Goldman, for feedback and insight that was always rooted in reflection and commitment to the Somerville Community. Thank you to everyone who offered their time in support of this thesis – this extends to the residents of Somerville, classmates, and coworkers who helped advance my writing. Finally, thank you Isabelle, for finding clarity in my words and for your presence throughout my academic journey.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures and Tables	v
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Research Goals and Methods.....	5
3. Literature Review	9
4. Case Context.....	25
5. Case Studies.....	35
6. Analysis.....	55
7. Findings.....	76
8. Recommendations.....	83
Conclusion	85
Bibliography.....	86
Appendix.....	90

List of Figures and Tables

Tables

Table 1. SZO Site Plan Approval Cases in MR Districts

Table 2. SomerVision Participation Processes

Table 3. 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting 1 Recorded Comments and Responses

Table 4. 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting 2 Recorded Comments and Responses

Table 5. 366 Broadway Planning Board Hearing - Recorded Comments

Table 6. Change in units mix of 366 Broadway between first and final Planning Board Hearing

Table 7. 366 Broadway Planning Board Decision Findings

Table 8. 599 Somerville Neighborhood Meeting 1 (April 5, 2021) - Recorded Comments and Applicant Responses

Table 9. 599 Somerville Planning Board Recorded Comments, 2022

Table 10. 599 Somerville Ave Planning Board Decision Findings

Table 11. Comparing Public-Facing Procedures in Somerville's Development Review before and after 2019

Table 12. Recorded Neighborhood Meeting Participants, Planning Board Hearing Participants, and the Formatting of the Neighborhood Meeting by Site, (2021) to (2025).

Table 13. Duration of Public Facing Development Review

Figures

Figure 1. The SomerVision Map identifying areas to Conserve, Enhance, and Transform.

Figure 2. Timeline of the Site Plan Approval Process for 366 Broadway.

Figure 3. 366 Broadway, Somerville. Rendering of Elevation on Broadway presented at NM1 and NM.

Figure 4. 366 Broadway as of June 2025

Figure 5. Timeline of the Site Plan Approval Process for 599 Somerville Avenue

Figure 6. Site Plan as shown on the 599 Somerville site.

Figure 7. Western corner of 599 Somerville Ave, August 2019

Figure 8. The same corner, August 2024

Figure 9. Registered Addresses of Resident Participants at Neighborhood Meetings and Planning Board Hearings

Figure 10. Frequency of Topic in Neighborhood Meeting Public Comment

Figure 11. Frequency of Topic in Planning Board Hearing Public Comment

Positionality Statement

I am a graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University with an undergraduate degree in environmental science. Following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I worked as a science teacher while completing a Master of Science in Energy Policy and Climate. While completing this thesis to address the impacts of participation-based land use policies in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, I attempted to incorporate a consciousness around the legacy of harm associated with zoning. Conversations around development often virtue signal towards “community development” while failing to accommodate existing residents and social networks embedded in neighborhoods that are selected for “revitalization” efforts. While the scope of this thesis does not center on these topics, I acknowledge that gentrification and displacement are products of new development. I hope to ground my future planning career in centering existing communities when anticipating new development. I am a white, cisgender woman without disabilities, and I grew up in a suburb of South Florida with a drastically different urban fabric than Somerville, MA.

1. Introduction

This thesis investigates the resident participation facilitated by the Neighborhood Meeting as part of site development review in Somerville, MA. I analyzed the Neighborhood Meetings and Planning Board Hearings of two projects in the city's Mid-Rise zoning districts, one residential and one commercial, to discern the reach and limits of resident engagement under the city's Form-Based Code. In particular, I wanted to articulate how Neighborhood Meetings address the tension between substantive engagement and efforts to promote efficient development.

As planning departments in urban areas work to review and update zoning ordinances to reflect the changing demands of development, the emphasis on resident feedback and involvement in land use processes is equally prioritized. Somerville's current land use policy involves the layering of several distinct plans that encourage institutionalized engagement and resident-led land use decisions. From 2009 to 2012, the city undertook an extensive public process to develop its first-ever comprehensive plan, SomerVision 2030. The visioning process, with its hundreds of community meetings, revealed the need to update Somerville's zoning to align it with SomerVision goals. The City used this study as a catalyst to completely revise their zoning, resulting in the current Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) adopted in 2019.

The incorporation of a pre-submission Neighborhood Meeting into the site plan review, known as the Site Plan Approval (SPA) process, is unique to Somerville's Zoning Ordinance. While traditional site plan review involves a public comment period during the Planning Board's review of an application for development, the Neighborhood Meeting mandates public engagement opportunities for projects before submission to the city. Furthermore, the addition of two mandatory public meetings to an extensive, 11-step development review process reflects the City of Somerville's recent commitment to promoting transparency, accountability, and resident inclusion.

Land-use planning and corresponding zoning codes serve as the foundation for much of the work in urban planning. Participatory planning emerged as the central method to integrating urban space into the social network and incorporating the connection between residents and civic governance. This connection fosters the right for residents to endorse or oppose government decisions. However, community participation in land-use planning codes found in zoning codes is often weakly institutionalized, indicating a lack of investment in protecting a community's ability to engage with planning decisions. Public participation in development review is colloquially characterized by a loud minority, perpetuating landowner-dominated conversations about resistance to change and increased inclusivity in a community.

While participation in zoning discussions have gained a reputation for slowing down procedures and leaving both developers and residents frustrated, best practices in planning suggest a wider community-centered approach. Without the buy-in of more residents than the usual minority, municipalities face generalized pushback on most development projects and residents consistently feel unrepresented by projects in the development pipeline.

Somerville's Zoning Ordinance is a Form-Based Code (FBC), which carries different implications for resident involvement than traditional zoning. Form-Based Codes center community feedback during the creation of the code itself, incorporating resident feedback from design charrettes and other community engagement methods to determine how the community perceives their built environment and what building forms are characteristic of their neighborhoods. The extensive engagement during the design of the code ideally generates zoning regulation that is reflective of the desires of the community at large. The high level of cooperation surrounding the creation of a FBC allows for highly prescriptive regulation around established use districts and building form; widespread buy-in around the intended outcome of the code minimizes the need for discretionary review and gives way for by-right project approvals. If the public is in favor of the form the code intends to permit through stringent regulation, there should be less demand from the public and city departments to examine development on a site-by-site basis.

Extensive by-right development allows for another desirable feature of an FBC: streamlined development approval processes and faster growth. However, eliminating opportunities for resident feedback in exchange for shorter application review minimizes the ability of residents to object to development, an ability consistent with governance that prioritizes community involvement in decision-making. Based on Somerville's previous commitment to community feedback around other land use policy, the city uses the Neighborhood Meeting to strike a balance between by-right development and the role of public input in development.

Broadly speaking, there is no standard method of resident participation after a municipality adopts a Form-Based Code. Advocates of engagement in the development of a FBC often omit explicit guidance on how to incorporate community input during its implementation. This leads to municipalities shaping site-level processes, including development review, to accommodate the existing relationship between city planning staff and community, the community and developers, and the capacity for staff to enact certain procedures for review. Somerville's extensive structure for community participation offers an opportunity

to learn more about how meetings between resident and applicant (those who submit the application to develop a site) influence development on the site and neighborhood level.

This thesis explores these relationships to better understand attitudes surrounding the Neighborhood Meeting as a central avenue to resident participation in land use planning at the site-level. Several Neighborhood Meetings occur across Somerville every week and developments across Districts are driven by different development goals. Therefore, I focused my research on project applications for sites in Mid-rise Districts. Mid-rise Districts accommodate mixed-use buildings between three and six stories intended to create a well-defined place for pedestrian activity along commercial and residential streets.

Procedural Context

The context for the analysis is Somerville's Site Plan Approval (SPA) process, which consists of 11 steps.

1. Pre-submittal Meeting, with city staff
2. Neighborhood Meeting, with residents
3. Design Review Meeting, with the Urban Design Commission
4. Neighborhood Meeting, with residents
5. Development Review Application
6. Application Review and Staff Report
7. Public Notice
8. Public Hearing
9. Decision
10. Appeal Period
11. Certification of Decision

Scope

The scope of this thesis is limited by the type of application reviewed – residential and commercial projects in Mid-rise districts – and by the focus on three steps of the SPA process: the two Neighborhood Meetings (steps 2 and 4) and the Planning Board Hearing (step 8). Several factors within the other seven steps in the Site Plan Approval process influence development outcomes as much as the Neighborhood Meetings.

Structure

First, I present the methodology and methods used. Then, I provide an overview of relevant literature to ground the thesis in existing scholarship and shift to the discussion of the historic and planning context in the city of Somerville. Although this includes some review of the previous Zoning Ordinance in Somerville, this thesis is not a thorough comparison of the two ordinances. I then introduce and analyze two case studies of developments in Mid-Rise districts that underwent the Site Plan Approval process and held Neighborhood Meetings and Planning Board Hearings. Finally, I discuss major findings and provide recommendations for the city of Somerville as well as broader suggestions for further research.

2. Research Goals and Methods

Institutionalizing avenues for participation in zoning procedure, as seen in the Neighborhood Meeting, compounds the political complexities of resident participation and land use. I sought to understand the quality of participation found in the NM and the intention of this element of the SPA process both in conversations about local governance and in the processes of zoning and land use. To understand the potential disharmony of the goals of the new Somerville Zoning Ordinance and public participation within the Neighborhood Meeting, I developed the following research questions.

1. How do the elements of the Neighborhood Meeting, as codified in Somerville's 11-step Site Plan Approval process, shape participation?
2. How is participation in the Neighborhood Meeting, as part of the 11-step Site Plan Approval process, shaped by resident, applicant, and city staff participants?
3. How does the tension between the project-level community engagement in the Site Plan Approval Process and efforts to promote development under the Form-Based Code play out in the Mid-rise districts of Somerville, MA?

In attempting to address these central questions, I investigated different facets of the Neighborhood Meeting process. The creation of the Zoning Ordinance using FBC comes as part of the City of Somerville's shift away from a government-centered development decision-making and politics towards local government that recognizes community organization and will to influence decision-making (Ewen-Campen 2025). Was the choice to incorporate more participation in zoning processes a move towards shared governance or to formalize dialogue between developers and residents as a procedural shield against negative resident sentiments toward development? How does the City ensure that community feedback from the Neighborhood Meeting is incorporated into development review? Regarding public participation, I was curious about the design of the Neighborhood Meeting and participant expectations regarding outcomes. Did the sequencing of the SPA, including placing the Neighborhood Meeting pre-submission, accommodate substantive discussion between the public and the applicant? Did the design of the Neighborhood Meeting facilitate engagement in ways different than the standard Public Hearing or in ways already occurring outside of government processes?

These questions guided a Literature Review, a series of interviews with city staff, applicants, and residents, and case studies of the Neighborhood Meeting based on two completed Site Plan Approvals in the Mid-Rise districts.

Literature Review

My review of the literature began with historical perspectives on zoning and how the public has become a larger part of land use decision-making over time. I also assessed how participation was incorporated into Form-Based Code guidelines and best practices to understand potential approaches within this zoning scheme. I reviewed the legacy of public participation across the paradigms of land use planning to better understand the models of participation incorporated into different planning approaches. Although there is limited literature on participation processes in development review, I collected best practices around public participation around land use and other regulatory decision-making processes.

Several participants shared experiences of the Neighborhood Meeting grounded in the sociopolitical culture of Somerville and local government. To understand these influences on land use policy and participation in a broader sense, I conducted additional review of literature concerning governance in Somerville over the past few decades and perspectives on urban growth and politics.

Case Studies

Analysis of the Neighborhood Meeting required both an evaluation of the design of the Neighborhood Meeting and an assessment of the implementation of Neighborhood Meetings in actual Site Plan Approval processes. The evaluation framework used to assess the design and implementation of the Neighborhood Meeting incorporated input from several sources. Firstly, the basic framework for evaluation was based on the language of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance that describes the purpose and parameters of the Neighborhood Meeting. Conversations with city staff about internal measures of success for the Neighborhood Meeting augmented the frameworks and identified components of the Neighborhood Meeting that already face pushback from stakeholders. Finally, a review of the literature surrounding evaluation frameworks for public participation in planning identified certain elements of the process and outcomes of engagement that are commonly assessed. The development of the evaluation framework is discussed in greater detail in the Evaluation Framework section of this thesis.

Site Plan Approval happens across the city with varying objectives that align with a district's purpose within the Zoning Ordinance. Mid-rise Districts hold potential for mixed-use development within the established character of major corridors with a mix of residential and commercial uses. I selected applications in Mid Rise districts to assess both commercial and residential development that aimed to honor the goals of future development established by the city. To find the case studies, I reviewed the

Reports and Decisions database from the OSPCD site. In the period from the SZO's adoption in 2019 and June 2025, fifteen development applications for projects in MR districts required Site Plan Approval and the associated Neighborhood Meetings and Planning Board Hearings. From the fifteen developments, I selected two case studies: 366 Broadway and 599 Somerville Avenue. The selection was based on the availability and quality of Neighborhood Meeting documentation, and the fact that they represent a residential and commercial project respectively.

Table 1: SZO Site Plan Approval Cases in MR Districts							
	Case Number	Street	Number	Year of Decision	Building Type	District	NM Reports Available?
1	CZC20-000104	Somerville Ave	379	2021	General	MR5	N
2	P&Z 20-026	Broadway	872	2021	General	MR3	Y
3	P&Z 21-041	Highland Avenue	371	2021	General	MR5	N
4	P&Z 20-031	Somerville Ave	599	2022	Commercial	MR3	Y
5	P&Z 21-029	Broadway	28-44	2022	General	MR6	Y
6	P&Z 21-057	Medford Street	16 & 20	2022	General	MR4	Y
7	P&Z 21-122	394 McGrath Hwy	394	2022	Residential	MR4	Y
8	P&Z 21-175	Broadway	366	2022	Residential	MR4	Y
9	P&Z 21-180	Medford St	494	2022	General	MR4	Y
10	P&Z 21-017	Bow St	59	2023	General	MR5	Y
11	P&Z 21-119	Alpine Street	2-4	2023	General	MR4	Y
12	P&Z 21-147	Washington Street	7	2023	Residential	MR4	Y
13	P&Z 22-054	White St	32/40/44	2023	Commercial	MR4	Y
14	ZP24-000047	Broadway	720	2023	General	MR4	Y
15	ZP24-000054	Chester St	53	2025	General	MR4	Y
Source: City of Somerville. n.d. Reports and Decisions.							

Comments from Neighborhood Meetings and Public Hearings were organized using a comment code matrix from the book *Neighborhood Defenders*. In the book, authors Einstein, Glick, and Palmer coded all public comments during Special Permit hearings across 97 municipalities in Massachusetts (Einstein et al. 2020) to track participation in Planning Board Hearings. I tracked every comment made about the 12 projects where comments were recorded based on the authors' 20 original categories, adding "Development timing", "Unit mix/Housing", "Neighborhood Meeting Engagement", and "Trash pickup" based on the content of the Neighborhood Meetings. Appendix D contains descriptions for each category in the coding matrix.

Interviews

The major players in the Neighborhood Meeting include Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) staff, Board members, applicants, and Somerville residents. I selected interview participants by consolidating contacts from the projects used as my case studies and matching the publicly available names with available contact information. This process yielded a total of 42 individuals, the majority of which were residents. Based on the interview responses, I spoke with 11 individuals involved in the Neighborhood Meeting process. I grouped these participants into three categories – city planning staff, residents, and applicants. The full list of interviewees and their association with the Neighborhood Meeting is listed in Appendix A. I tailored a set of questions to each group based on expected knowledge and experience around the Neighborhood Meeting. Interviews typically lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and often went beyond the scope of my initial set of questions. The group question sets are available in Appendix A.

I then reviewed the interview transcripts for topic themes within and across groups. The findings section of this thesis reviews these themes and the input across groups to reveal attitudes about the Neighborhood Meeting and its relationship to public participation and the Form-Based Code. Certain responses taken from interviews were used to inform the evaluation framework used to assess the design of the Neighborhood Meeting and the application of the Neighborhood Meeting in the case studies. The Appendix includes the interview protocol, agenda, and a list of individuals interviewed.

3. Literature Review

This literature review covers three topics: land use and zoning, participation in planning, and participation in development review. The history of land use and the emergence of New Urbanism, leading to the rise of the Form-Based Code, contextualizes the goals of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance and the Site Plan Approval process. This thesis also discusses the power dynamics within land use planning, the different roles of planning participation, and the theory of substantial participation throughout. Finally, minimal literature exists concerning participation at the site level (as opposed to city-wide or neighborhood level planning); the final portion of the literature review attempts to address this by exploring how developers, city staff, and residents interact with development review.

Land Use and Zoning

From its emergence in the 1920s, zoning has been the dominant form of land use regulation in the United States. Its primary purpose is to separate different, potentially conflicting, land uses (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial) and to protect property values and promote public health and safety (Burdette 2004). Zoning regulations typically focus on what cannot be built, specifying prohibited uses, minimum lot sizes, and setback requirements. While zoning has provided predictability in development and protected property investments, it has also been criticized for fostering urban sprawl, perpetuating social and economic exclusion, and creating inflexible, often incomprehensible regulations (Burdette 2004; Talen 2013).

In contrast to traditional zoning, architect Andres Duany in 1982 created a development code for Seaside, Florida, an influential development that launched the New Urbanism movement. Although not called by that name in 1982, the development code for Seaside also launched Form-Based Codes. Municipalities attempting to alter land use regulations to better address their needs, increasingly started adopting Form-Based Codes, which focus more on the desired form of the built environment than on prescribed uses of buildings and parcels within districts. To understand the goal of FBC's and New Urbanism as a technique for land use planning, this section will trace the legacy of planning in the U.S. leading up to New Urbanism and the proponents of local governance that shapes the priorities of urban development.

History of Zoning

The evolution of urban planning and societal changes throughout the 20th century heavily influenced zoning practices in the United States. Zoning emerged as a response to the increasing complexity of urban environments and the need for more structured land use regulation. Zoning's roots can be traced back to the mid-1900s, with New York City adopting the first comprehensive zoning code in the United States in 1916 (Burdette 2004, 5). The Standard Enabling Act of 1924 formalized states' authority to enable zoning (Ibid) and the regulation of land use through zoning at the local level was affirmed as a legitimate use of the police power of local government (Faga 2014).

The regulatory power of zoning was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1926 in the landmark case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty*. As it was applied, zoning was often used as a tool for social exclusion (Hack et al. 2009). The Euclid ruling standardized the prioritization of single-family homes and residential use in zoning and further applications exercised the power to separate land use to maintain social and economic exclusion (Burdette 2004). Some communities implemented blatantly racist zoning schemes, reflecting the societal norms and prejudices of the time. Members of the urban land-owning classes frequently relied on zoning upon the implicit understandings of their class regarding land use standards. Zoning's enforcement of separation of uses made it a versatile tool for enshrining race-based privilege and perpetuating disadvantage (Innis 2007). As early as the 1960s, leading planners began to criticize zoning as a failed experiment. Notable works such as Reps's *Requiem for Zoning* (1964), Babcock's *The Zoning Game* (1966), and Siegan's *Land Use without Zoning* (1972) questioned the effectiveness and consequences of traditional zoning practices (Talen 2013). Jane Jacobs referred to Euclidean zoning as a mechanism to foster sprawl, exclude certain populations, prove inflexible over great periods of time, thwart the public's general comprehension of basic ordinances, and impede the creation of livable communities of mixed uses (Burdette 2004).

In response to these criticisms and changing urban needs, new approaches to land use regulation began to emerge. The New Urbanism movement, which grew from earlier Urbanism ideas of the 1920s and 1930s, promoted denser urban development as opposed to suburban sprawl. In addition to paradigm shifts in other facets of planning, changing notions of social exclusivity, the permanence of social class, and the concentration and retention of wealth in a relative few gave way to notions of equality in land use policy (Ibid.) This shift in urban planning philosophy eventually led to the development of form-based codes in the late 20th century.

Growth and Power

Zoning and general land use policy influence the political discourse and distribution of power. Land use planning influences growth patterns, and therefore concentrations of wealth and property value, in a municipality. The sociological framework of “growth machines” – a group of powerful elites in local governance who champion urban growth (Molotch 1976) – is made up of landowners, builders, real estate developers, utility providers and growth-oriented political leaders. Scholars use the framework to characterize the political actors responsible for maintaining a pro-growth consensus on land use decision making. When first describing the growth machine as it pertains to local land use policy, Molotch wrote that the “political and economic essence of any locality...is growth” (Molotch 1976, 310). Molotch and other scholars argue that power holders prioritize urban development as it furthers economic growth, rather than consider implications for the same development on sustainability, social wellness, or increased democratic processes.

Localities must balance economic growth and citizen wellbeing in shaping their land use planning process and goals. However, the growth coalition tends to dominate city politics because those leaders who maintain power also uphold the political consensus that growth is good for all. Once consensus is established, the growth machine can go about its projects without difficulty, producing urban space according to a pro-growth agenda. (Purcell 2007, 1). Once representatives of the growth machine acquire consensus on land use policy, they will work to maintain consensus through limited participation to assuage the citizenry concerning land use decision (Jonas and Wilson 1999, 51).

Land Use Planning and Neoliberalism

The economic and political theory of Neoliberalism, when applied to urban planning, centers on economic rationalism to determine planning strategies for a municipality (Wright and Geer 2013, 10). This contrasts with other planning theories like modern planning theory, which depends on methods of value-free scientific reason, or postmodern planning theory, which depends on a participative process (Wright 2013, 10). In neoliberal planning theory, the planner acts as manager, depending on economic rationality to make decisions (Wright and Geer 2013, 19). This again contrasts with popular planning theories like communicative or participatory models, which depend on the rationality of the planning process itself and puts forth recommendations (rather than decisions) based on community input (Wright and Geer 2013, 19).

While the deregulated market-dominated governance structure of neoliberalism has gone away in favor of municipal systems that promote policy to improve the socioeconomic conditions of its citizens, components of the strategic management process in land use matters persist. New Urbanism is an example of a popular planning theory that incorporates several factors of different public policy regimes, including neoliberalism.

New Urbanism and Form-Based Code (FBC)

Form-based code is a more recent approach that aims to address many of the shortcomings of traditional zoning through a New Urbanist lens. Form-Based Code works to enhance the “public good” (Walter and Read 2014) derived from private sector development by focusing on the physical form and character of buildings and public spaces rather than solely on land use. Form-based codes are typically prescriptive, telling developers what they should build rather than what they cannot build. This approach aims to design more cohesive, walkable, and mixed-use communities that reflect the principles of New Urbanism (Innis 2007).

One key difference between traditional zoning and the FBC is their relationship to community input. While zoning decisions are often made by planning professionals and city officials, form-based codes rely heavily on community involvement to articulate the desired design and character of an area, promoting postmodern values of collaborative planning. This collaborative process aims to create developments that better reflect local values and needs. Additionally, form-based codes are praised for their potential to reduce uncertainty in the development process, create more diverse and inclusive communities, and address issues of physical decay and economic decline in urban areas (Innis 2007).

Emergence of the FBC

Even though the development code of Seaside, Florida in 1982 exemplified the tenets of Form Based Codes, the term was first used in 2001 by Carol Wyant, former director of the Form-Based Code Institute, during a presentation to the Chicago Zoning Reform Board (Faga 2014). This new approach to zoning focused on the physical form of buildings and emphasized community involvement in the planning process, marking a significant departure from traditional Euclidean zoning practices. Early adopters of Form-Based Code situated this new approach to zoning as a remedy to the limitations of Euclidean Zoning, contrasting the traditional approach to certain dimensions of land-use planning with the methodology of Form-Based Code.

Acknowledging the importance of existing conditions and community visioning aims to ensure a process that results in various outcomes. Identifying the parameters of the process of developing a Form-Based Code has resulted in a variety of metrics. The Charter of the New Urbanism mandates that planning approaches should center slowness, inclusiveness, and eligibility (Tagtachian et al. 2019), and scholars have acknowledged the significant variations in the practice concurrent with an emerging consensus on a common approach (Polyzoides 2008). Nonetheless, suggestions for standardized processes to develop successful Form-Based Codes have emerged (Ibid.)

Elements of a Form-Based Code

No two Form-Based Codes are alike as municipalities apply the tenets of FBCs on a variety of scales and with different levels of integration into their existing zoning ordinance. Most include three primary components: (1) a definitions section (2) regulating plans, and (3) building envelope standards, with a common fourth element of architectural or streetscape standards (Kohr 2004). In contrast, traditional zoning regulates intensity, density, and use through three plan elements: 1) information on how private property may be used; 2) a series of standards for planning and design of development; and 3) procedures for review and approval of project (Ibid.).

The elements of a Form-Based Code prioritize legibility, succinctness, and prescriptive terms for development. A clearly written definitions section that describes FBC terms also supports New Urbanist values of legibility and process, and includes both definitions related to the FBC, and key actors involved in the Code's implementation. As opposed to delineating general districts for certain land uses, the regulating plan in a FBC includes the details of street dimensions and required building lines (RBLs) (Ibid.). The regulating plan includes much of its details in graphic format, limiting jargon-based descriptions of the built environment in favor of more legible visual depictions of regulation. In contrast to zoning maps that delineate districts based on use and development density, FBC regulating plans designate districts in reference to building types and surrounding contexts (Ibid). Finally, building envelope standards describe the general physical characteristic required for buildings that fall within that district. Form-based codes incorporate fewer land-use regulations and offer an opportunity for a wide variety of significant land use developments to be allowed by-right, streamlining the development review process (Tagtachian et al. 2019). The high level of detail in form-based codes heavily restrict what property owners may do with their land; therefore, successful Form-based Codes require extensive community involvement to bring those affected by the code into the processes of designing it (Innis 2007).

FBC aims to create regulations that reflect community interests and foster a sense of ownership by incorporating all members of the public, not just experts or city staff and officials, into the code creation process. Many FBCs facilitate community involvement through charrettes -- brainstorming meetings at which community members and other interested parties are invited to voice their desires and annotate designs for a particular plan or project. These charrettes, typically led by consulting design professionals or local planning officials, have community members discuss community priorities, address design constraints and issues specific to the area, and generate a designed vision for the future of the neighborhood. The resulting FBC ideally codifies the design vision agreed to during the charrette (Kohr 2004).

Participation in Planning

Introduction

Civic participation has been consistently prioritized in land use planning since the publication of Arnstein's seminal "Ladder of Participation" in 1969 (Arnstein 1969). The 1950s and 1960s marked a turning point, as previous paradigms began to lose validity in the face of changing urban societies. This period witnessed a move towards post-positivist and postmodern approaches, emphasizing pluralism, democratic concepts, and the active role of civil society in planning processes (Ramezani and Homayoon 2023). While the majority of planners agree that the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process of government is a good idea, little agreement exists about the best way to achieve meaningful involvement and how to determine how much participation is enough (Callahan 2007).

Participatory planning emerged as a method to foster trust between the stakeholders, thus avoiding conflicts at an early stage in the planning process. (Furstenau et al. 2021). Planning can become more democratic and just through enhancements of the quality and quantity of communication between planning actors such as planners, politicians, citizens and private sector representatives (Mattila 2019). Participatory land use planning (PLUP) engages with citizen participation and inclusion to harness the local knowledge needed to make nuanced land-use plans and strategies for future growth (Kopacek 2021). Another integral framework for consistently incorporating public input regarding the evolution of the built environment comes from Lefebvre's 1968 *Right to the City*, which ties the individual liberty to access urban resources to the right of organizing and governing collectively. This approach to urban resource distribution depends upon the exercise of collective power to iteratively define the process of urbanization in municipalities (Harvey 2008).

In addition to the appeal of planning approaches which center the resident in decision making because of the inherent value of collective visioning and social idealizing, establishing a process of local participation not only benefits the people whose lives are being affected by the planning, but it also inserts a degree of rationality into the entire process that would otherwise be lacking (Lee 2014). Changes in public participation strategies have shifted as public administrators and developers have come to understand the value of public support in keeping projects moving forward and potentially capturing future eruptions of protest, suggesting economic growth as a bottom line (Ibid.)

Today, provision for participation can be found in almost any planning framework, typically with legislative requirements for notification and exhibition of planning proposals, and opportunities for the public to provide their views on proposals through written submissions and/or participating in public hearings. Yet participation remains a discrete part of the process. Local and central government planning departments are invariably required to consider the results of public consultation processes when determining planning matters and may even be required to explain how public feedback was used in the determination process. However, no legislative requirement that participatory processes influence decision-making exists and can become another step in a long process rather than a tool to drive planning outcomes (Thorpe 2017, 578).

Participation in planning has no singular meaning and measures of participation vary widely. This thesis uses the phrase “participatory planning”, “collaborative planning”, and participation in planning to suggest a regime of participation that emphasizes postmodern values of citizen involvement in governance. While these terms are also used to suggest a more radical shift in planning theory (Thorpe 2017, 568), this thesis focuses on distinctions between substantive and gestural participation in land use processes.

Participation and Governance

Land use planning exists in a paradoxical relationship with neoliberal governance, which prioritizes private property rights and deregulation. This tension limits the effectiveness of community-driven planning initiatives within the dominant neoliberal framework focused on growth and profit. Even when decision-making processes are participatory, the outcomes are constrained by market logic, often facilitating private benefits rather than serving broader community interests. In this context, planners find themselves mediating between private developers and community groups, inevitably operating within the confines of neoliberal principles. Consequently, community participation in public decision-making

under neoliberalism is not a simple reversal of exclusionary processes but a complex negotiation within existing power structures. Meaningful participation must address these structures as they exist more broadly in municipal politics (Thorpe 2017, 576).

Growth elites can consolidate the hegemony of neoliberal assumptions and use the power of capital to shape the future of the city by engaging in participatory processes (Purcell 2009, 147). Civic participation can help prevent post-approval conflicts by addressing residents' intentions and desires during the planning phase. However, land-use planning also presents opportunities for developers' or landowners' self-enrichment, which can influence participation dynamics. Furthermore, the relationship between planning and private ownership is complex, and unregulated private interests may influence land use policy that maintains the status quo and benefits those who already have property-based assets. Participatory planning efforts have often been limited by over-representation of property owners and higher-income individuals, as well as general under-representation of marginalized groups.

Expanding institutional participation in land use processes incorporates conversations between residents and developers that typically occur outside of government processes. Alternatively, participation with city oversight could create a platform for gestures of participation without maintaining substantive discourse (Westin 2019, 133). Participatory processes are often undermined by the dominance of profit interests, which can lead to undemocratic outcomes despite community engagement. Zoning policies, for instance, are influenced by the interests of landowners and homeowners, who use these regulations to protect property values rather than promote equitable development (Molotch 1976). This dynamic reinforces existing power structures, limiting the potential for participatory planning to achieve truly inclusive and equitable results. Institutional participation with government oversight involves a push-and-pull between resident input and its eventual acceptance by developers. Monitoring which side of the discussion "wins" more frequently in a municipality reveals how civic institutions work to challenge power structures within land use planning (Lee 2014).

Institutionalized Participation

The idea that processes for participation can be designed and redesigned assumes that participation, and planning more broadly, can be controlled by professionals (Thorpe 2017, 568). Planners can shape the participation that occurs within institutions of local government. They can exercise power over the stakeholders they choose to engage with, over what participatory techniques they use, with what materials, and over how the information from participation should be used to inform planning policy

(Thorpe 2017, 568). Despite the collaborative rhetoric within institutional participation events, planning remains a closed process to those who are willing and able to attend (Ibid).

Participatory planning can be understood as a technique to manage opposition to land use policy (Thorpe 2017, 267). Whether deliberative or more conventional, participation can inform the work done by professional planners in producing and implementing plans and policies (Thorpe 2017, 567). Accordingly, “inclusive planning”, with its emphasis on citizen participation and civil society partnership, has often become the accomplice of neoliberal governance” (Miraftab 2009, 43). Decision-making practices that are widely accepted as ‘democratic’—including the conventional process for Development Review through public hearings—do not shift existing relations of power so that resident interests are balanced with developer or growth-oriented leaders (Purcell 2009, 141).

Participation in land use planning does not exist solely within the confines of invitational participation. Influence around land use planning can be differentiated between power around the table and power outside the dialogue (Innes 2004, 12); the design of a participatory planning process can include residents during actual decision-making processes or let resident input influence decisions on the periphery. There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the process (Arnstein 1969, 216). Furthermore, gestural participation allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit (Ibid).

Substantive Participation

Planning, and the processes through which visions for the future of cities are shaped and reshaped, generates a process of negotiation between a diverse range of participants. Any process of planning should aim to capture substantive, or meaningful input from residents to bring power relations into being and change them if necessary (Westin 2019, 146). At its best, participatory planning can transform power relations that exist in land use planning and democratizing land use decisions (Westin 2019, 146).

Planning for substantive participation requires acknowledgement of where power lies in engagement processes. The common dynamic between actors in land use participation (planners, city staff, residents, and developers) can be shaped by ensuring that residents have influence in decision making, agenda setting, and identifying needs (Forester 1982). Agenda setting provides influence over which citizens find out what and when, about which projects, and the terms of dialogue concerning projects. Depending on

larger motives, dominant institutions and actors shape the conception of citizens and neighborhoods and what they may need from development in the city (Forester 1982).

Substantive participation processes address these imbalances of power by managing people's comprehension of issues, the giving of public consent through adherence to procedure, and the misrepresentation of the feasible alternatives, actions, costs, benefits, or risks. Support or opposition to projects and participation in the planning or broader political process depends in part upon what interested citizens believe about project alternatives. (Forester 1982, 72).

Best practices for community participation encompass several key strategies to ensure meaningful engagement and effective outcomes. These practices focus on inclusive, empowering, and sustainable approaches to community involvement and create multiple entry points for engagement, recognizing the various levels of power they afford (Bergstrom et al. 2012). This approach allows for diverse participation and helps balance representation across various community segments. Planners should avoid sole reliance on voluntary participation and instead actively seek information as the contracting party to ensure a more comprehensive and representative input. Using multiple engagement instruments simultaneously can help reach different groups within the community and provide various ways for people to contribute their ideas and concerns.

Supporting capacity building enables meaningful engagement by educating inhabitants regularly about planning processes and issues (Ibid). This helps to foster informed participation and ensures that community knowledge and concerns are prioritized in the planning process. Building clear opportunities for decision-making and partnerships with community organizations can create a more collaborative planning process and reduce potential conflicts in the long term. Authentic participation should be achieved through dialogue and deliberation, avoiding processes where administrators dominate and control citizen participation (Callahan 2007).

Engaging key parties early, often, and through an ongoing process generates a sense of ownership over a plan's content and reduces potential long-term conflicts (Brody et al. 2003). Planners should aim for a representative sample of the population, with well-balanced groups representing various population segments, such as young and old, and employees and entrepreneurs. Traditional public hearings should be supplemented with outreach to community organizations, historically disenfranchised communities, and groups unlikely to attend public hearings. Additionally, requiring planners and commissioners to issue reports detailing the results of public participation and their responses to comments serves an important

documentation role (Ibid.). By considering these factors, planners can design more inclusive, effective, and meaningful public engagement processes in land use planning.

Actors in Land Use Participation

Planners and City Staff

Planners have many roles in land use policy and the process of engagement influences the ability of planners to influence the quality of participation. Focusing on a democratic process, technical accuracy, or power balancing are all examples of how planners can shape resident engagement (Forester 1982, 68). Current approaches to public administration focus on “community paradigms” where public managers are seen as community builders and enablers of democracy (Callahan 2007). Most planners incorporate direct citizen participation as an essential facet of their work, and public administrators, through their actions, are central to the success or failure of participatory efforts. Community building has become a large part of their responsibility, and they are expected to facilitate community building and enable democracy through open communication and direct participation with citizens (Ibid.). In facilitating public engagement in land use plans, public staff can be a source for both technical expertise and as a mediating body to channel local input and knowledge. Planning staff can play such roles in several ways. Planners shape not only documents but participation as well: who is contacted, who is able to participate in informal design review meetings, who seeks to persuade whom for project development (Forester 1982, 68). If not done properly, participatory land use planning can result in the delegation of decision-making authority to property-owners and residents who already maintain leverage in other more traditional forms of land use planning. While planners who engage in participatory processes cannot wield influence over larger systemic dynamics, they can influence the conditions of neighborhood-based engagement which make residents able to participate and organize effectively (Forester 1982, 67).

Residents

While some scholars have argued that resident participation in land use planning should remain indirect, citing the burden of the time, knowledge, and personal motivation required to do so (Callahan 2007; Lemar 2021), this literature review expands upon the accepted benefits of direct participation. Direct engagement from residents in land use decisions reinforces the dynamics of residents as “owners” of government and should exercise a larger extent of control over the decisions being made (Callahan 2007). Direct participation can also expose the unevenness of power among groups in a neighborhood and incentivize differing degrees of participation for each of these groups, depending on the outcomes

they are likely to secure (Lee 2014). Some public administrators fear the outcome of direct public participation as the broad interests of citizens will always be overruled by the narrow and deep interests of organizations, like NIMBY or affordable housing groups (Callahan 2007). Broad opportunities for resident engagement, if not facilitated effectively, can be used by property owners to promote property values or group identity rather than to minimize the negative externalities of growth on neighborhoods (Lemar 2021).

On the one hand, proponents hail resident participations as a transformative force that strengthens the influence of individuals over their neighborhoods (Fagotto and Fung 2006; Albrechts 2012). On the other hand, citizen participation can devolve into an item ticked on a list that effectively cements the decision-making power of government agencies and market parties under the guise of citizen participation (Stapper and Duyvendak 2020, 1) Although all residents are invited to participate in institutional engagements, some residents are more welcome than others. The city's resources often shift towards solving problems defined by residents who are already well connected—thereby compromising the aims of policies designed to serve the public. These residents tend to be white, affluent landowners. However, studies have suggested that alternative participation opportunities, like workshops rather than public meetings, improve residents' influence over the development project (Stapper and Duyvendak 2020, 2).

Developers

Real estate developers often find common cause with local government actors seeking to grow the city and expand the value of local real estate in traditional land use regulatory systems (Lemar 2021). Proponents of development make use of the claim that the “growth machine” controls local politics. As discussed in the Growth and Power section, the growth machine concept was put forth by Harvey Molotch in 1976. It posits that urban development is driven by local elites seeking to increase land values and that capital accumulation drives urban development. Growth machine adherents argue that local government and local review processes are captured by real estate developers. Because local government privileges developers' desires and fails to meet residents' interests, the positive impacts of development accrue to the developer and municipality. Governmental redevelopment decisions suffer from a “legitimacy challenge.” Meanwhile, the negative impacts of development accrue to the residents of the community undergoing or adjacent to redevelopment (Ibid).

Participation in Development Review

Public engagement offers numerous benefits that can significantly enhance the relationship between communities and their governing bodies, while also improving the overall quality of decision-making processes. Engagement contributes to increased legitimacy and support for plans and projects, as citizens feel more involved and invested in the outcomes (Bergstrom et al. 2012). This involvement leads to improved community-government relations, fostering a sense of trust and collaboration. Through active participation, both officials and residents gain a deeper understanding of complex issues, allowing for more informed and nuanced solutions. This participatory approach often results in reduced long-term costs, as potential conflicts or misunderstandings are addressed early in the process (Ibid). It also serves as a tangible example of democracy in action, reinforcing the idea of government as a collective working towards common goals (Callahan 2007). The shared governance that emerges from this approach to land use policy encourages the social production of public decisions. The shared power between elected officials and residents can produce municipal decisions that reflect the needs of both parties (Ostrander 2013, 3).

Furthermore, involving existing residents in development processes enhances accountability and ensures that new projects align with the needs and desires of the community (Lemar 2021). The educational aspect of public engagement cannot be overstated, as it not only taps into the knowledge of current residents but also educates participants about various aspects of governance and urban planning (Ibid). This increased understanding and involvement lead to more legitimate and well-supported redevelopment decisions, creating a positive cycle of civic engagement and community improvement (ibid). Substantive participation requires attention to the full range of activities intended to shape the city, from small-scale contributions by citizens and community groups to much larger interventions by corporate developers (Thorpe 2017, 568).

Some cities have taken steps to revise how resident feedback is incorporated into site level review. Resulting participation opportunities vary from place to place, again suggesting that the existing engagement framework within a city determines what types of participation the community is best suited for. The Boston Planning Department has conducted a Modernization Project of Article 80, which oversees the review process for large development projects. This project included an analysis of peer cities' approach to engagement in development review. While the population and scale of these peer cities are

greater than Somerville's, these methods represent the most forward-thinking approaches to meaningful land use participation.

In Denver's Large Development Review (LDR) process, community information meetings occur before a formal submission of an application. Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) and Good Neighbor Agreements (GNA) supplement community information meetings to foster partnerships between community groups and abutters, recognizing that these groups of residents often prioritize different elements of a project application. In the form of documents that catalog where resident input influence elements of a development plan, these agreements create commitments that are easier to oversee among planning and building inspection staff (Suder and Jackson. 2023). Similar success in timing can be found in the City of Portland, Oregon. The main form of resident engagement in development review in Portland is the Development Review Advisory Committee (DRAC), a citizen-led advisory group that provides recommendations about the process of development review. This group does not provide direct input on a project level; instead, they oversee municipal processes of review to ensure process optimization for applicants and transparent review processes aligned with the city's land use goals. Public realm improvements are funded through System Development Charges, fees imposed to mitigate the neighborhood impacts of development (Ibid).

Extended development timelines burden applicants and constrain their capacity to fruitfully engage in site development review procedure. Incorporating different engagement models can streamline or extend review. Denver's Large Development Review (LDR) approach takes between 79 and 102 days for intermediate commercial and residential projects, respectively (Suder and Jackson 2023). Portland's DRAC system requires an average of 239 days from the first meeting to final review for residential projects and 369 days for commercial projects (City of Portland 2025). DRACs position residents on the level of other municipal advisory groups, addressing traditional power dynamics in land use planning. While Portland's process results in longer review periods, this could be attributed to the required meetings between applicants and city commissions.

Participation in the Form-Based Code

The success of form-based coding depends more on the levels of political and economic support that accompany it than the scale of development it controls. A form-based code must embody a broad, community-based vision of the desired form of future development (Burdette 2004; Kohr 2004). Established FBCs often attempt to capture a built character that was established by construction that

came about under a development regime influenced by economic growth, limited civic participation, and political agendas that limited involvement of certain residents across municipal systems. Critics suggest that New Urbanisms and FBCs attempt to recreate urban environments from the past while ignoring the associated prejudiced approach to governance. FBC proponents suggest that extensive participation in the visioning process of the modern FBC addresses this issue, bringing the good of previous urban landscapes with inclusive modern community involvement (Walters and Read 2014; Innis 2007).

Major actors in land use in a locality can directly benefit based on changing expectations of how they interact with a Form-Based Code. Form-Based Codes facilitate greater flexibility among the implementing communities and the land developer. In the visioning process, stakeholders detail the aesthetic traits and elements of the public realm that most suit their community. Similarly, developers avoid having to calculate Floor-Area Ratios and benefit from shorter approval processes. Thus, developers garner a greater understanding of expectations regarding the projects they build (Kohr 2004). Local planners foresee the Form-Based Codes as streamlining the approval process for new development (Ibid).

FBCs attempt to move the power historically held in institutions based on the neoliberal system of top-down policymaking and shift the power to build the social capital of the individual through a bottom-up approach of land-use planning (Ibid). Opening opportunities for participation by all in land-use planning makes engagement easiest for those who historically and systemically already had influence. A shift to Form-based Code's charrette process comprised of "rational" face-to-face meetings has the risk of replicating existing power dynamics, since the dominant are often better equipped to manage and control such processes. Because form-based code focuses on localized developments and the character of those developments, it potentially allows empowered elites (developers and property owners alike) not only to retain control of the planning process but to custom-tailor their own neighborhoods without concern for the needs of the broader municipality (Walters and Read 2014; Inniss 2007).

The duality between the prescriptive regulation and the push for community involved in a FBC has limited developer support. Supporters of FBC have offered this novel approach to zoning as allowing flexibility in project size, allowable land uses and product mix in exchange for the imposition of specific controls on behalf of the public realm (Walters and Read 2014). Further, should market conditions change, the developer has the by-right ability to alter the product mix to satisfy the existing tenant demand so long as the form and arrangement of buildings continues to meet the requirements of the code. A costly and time-consuming rezoning is not necessary to modify the project in this manner. The predictability of

the regulatory process reduces the time required to complete the project and the developer's risk exposure, thereby potentially putting downward pressure on rental rates and housing prices (Ibid). However, the stringent and highly detailed form-based code has made developers view it as a type of down-zoning, made property owners fearful of tax increases, and made residents fearful of density increases (Talen 2013). Additionally, developers are wary that the design standards that result from consensus building activities and stakeholder participation will be economically viable from the perspective of the private sector (Walters and Read 2014).

4. Case Context

The Neighborhood Meeting is a component of a broader Site Plan Approval in Somerville in which zoning, governance, and community participation intersect. Somerville presents a compelling site for analyzing the relationship between participation and zoning reform and this section provides background on the city's demographic and development trends, the motivations and goals behind the recent zoning changes, and the participatory mechanisms introduced to support more inclusive and transparent planning outcomes.

Legacy of participation in Somerville

Existing narratives of the social fabric in Somerville often describe the friction between the Old and New Somerville. The Old Somerville, comprised of older, working-class residents who were “born and raised” in the city and descend from Irish and Italian heritage, have long maintained control of local politics (Ostrander 2013, 3). The new Somerville includes a growing professional middle class, largely white and often young, and newer immigrants, mainly from Central and South America and Haiti (Ibid). In contrast to the label, many of the households considered a part of the new Somerville have been there since the 1980s.

Consistent resident engagement in Somerville's governance since the 1960s has transformed the once-known “Slumerville” into a city now celebrated for its racial-ethnic and class diversity. Community-oriented policy has supported existing pockets of artists and local entrepreneurs and brought in major economic anchors in the medical and scientific sectors to the city. (Ibid, 6). While this socioeconomic shift was happening, the city also reckoned with a pattern of backdoor deals in City Hall coming to the national spotlight. Somerville's shift from its previous practices of governance explains the high level of engagement encouraged by current systems. Redevelopment projects have been at the center of the civic and political engagement in Somerville since the 2010s (Ibid, 9). At the core of this issue remains the challenge of revitalizing economic centers without displacing the established working class and immigrant communities, gentrification being central to many discussions concerning housing and development in planning.

The national financial crisis of 2008 prompted City Hall to prioritize increased commercial and real estate development to alleviate reliance on residential property taxes and state funding. Strategies to grow commercial tax bases, which would in turn increase the value of residential properties and the cost

of living in the city, threatened the ability of existing working-class and immigrant households to stay in Somerville. Potential projects reviewed during this period (2008-2012) were met with a substantial level of engagement from individual residents and organized community groups (Ibid, 39). The Office of the Mayor and the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development relied on existing neighborhood groups to roll out the incorporation of public feedback into zoning decisions. Examples include the Mystic River Task Force and the Community Corridor Planning Coalition.

SomerVision 2030 and 2040

Overview

Somerville's current land use policy involves the layering of several distinct plans that allows for more institutionalized engagement and resident-led decision-making. The period from 2008-2012 hosted several major development achievements for the City – one being the culmination of the decades-long negotiation between the city and the state of Massachusetts for the MBTA Green Line extension (GLX) into Somerville. The city leveraged the community response to this project – most notably the Community Corridor Planning (CCP) coalition, a grassroots organization committed to incorporating public visioning into the GLX project – and established the SomerVision process that would proceed in parallel to existing community organizing (Ostrander 2013, 54). The SomerVision process would eventually lead to the first city-wide comprehensive plan, SomerVision 2030. The visioning process, with its hundreds of community meetings, revealed the need to update Somerville's then-current zoning to align it with SomerVision goals.

Ten years after adoption of SomerVision2030, the Steering Committee was reconstituted as the SomerVision Committee to plan SomerVision2040. The Committee sought participation from elected officials, business owners, and Board and Commission members to determine how to reaffirm the goals laid out in the original plan. The emphasis on equity, political capital, and advocacy stemmed from the progress made in the wake of a global pandemic and a national reckoning of systemic racism and white supremacy. To reflect this, engagement with residents varied in type, frequency, and approach to reach as broad an audience as possible.

Engagement Approach

In response to the GLX project, the Community Corridor Planning Coalition (CCP) led its own series of community-visioning processes to establish a vision statement based on months of public workshops. Around the same time in 2009, Mayor Joe Curtatone assembled a 60-member Steering Committee to

facilitate SomerVision, a three-year process to establish a community-led comprehensive plan. Many of the Steering Committee members were founding members of the CCP Coalition. A variety of engagement methods, from workshops to information sessions, were held by the city distinct from the CCP process to produce a city vision statement. Vision statements called to “ensure residents are included on an ongoing basis in the planning, design, and zoning changes to the stations and areas around them...We need an easy and clear process for residents to address problems as they come up, with ways to go immediately resolving unseen impacts” (CCP coalition document as cited in Ostrander 2013, 57). In April of 2012, SomerVision was formally endorsed and adopted by the Board of Aldermen.

Table 2. SomerVision Participation Processes		
SomerVision 2030		
Event Name	Participation Type	Goal
Trend Report Workshops (2009)	Eight public workshops	Gather community input on the data, community’s direction, and shared goals in the city
Community Values Workshop Series (2009)	Four small group discussion breakouts	Develop Somerville’s shared values and create dialogue between “old” Somerville and “new” Somerville residents
Resident Meetings (2009-2011)	City Hall Community Meetings	Provide community members with updates on the draft Comprehensive Plan
SomerVision Goals Showcase Series (2011)	In-person presentations Online and print surveys	Solicit feedback on the Comprehensive Plan from residents
SomerVision 2040		
Event Name	Participation Type	Goal
SomerSuppers	Hundreds of participants hosted their own conversations in their homes	Collect feedback from informal settings where the residents themselves lead the discussion without City staff present
SomerStories and Qualitative Survey	Open-ended submissions through a survey or text or video submission	Learn about the challenges and opportunities residents found living in Somerville, as well as their vision for the City’s future.
SomerVision Forums	Nine forums, hosted in a variety of languages	Collect feedback from in-depth conversations from targeted groups and topics
SomerVision Public Meetings	Staff presentations with small group activities or stations for feedback	Gather community input on the data, community’s direction, and shared goals
SomerVision Card Game	Participants read through possible SomerVision Numbers and picked the eight that were the most important	Reveal collective visions for the City.
Source: City of Somerville. SomerVision, 2012 and 2020.		

The Trend Report Workshops resulted in the “Shared Values” of Somerville. These shared values were used as a reference point for what residents valued about Somerville today and how the city should move into the future. The result was the inclusion of implementation priorities that extended from the shared values within the visioning section of the comprehensive plan in addition to goals that are incorporated into the chapter sections mandated by Mass State regulations for Comprehensive Plans. The priority goals related to Zoning are tied to commercial development and housing. These goals are referenced in every Decision Report the Planning Board releases in response to a development review that requires a Site Plan Approval process and associated Neighborhood Meeting. In the context of Mid-Rise (MR) development review applications, a variety of goals are referenced, reflecting the wide range of acceptable development in this district. Specific examples of the goals from SomerVision referenced in Site Plan Approval decisions are identified in the case studies of this thesis.

The engagement process of the Comprehensive Plan produced the SomerVision Map that categorized the land area of the city into three groups -- Conserve, Enhance, and Transform -- with a vision of future growth for each (Figure 1). While SomerVision2030 laid out the plans for zoning changes, the engagement conducted for SomerVision2040 (see Table 2) reveals the dynamic conditions of engagement at play in the city today. Mid-rise districts exist mainly in the “Enhance” areas of the city, suggesting that future development that fosters interactive public realms are encouraged.

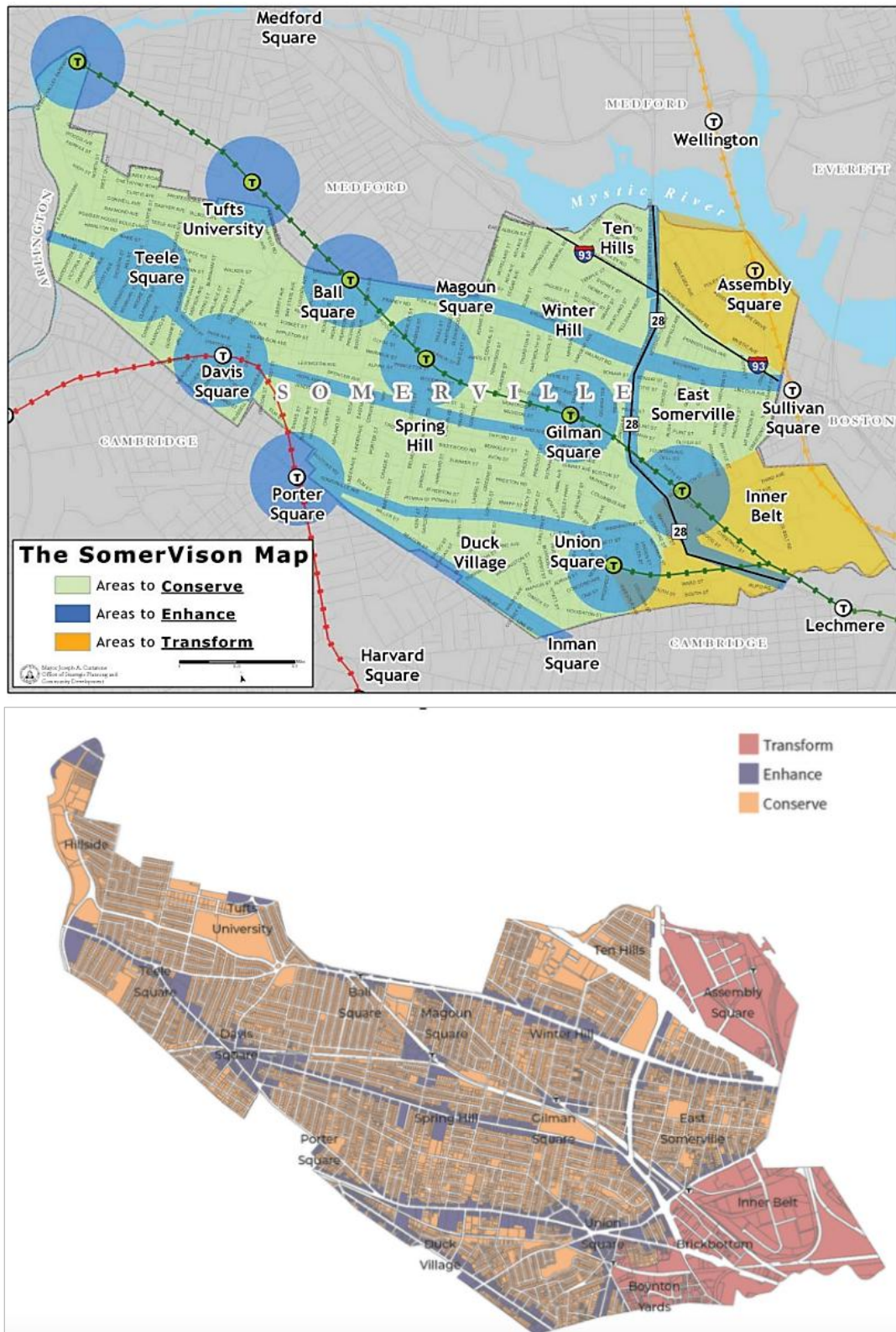


Figure 1. The SomerVision Map identifying areas to Conserve, Enhance, and Transform. (*SomerVision 2030*, 17 and *SomerVision 2040*, 11.)

RA/RB Report

The three-year engagement processes that culminated in SomerVision 2030 adopted in 2012 uncovered the inadequacy of the city's existing zoning ordinance. The need was documented when the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) conducted a study in 2013, the RA/RB Report, that revealed that only 22 of the residential buildings in Somerville were compliant with existing zoning (City of Somerville 2013). The City used this study as a catalyst to completely revise its zoning, resulting in the current Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) adopted in 2021. The new zoning ordinance would be designed to bring existing buildings into compliance and would consider the engagement approaches being incorporated in adjacent planning efforts in the city (Lewis 2025).

SZO Overhaul

The Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) was designed to use land use regulation in the city to help achieve the 180 objectives of SomerVision 2030. Approaching the zoning overhaul with a Form-Based Code was intended to “harness the powerful forces of change...in a way that ensures our shared values are considered first” (City of Somerville, 2019). Form-based codes (FBCs) execute community visions for urban form by using a by-right development code instead of complicated discretionary design review processes. As mentioned in the Literature Review, the elements of a Form-Based code are designed by planners with the public, prioritizing legibility, succinctness, and prescriptive terms for development. While there are some components of the Ordinance that use performance-based and use-based parameters, the Somerville Zoning Ordinance's structure mirrors a typical Form-Based Code. The SZO includes sections like most existing Form-based Codes:

- (1) A definitions section labeled “Glossary,”
- (2) Several “District” sections that combine regulating plans and building envelope standards that outline the details of street dimensions, property lines, and required building lines (RBLs),
- (3) “Development Standards” and “Development Benefits” sections that include performance-based measures of development,
- (4) A “Public Realm” section that describes the form of public spaces like parks, plazas, and commons, and
- (5) An “Administration” section that describes development review and legislative procedures

The SZO outlines land use regulation with popular FBC methods like reducing allowable land uses from 250 uses to 62 broad categories and relying on visualizations to depict form standards. The “DISTRICTS”

sections of the SZO describes the form expected in the different districts that fall into the areas defined in SomerVision – areas to protect (the mostly residential areas that comprise most of the land use in the city), enhance (the squares and commercial corridors), and transform (opportunity areas in the eastern and southern areas of the city) (City of Somerville, 2019).

The interconnectedness of plans in Somerville comes from massive engagement efforts conducted over several years of planning. The engagement for SomerVision and the SZO included “seven years of research and analysis, hundreds of community meetings, multiple public hearings and extensive review” (City of Somerville, 2019). Several series of charettes with community members guided the ideal form described in the Districts in the SZO and influenced where the districts would be applied across the City. Following best-practices of Form-Based Codes, the last version of the SZO captures the form most suited for the city as defined by the community. It describes the zoning requirements in ways that facilitate a greater understanding of expectations from developers and streamlines the approval process for new development.

Form-Based Codes encourage extensive pre-adoption community engagement to create community buy-in for the future development that will happen through prescriptive, but by-right, land use regulation. However, how does a Form-Based Code account for community engagement that occurs within the development review process? While site-level community engagement has long been practiced in the development review process, establishing a form-based code that sets well-defined form standards with broad by-right approvals might limit the amount of community input at the time of review. George Proakis, the Planning Director at OSPCD during the development of the SZO, describes this strain between FBC and community engagement by saying,

Implementing a form-based code (FBC) is not just a matter of desired form, but also a community’s expectations about the role of public input into development...the decision requires an understanding of how unintended consequences and necessary deviations from the code will be addressed (Proakis 2021).

MR Districts

Chapter 4 of the SZO describes Mid-Rise (MR) Districts, comprised of buildings with commercial uses on the ground floor, and residential or office uses above, that address the needs of residents and employees in the neighborhood. Mid-Rise Districts exist to “create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for smaller scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhood serving uses.” The allowable building height is regulated by further dividing Mid-Rise districts into MR3, MR4, MR5, and MR6

districts, with the number indicating the maximum allowable building stories in that district. In contrast to the Residence Districts that identify principal building types that are permitted by right in the districts, all principal building types allowed in MR Districts are permitted by Site Plan Approval. This establishes drastically different development review processes across defined districts in the SZO. Although Residence Districts make up most of the land use in the city and covers most parcels controlled by the FBC, the MR Districts (which contain the “Enhance” areas from SomerVision 2030) contain the parcels of land with the most potential to contribute to the overarching goals of SomerVision. The range of possible outcomes on a parcel in the Mid-Rise districts necessitate the process of Site Plan Approval for the city to review development applications. Consistent with the emphasis on participatory land use planning across Somerville Plans, the Site Plan Approval process prompts community involvement. All the cases reviewed in this thesis happen in the Mid-rise Districts.

Site Plan Approval (SPA)

Chapter 15.3.2 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance introduces the Site Plan Approval Process (SPA). Developers of a site in a district that requires the Site Plan Approval must meet with Planning Staff, the Urban Design Commission, and community members (referred to as “Neighborhood Meetings”) before applying for review. The Planning Staff meeting includes a review of potential special permits or additional applications, and the Urban Design Commission is comprised of local architects and planners that review initial site plans for compliance with the form requirements in the relevant district. The full process is:

1. Pre-submittal Meeting, with city staff
2. Neighborhood Meeting, with residents
3. Design Review Meeting, with the Urban Design Commission
4. Neighborhood Meeting, with residents
5. Development Review Application
6. Application Review and Staff Report
7. Public Notice
8. Public Hearing
9. Decision
10. Appeal Period
11. Certification of Decision

This differs significantly from the Site Plan reviews in previous iterations of Somerville’s Zoning Ordinance, which only engaged the public for comment during hearings for developments seeking special permits. Anticipating the demand for avenues within the development review process for public participation, OSPCD designed a Site Plan Approval process that incorporated the feedback loops that are

integrated into other engagement efforts offered by the Office, like Somerville by Designs' Encourage—Intend—Dialogue—Outreach approach (City of Somerville 2017). By scaffolding the Site Plan Approval process to mirror the phases of development, OSPCD intended that public participation and engagement with other guiding groups – like the Urban Design Commission and OSPCD staff – would happen in accordance with the different stages of development, allowing input to take on a more transformative influence in the review process. Other discretionary permits for construction, like a special permit or hardship variance, only require the public hearing after submission.

Requiring Site Plan Approval for every development in any MR District, designed to encourage mixed-use development as a method to enhance existing commercial corridors in the city, potentially undermines two aspects of the FBC: 1) previously established community visioning about the intended form of a District and 2) the predictability of development – one of the better-described benefits of adopting a Form-Based Code – and the development's relation to the existing urban fabric of a municipality.

Neighborhood Meetings

The current form of the SZO allows three opportunities for the public to engage with every development application for a project in a Mid-Rise District – two Neighborhood Meetings and the typical Public Hearing, usually hosted by the Planning Board. Any resident of Somerville is welcome to attend, as with the Planning Board open meetings. Expanding opportunities for community engagement in development processes enhances accountability and ensures that new projects align with the needs and desires of the community. In the previous iteration of the Zoning Ordinance, the Planning Board had the authority to request that applicants conduct a public-facing meeting with abutters and other invested residents if the Public Comment period during Board Hearings reflected an abundance of community resistance. In the design process of the SZO, Ward Councilors suggested the codification of this informal meeting with residents in the Administrative process of the SPA to ensure public participation would be incorporated into every review process in a way that would facilitate two-way dialogue between applicant and residents without causing delay in the review process.

The explicit purpose of the Neighborhood Meeting is to:

Facilitate community participation in the development review process, provide an applicant with an opportunity to present a proposal to the public during the conceptual design phase, and allows the

public to identify and discuss issues and impacts of the proposal with the applicant (Somerville Zoning Ordinance, 2019).

The requirement of the Neighborhood Meeting connects to some of the broader goals of a Form-Based zoning Code, including facilitating development review applications that are more responsive to neighborhood concerns, expediting the review process and lessening the cost of development review. Collecting resident feedback before application submission provides the feedback to developers and applicant teams with time and opportunity to address potential conflict in subsequent planning iterations.

The addition of the Neighborhood Meeting into every development review process of MR District projects support goals of both participation in land use planning and implementation of a Form-based Code – even when these two modes of planning clash. Incorporating the Neighborhood Meetings prior to the submission of development applications allows for potential conflicts to be addressed early in the process of Site Plan Approval, minimizing the unpredictability of the SPA process for developers. However, the addition of two meetings in the SPA process extends the timeline for application approval, undermining potential streamlining effects of the FBC. The public’s understanding and involvement in land use decisions lead to more legitimate and well-supported redevelopment decisions, but how does the dialogue within the Neighborhood Meeting align with the broader goals of SomerVision 2040, including:

1. Encourage more commercial development. Develop sufficient commercial property to generate 50 percent of property tax revenue from commercial sources.
2. Lower barriers to participation in city governance.
3. Increase the Housing Supply.
4. Aim for Universal Design.
5. Ensure diversity of the housing stock.

Since the adoption of the SZO in 2019, fifteen projects in MR Districts underwent the Site Plan Approval process and the associated Neighborhood Meetings (Table 1). Two development projects, a residential building in an MR3 District (599 Somerville Ave) and a commercial building in an MR4 District (366 Broadway), were selected for further evaluation.

5. Case Studies

To examine the Neighborhood Meeting and Planning Board Hearings, this chapter presents a comparative case study of two recent development proposals that underwent Site Plan Approval. By analyzing two distinct applications—366 Broadway and 599 Somerville Avenue—this chapter investigates how the participatory requirements outlined in the ordinance are interpreted, implemented, and experienced by different stakeholders, including applicants, city staff, and community members.

The selected cases vary in project goals and how discussions in the Neighborhood Meetings were documented, offering contrasting insights into how participation operates in practice. Both projects followed the same regulatory framework, allowing for a focused comparison of process consistency and responsiveness to community feedback. Through this analysis, the case studies help to assess whether the Neighborhood Meeting promotes meaningful participation and what challenges remain to ensure community-informed development review.

366 Broadway

Introduction

The 366 Broadway project is in the Mid-Rise 4 zoning district in the Winter Hill neighborhood, in the half-mile Transit area of the Gilman Square MBTA station. The project site is approximately 49,900 square feet (1.15 acres) and fronts Broadway on the north side and Thurston Street on the east side in Somerville. The site was previously used as a 2-story commercial building. The abutting parcels are both in the Urban Residence (UR) zone, a district allocated to residential uses. The Site Plan Approval process began with the first Neighborhood Meeting in January of 2022 and ended with Planning Board approval in August 2023. Figure 2 illustrates the timeline of the approval process.

Several parties are involved in the Site Plan Approval process. The applicant, 366 Broadway Somerville, LLC, has managed development processes in Somerville, Cambridge, and Boston. The company bought the property in 2019. Based on the project's location in Ward 4, Councilor Jesse Clingan operated as facilitator and host of the Neighborhood Meeting. The Planning Board has decision-making authority for all discretionary or administrative permits required for the MR4 zoning district.

The proposed design on the project site includes 58 Residential dwelling units across four stories with basement-level amenity spaces. The initial housing unit mix included 33 studio units, 16 1-bedroom units,

five 2-bedroom units, and four 3-bedroom units. In compliance with the SZO, 20 percent, or 11 units, will be affordable, including three of the 3-bedroom units.

Amenities include private balconies for some of the units, a common roof deck, a main lobby, and resident storage space. In the Application narrative, the project aims to include a building that will “enhance the streetscape.” This includes a setback from the property line on Broadway to expand the sidewalks to 12 feet. Additionally, new street trees, decorative permeable pavers, bike racks, streetlights and plantings are proposed, along with infilling of curb cuts on Broadway and Thurston Street. There was no parking plans based on the site’s proximity to an MBTA station, and the development planned for bicycle parking for each unit.

I explore the case study based on information from video recordings of the Neighborhood Meetings and all other documentation provided by the OSPCD “Reports and Documents” homepage. I also spoke with members of the applicant team and two individuals who attended the Neighborhood Meetings. The Applicant report supplied some details of the meetings, but I made most of my observations from the live recording. The following section of the analysis discussing outcomes uses the OSPCD Staff Memo to supplement descriptions of the Planning Board decision.

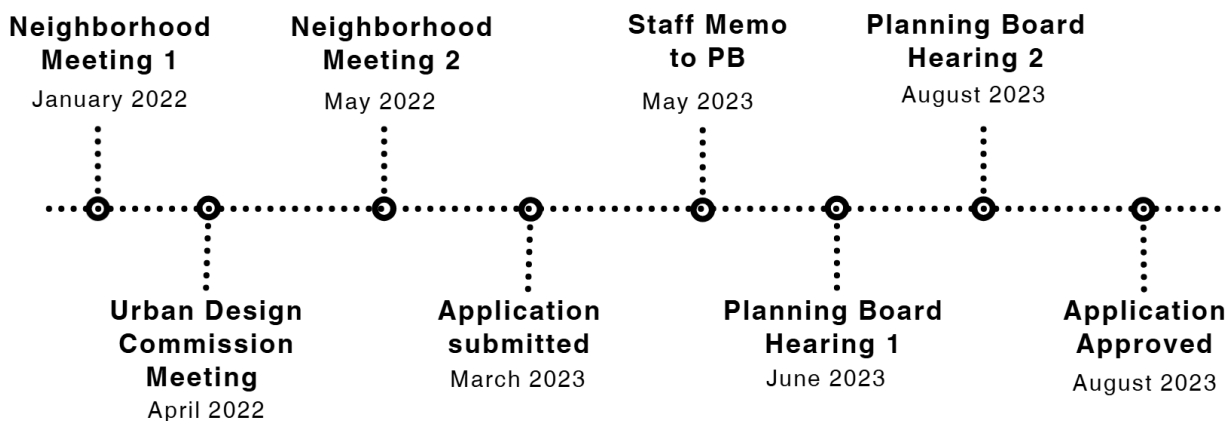


Figure 2. Timeline of the Site Plan Approval Process for 366 Broadway.

Neighborhood Meeting 1

The first Neighborhood Meeting for this event was held on January 21, 2022, at 6:00PM on zoom. There were 18 virtual participants, including two City Councilors, an OSPCD Planner, development lead counsel and architect, and community members. Notice of this meeting was established by printing and circulating

flyers in the neighborhood, posting in the radius indicated by the SZO, and providing materials for the Ward Councilor to circulate to constituents.

The meeting began with an introduction from Councilor Jesse Clingan, who co-hosted the Neighborhood Meeting with the applicant, meaning the councilperson often hosts the meeting on their zoom account and provides a brief introduction before the Applicant's presentation. The Councilor introduced the Neighborhood Meeting as part of the development process as an opportunity to hear about the proposal from the development team, provide feedback afterwards, and that the meeting would be followed by a second Neighborhood Meeting.

The lead attorney on the development team led the rest of the meeting and shared that all the development team prepared was "our initial application in order to kickstart the process with the city." With accompanying slides, the development team worked through several topics. The slides began with information about Ed Doherty, the main developer for the projects, and his previous projects that have been developed in Cambridge and South Boston. Then, as a directive for residents participating in the meeting, the development team described the opportunity for participation as follows:

What we are looking to get after our presentation is to...listen to your feedback as abutters and neighbors. Listen to your questions and concerns. We'll then further the process and consider any of your comments. You all live in the neighborhood; this is your neighborhood.... You are acutely aware of...issues and concerns that we didn't consider in the first iteration of the project.

The lead architect then shared information about existing conditions, including the neighborhood context, existing zoning, and other land use regulations (like affordable housing requirements, dimensional requirements). Finally, the slides showed a preliminary floor plan and site design, including the detailed frontage and facade information that brings the building into compliance with the FBC. Once the information-sharing was completed, the lead counsel again stressed that any public comments or questions were welcome through the virtual chat or by sharing through the audiovisual platform on Zoom.

After the 23-minute presentation from the Applicant team, the remaining 34 minutes of the Meeting were dedicated to resident feedback. Table 5 documents the resident questions and the immediate response offered by the Applicant team.

Table 3. 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting 1 Recorded Comments and Responses

1	Has commercial use on the ground floor been considered?	The applicant is seeking a variance for the Apartment Building type, requesting a fully residential building in a Mid-rise district. The applicant was not confident in attempt to attain a variance for a mixed residential/commercial ground floor.
2	Aesthetic concerns about the facade, materiality, and windows on the building.	The design considerations would be discussed at the Urban Design Commission meeting.
3	Has the current unit matrix considered fewer studios? Suggested the inclusion of more family-sized units.	The Applicant was content with the 16 percent 2- and 3-bedroom unit proportion. It stated that the 11 units plus the fractional payout to the city would contribute to affordable housing.
4	Location of nearest accessible parking spot?	The Applicant will close 2 curb cuts for on-street short term parking and will explore adding an accessible spot close to the project.
5	Request to provide a website for the project with materials relating to the project.	The Applicant suggested they will connect with someone on their team to create the website.
Source: 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting Report		

Neighborhood Meeting 2

The second Neighborhood Meeting for this project was held on June 30, 2022, at 6:00PM, about five months after the first Neighborhood Meeting. There were 14 virtual participants, including two City Councilors, an OSPCD Planner, development lead counsel and architect, and community members. Notice of this meeting was established by printing and circulating flyers in the neighborhood, posting in the radius indicated by the SZO, and providing materials for the Ward Councilor to circulate to constituents.

The meeting began with an introduction from Councilor Clingan, who co-hosted the Neighborhood Meeting with the applicant. Councilor Clingan described the first meeting as, “a great example of how a Neighborhood Meeting can really make a project better.” He then suggested more discussion at the second meeting and to see how applicants incorporated feedback from the first session. The Applicant was once again introduced as an experienced developer in the region and the lead architect ran through the same informational slides as in the first Neighborhood Meeting. The presentation materials included more detailed mockups of the site plan, including the versions presented to the Urban Design Commission (Figure 3). The contextual site plans include bike parking and the incorporation of some street plantings along Broadway.



Figure 3. 366 Broadway, Somerville. Rendering of Elevation on Broadway presented at NM1 (left) and NM 2(right). (Khalsa Design Inc. 2024 <https://kdiarch.com/portfolio/366-broadway-somerville-ma/>)

Input from the previous Neighborhood Meeting was also discussed. The project website was still not created but there were plans to publish one soon after the second NM. Discussion about exploring a commercial ground floor use was mentioned like the last Neighborhood Meeting. The Applicant responded by mentioning the additional work needed to acquire a variance for a partial ground floor commercial space. The Applicant also stated that it would be going against the goals of SomerVision to “mishmash building types”. Meanwhile, the Zoning Ordinance describes Mid-rise Districts as primarily commercial with ground floor uses that address the needs of residents and employees in the immediate neighborhood. With this description, exploring direct resident input about a different ground floor use would be in service of the goals of the District overall, supporting a request for a variance. Other public comments included a dialogue about the traffic and parking around the building. This led to a back and forth between the architect and lead counsel and the original commentator about reasonable coordination for parking and what kind of demand there would be for parking near the building.

Table 4. 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting 2 Recorded Comments and Responses		
1	Request for more images and renderings of the Project based on surrounding environment.	Additional contextual images were posted to the website created based on the last Neighborhood Meeting.
2	Concern about the traffic and parking, particularly with residents not being eligible for resident permit parking.	Based on the SZO, no parking is required for the project. The Applicant has entered a Mobility Management Plan with OSPCD for the project which includes hosting an annual mobility education meeting for building residents and distribution of information.
3	Concern about construction management, rodent control, and noise levels during construction.	The Applicant is its own general contractor for projects so will work closely on the construction management plan to limit impacts.
Source: 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting Report		

Planning Board Hearing

The Planning Board hearing to review the application for development at 366 Broadway happened virtually on zoom in July 2023, about a year after the second Neighborhood Meeting took place. Relying on the city staff memo, applicant-submitted Neighborhood Meeting reports, and informal discussion with the OSPCD staff, the Planning Board's role is to hear the applicant's proposal, ask any clarifying questions or make comments, and approve, deny, or delay the application. The Planning Board hearing holds a traditional space for resident engagement in the form of public comment to endorse or deny the application. There is no opportunity for the public to engage directly with the applicant at this time; instead, Planning Board members hear public testimony, which may include unanswered questions, and use their standing as members to address public testimony with the applicant in the final portion of the Planning Board hearing.

Once they had the floor, the applicant team gave a similar presentation as the ones at the Neighborhood Meetings. Similar slides were used and the content included existing conditions, proposed design, and the unit mix for the residential units. The first mention of the Neighborhood Meeting was when the Planning Board director paused the presentation from the partner architect to ask, based on the Neighborhood Meeting discussions, how residents felt about the unit mix proposed (1.37 of Public hearing recording). At the time of the Public Hearing, there were 33 studio units, 16 1-bedroom, five 2-bedroom, and four 3-bedroom, the same mix suggested at both Neighborhood Meetings (Table 6). At first thought, the applicant did not recall there being much opposition. Instead, the lawyer on the applicant team described a discussion where the number of studio units would have the added benefits of reducing the need for parking and considerations for additional traffic congestion. The applicant then referred to Councilor Clingan to speak to any resident feedback that might be contrary. The applicant described the project site as unsuitable for buildings with larger units and stated that this project would be oriented to "take the burden off some of the other larger-sized units in the vicinity" that would typically hold a household of roommates and create space in those units for families.

Planning Board members then responded with a follow-up question about the inability of residents to apply for residential permit parking and that the development would require a Mobility and Circulation Plan. The Chair validated the discussion saying that while Board members may have read the application materials in advance, some members of the public may not have had the time to do so, so it's important to bring everybody on the same page.

Public Comment

The hearing then opened to public comment in support of the project. Hearing none, the director then opened the floor to public comment speaking in opposition or expressing concern. Table 5 summarizes the public comment in the hearing. While there was an opportunity for written comments, none were catalogued for this site review.

Table 5. 366 Broadway Planning Board Hearing Comments		
1	Unit Mix	One member of the public was glad to see the affordable units in the mix. However, their experience of the Star Market makes them question the lack of opposition to the current unit mix of this project. The Star Market project had to adjust their mix to add more family-sized units. The resident hopes there is room to consider increasing the number of 2-bedroom units.
2	Retail Use	The resident asked why commercial use was not being considered in the building considering the location of the site on a major thoroughfare.
3	The Unit Mix, resident participation	This resident introduced themselves as part of the Union Square Neighborhood Council. She explained that part of the reason that there is not more resident pushback is because of the lack of a neighborhood council or other organized community group for the Winter Hill neighborhood. Without that level of organization, residents have a difficult time keeping track of the high rate of development. She states there is an urgent need for affordable housing and to keep families here. She also questions why a Mid-Rise district would allow a purely residential building. In her words, she feels as though, “developers are coming in and making a killing”.
Source: Recording of Planning Board Hearing, 2023.		

Hearing the public comments, the Planning Board Director confirmed that a point of discussion in previous applications, ones where the current applicants were present, was the unit mix and those conversations led to increases in the number of 2- and 3-bedrooms units. The Director asked why the unit mix was not tailored to the existing family-friendly neighborhood context. The applicant team then reviewed their meeting notes to reveal that there were comments about unit mix at both Neighborhood Meetings (as catalogued in Tables 3 and 4). After hearing about the total of 32 participants at the two Neighborhood Meetings combined, the Planning Board Director mentioned the “paltry” attendance and inquired about the outreach methods the applicant used. The applicant responded that they flyeried around the neighborhood, gave materials to OSPCD to post online, and provided materials to the councilor to share on their outlets.

At the end of the first meeting, Planning Board members were generally supportive of the application apart from the proposed unit mix. Several cited the description of MR-4 development in the Zoning Ordinance as intended to support “larger-size family units” and the goals of SomerVision 2040 for housing. Additionally, many Board members referred to the public comments made and the resident feedback from the Neighborhood Meetings. Ultimately, the Board opted to request the review and alteration of the unit mix to incorporate more family-sized units to review at the next Planning Board meeting.

Planning Board Decision

At the continuation of the Planning Board meeting on August 3rd, the applicant proposed a new unit mix (Table 6). This included the addition of 5 2-bedroom units and 3 3-bedroom units. After weighing tradeoffs between decreasing the affordable units available and having more family-sized bedrooms, the Planning Board approved the applicant 5-0 subject to several conditions outlined in the Decision Memo in accordance with public testimony, review of the submitted plans, and discussion of the statutorily required considerations.

Table 6. Change in units mix of 366 Broadway between first and final Planning Board Hearing	
Original Unit Mix – 58 total	Revised Unit Mix – 50 total
Studio – 33 units (57%)	Studio – 26 units (52%)
1-bedroom – 16 units	1-bedroom – 7 units
2-bedroom – 5 units	2-bedroom – 10 units
3-bedroom -- 4 units	3-bedroom -- 7 units
Affordable Units: 11	Affordable Units: 10

The considerations include those listed in Chapter 15 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. Based on the description of the considerations in the context of the applicant, the decision document from the Planning Board elaborates on why the application, as approved with conditions, fits into the goals of SomerVision 2040, the zoning district, and considerations of mitigation and housing demand. Table 7 documents the findings in more detail.

Table 7. 366 Broadway Planning Board Decision Findings	
Consideration	Planning Board Findings
The proposal will help to achieve the following goals from SomerVision, the comprehensive Master Plan of the City of Somerville.	Significant increase housing stock to keep up with did while pursuing the goals of increasing the proportion of affordable housing and housing stock diversity. Promote a dynamic urban streetscape that embraces public transportation, reduces care dependence, and is accessible, inviting, and safe for all pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders. Minimize the overall land use in Somerville dedicated to personal vehicles while encouraging alternative modes.
The proposal is consistent with the intent of the zoning district where the property is located.	The proposal is consistent with the intent of the MR4 zoning district which is, in part “To create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for smaller scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhoods serving uses”.
The Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.	The Board finds that, as conditioned, the proposal does not produce any impacts that require additional conditions.
Ability of the development proposal to meet the demand for dwelling units of various types, sizes, and bedroom counts.	The proposal includes fifty total dwelling units including 26 studio units, seven one-bedroom units, ten two-bedroom units, and seven three-bedroom units.
Conditions related to Neighborhood Meeting Comments	
Public right-of-way or pedestrian access easement must be provided in perpetuity Frontage for a widened sidewalk along Broadway and Thurston Street must be design and paved Product details and design specifications for the fifty-eight long-term bicycle parking spaces but mw submitted to the Mobility Division to confirm compliance	
Source: Somerville Planning Board. Decision 366 Broadway.	

Progress on Development

Since the Planning Board’s decision in January 2023, there has been no physical progress made on the development of 366 Broadway. As of June 2025, a demolition permit and a foundation permit for new commercial and residential construction are under review at the Building Inspection Department.



Figure 4. 366 Broadway as of June 2025.

599 Somerville Ave

Introduction

The 599 Somerville Avenue project is in the Mid-Rise 3 (MR3) zoning district in the Spring Hill neighborhood of Somerville. The applicant, Rafi Properties LLC, proposed to develop 3-story commercial building massing 45,000 gross square feet (slightly smaller than 366 Broadway). The site, located at Somerville Avenue and Spring Street, was previously used for a 1-story, 21,960 sq commercial building. The abutting parcels are both in the Urban Residence (UR) zone, a district allocated to residential uses.

The proposed design on the project site includes 43,200 sf of commercial space (located on the first, second, and third floors), 500 sf of ground floor retail and approximately 13,000 sf of underground parking that would provide 33 parking spaces. Ten covered bicycle parking spaces and six spaces in outdoor racks would accommodate 16 bicycles. The proposed project would provide 17 percent of the lot area as Open Space. The Project will reduce the size of the existing curb cut on Spring Street along the east side of the building from 39 ft to 30 ft improving pedestrian safety on Spring Street and will create a new Parklet at the enlarged bump-out proposed for the corner of Somerville Avenue and Spring Street.

The Applicant team identified several SomerVision comprehensive plan goals that would be addressed with the approval of the submitted site plan. This includes the addition of widened and improved sidewalks on both sides of the property and a flexible ground floor designed to accommodate a range of commercial and storefront uses along its 197 ft-long frontages. The proposed development will pursue LEED Gold certifiable requirements, complying with SomerVision goals of sustainable development. Furthermore, enhancing commercial corridors and creating pedestrian-friendly access in ways that encourage community engagement, planting native plants and trees, supporting new job creation through construction and permanent operating jobs on site, and investment in building resiliency, sustainability, and reduction of carbon emission through adherence to the stormwater management plan and installing EV charging stations to mitigate air pollution (Rafi Properties 2021).

Several improvements to transportation circulation were also proposed in the Application narrative. In addition to the widened sidewalk, an inline bus stop with a new bus shelter, a pedestrian bump-out, a parklet with plantings and seatings, a pedestrian crosswalk, and a reconstructed bicycle lane with be added. These proposed infrastructure improvements were reported to represent a neighborhood benefits package of approximately \$365,000, supplemented by approximately \$160,000 in Affordable Housing and

Employment Linkage Fees used towards the retainment of affordable housing and other community improvements.

The recounting of this Case Study uses the documentation provided by the OSPCD “Reports and Documents” homepage. In this case the video and audio recordings were on the OSPCD website. I spoke with individuals involved in the application, including members of the team who assembled the NM reports, the City Councilor of Ward 3, and two residents who attended the Neighborhood Meetings. This section, describing the process of the Meeting, is from the Applicant report. The following section of the analysis discussing outcomes uses the OSPCD Staff Memo to supplement descriptions of the Planning Board decision.

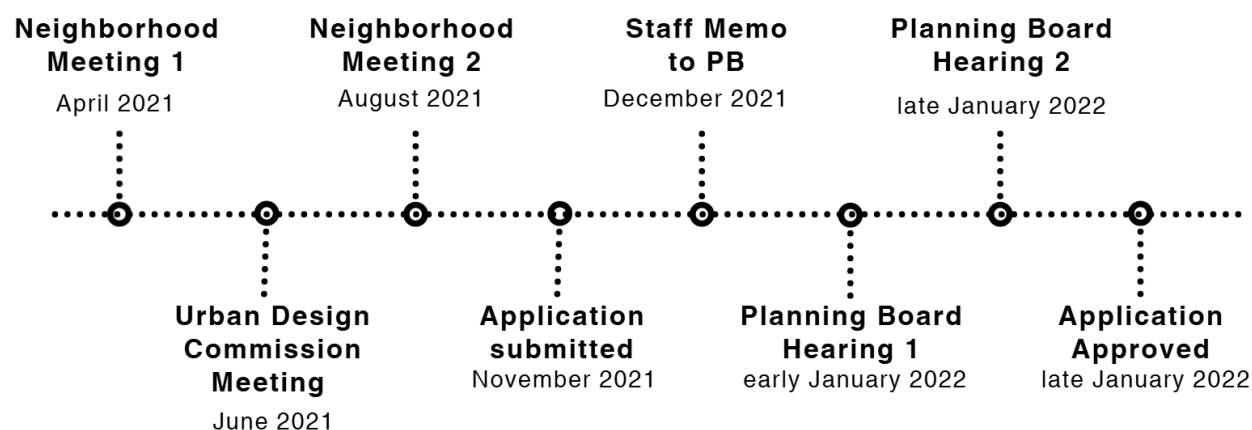


Figure 5. Timeline of the Site Plan Approval Process for 599 Somerville Avenue.

Neighborhood Meeting 1

The first Neighborhood Meeting for this project was held on April 5, 2021, via Zoom. Fifty-nine attendees were listed, including two City Councilors, an OSPCD Planner, development lead counsel and architect, and community members. Notice of this meeting was established by printing and circulating flyers in the neighborhood, posting in the radius indicated by the SZO, and providing materials for the Ward Councilor to circulate to constituents.

The meeting began with an introduction from Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen, who co-hosted the Neighborhood Meeting with the Applicant. The Councilor introduced the Neighborhood Meeting as part of the development process as an opportunity to hear about the proposal from the development team, provide feedback afterwards, and that the meeting would be followed by a second Neighborhood Meeting.

The Applicant team shared information about the existing conditions, including the neighborhood context, existing zoning, and other land use regulations (such as affordable housing requirements and dimensional requirements). Finally, the slides showed a preliminary floor plan and site design, including the detailed frontage and facade information that brings the building into compliance with the FBC. Once the information-sharing was completed, the presenters opened the meeting to public comments or questions through the virtual chat or the audiovisual platform on Zoom.

Table 8. 599 Somerville Neighborhood Meeting 1 (April 5, 2021) - Recorded Comments and Applicant Responses		
1	A neighbor at 40 Pitman St asked for more details regarding the relationship of the garage ramp with their property.	The development team committed to further conversations regarding the ramp and exploring screening strategies to block traffic noise and visuals from the neighboring properties. Additionally, the landscaped buffer required by zoning was raised to match the abutting properties' higher backyard terrain level (due to Spring Hill's slope).
2	Concern about the windows on the back facade, facing the properties on Pitman Street.	When working on facade alternatives, the design team made sure the window pattern and windows sizes were suited to a neighborhood scale. The final design resulted in an 18% fenestration for the back façade. Additionally, an elevated landscape buffer with evergreen trees will block the views from the first two levels of the proposed building. The design and development team has been in close communication with the Pitman Street property owners to engage them in the final facade design to minimize privacy concerns.
3	Neighbors requested more specific details regarding the height of the penthouse.	The development team explained that the design of the building was still in an early stage and would share further details during the future UDC meeting and further Neighborhood Meetings.
4	The 2-way traffic allowed on Spring Street for only half of the block between Pitman Street and Somerville Ave.	The team met with the City of Somerville's Mobility department and discussed this topic. It was concluded that the proposed condition is the least impactful to the neighborhood to the north through these conversations. We defer to the City of Somerville's Mobility Department as the directionality of these streets is under their purview.
5	Several neighbors asked about the possibility of reducing the amount of parking (44 spaces).	The final proposal will seek a special permit to reduce the parking by 25 percent for a final parking count of 33 spaces. Furthermore, a mobility management plan is being presented which includes several strategies defined in coordination with the city to incentivize alternative modes of transportation other than private vehicles.
6	Noise from the mechanical equipment on the roof.	The mechanical roof screening was set at 16 feet, keeping it to the minimum possible to properly shield the neighbors from any

		potential noise. The building will also follow all the city and state regulations regarding noise in residential areas.
7	Incorporation of sufficient bike parking for visitors.	The proposal includes 10 covered bicycle parking spaces in the garage rather than just the 3 required by zoning and will accommodate an additional 6 outdoors with the 3 new proposed bike racks
8	Concern about the project demolition and construction timeline.	The development team committed to staying in communication with the neighbors regarding the construction timeline.
9	The use of the roof for more than just mechanical.	The development team confirmed that the roof will only be used for mechanical equipment and the proposal does not include any roof deck space for other uses.
10	Pedestrian crossing at Spring Street and Somerville Ave. This section of Somerville Ave has no pedestrian crossing, and the intersection with Spring Street would be ideal for one.	The 599 Somerville Avenue project will pay for the design and building costs for creating an elevated crosswalk on Somerville Avenue between Spring Street and Kent Street. The final design will be determined in direct coordination with the city and their guidelines and latest best practices in other parts of Somerville Ave.
11	Neighbor asked for more trees on Somerville Ave.	The proposed building is set back 3' 5" on Somerville Ave and 8' 2" on Spring Street to guarantee 12' sidewalks on both frontages. Additionally, the proposal includes a parklet space in the corner next to the future new pedestrian crossing. The streetscape design for this proposal includes 5 trees on Somerville Ave (currently there are 4) and one new tree on Spring Street (currently there are none).
12	Concern regarding the use of the loading dock for other uses besides loading. Neighbor mentioned other activities like the ones happening at SomerNova (A property also owned by Rafi Properties).	No additional uses and events will be included or planned in the loading dock.
13	Severe problem with rats in the area and resident asked if the development of this property could address it.	The construction team will pay close attention to this issue during demolition and construction. It is a shared interest to control any rodent infestation in the neighborhood and as a condition of the building permit you will have to have a plan for pest control during construction.
14	Concern about the lab uses and the chance of toxic materials being used and released.	The development team has conducted the environmental due diligence required by the city and state regarding any potential site contamination. The environmental findings did not report anything having recordable levels.
Source: 599 Somerville Neighborhood Meeting 1 Report		

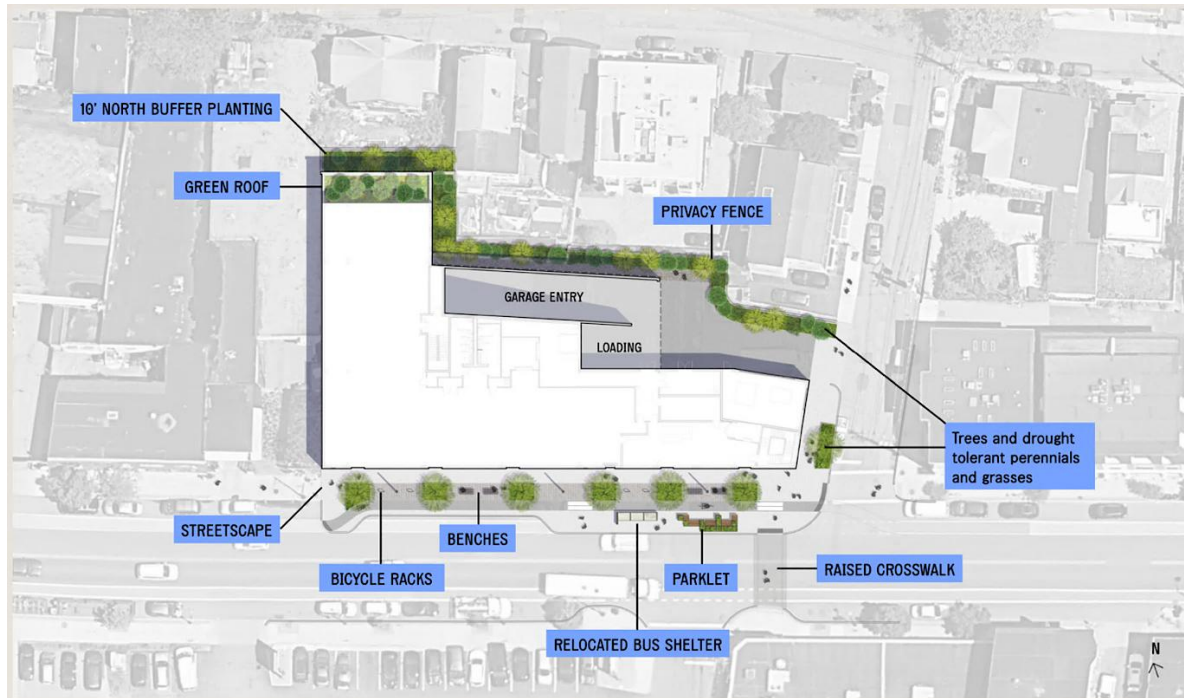


Figure 6. Site Plan as shown on the 599 Somerville site. (Rafi Properties 2025. <https://599somerville.com/>)

Neighborhood Meeting 2

The second Neighborhood Meeting for this project was held on August 12, 2021, at 6:30pm, about four months after the first Neighborhood Meeting. There were 27 virtual participants, including the presiding City Councilor, an OSPCD Planner, development lead counsel and architect, and community members. Notice of this meeting was established by printing and circulating flyers in the neighborhood, posting in the radius indicated by the SZO, and providing materials for the Ward Councilor to circulate to constituents.

Input from the previous Neighborhood Meeting was also discussed. The content of these discussions is reported based on the Neighborhood Meeting Report and Staff Report alone. I requested access to the audiovisual recordings of these Neighborhood Meetings from both the development team and the OSPCD. While the OSPCD only keeps records of the written documentation for the Neighborhood Meetings, the development team said they did not have the files available to them at the time of the request.

Table 9. 599 Somerville Neighborhood Meeting 2 (August 12, 2021) - Recorded Comments & Applicant Responses		
1	Total height of the building	The proposed building has 3 stories and a height of 42 ft. meeting the MR3 zoning requirements. The mechanical penthouse will be 16ft, which is shorter than most similar buildings, as it was recognized by the Urban Design Commission.
2	Abutting neighbors' privacy. Rear windows on the second and third floors	The design of the proposed facade facing the abutting residential parcels incorporates small, neighborhood-scale windows. The final design resulted in an 18 percent fenestration for the back facade, which is close to the minimum fenestration allowed of 15 percent. Additionally, an elevated landscape buffer with evergreen trees will serve to block the views from the first two levels of the proposed building.
3	Maintaining the trees on Somerville Ave.	The streetscape design for the sidewalk, corner parklet, bus stop and pedestrian crossing was adjusted to maintain the current trees in place.
4	Construction noise, working hours and Saturdays	Construction shall not begin before 7 am Monday - Friday to comply with section 9-116 of the City of Somerville Municipal Code (noise ordinance). The project team will install a 6 ft high construction fence around the perimeter of the site with a scrim. Daily clean-up will occur at the construction site. The development team takes community relations during construction very seriously.
5	Loading dock working hours	We recognize there are some concerns about the noise associated with loading. The Somerville Zoning Code allows loading hours for NR areas between 7am - 10pm but based on the team's experience with loading in other Rafi properties, the proposed loading hours will be between 7am and 7pm, except for trash removal which is determined by the Sanitation Division.
6	Mechanical equipment noise and air quality.	The project must follow Massachusetts and Federal regulatory bodies and regulations, laws, and ordinances. Our acoustical engineer has conducted a noise study, and the building's design will consider the ambient and background noise levels so that any equipment noise is in line with MassDEP community noise policy and the Somerville Noise Control Ordinance (55 Db during daytime and 40 Db during night).
7	The number of parking spaces is not sufficient.	There is no tenant defined for the building yet. Per the request of the neighbors and the city, the development team is seeking a Special Permit to reduce the parking to 33 spaces.
8	Parking for workers during construction.	The developer will offer spaces for construction workers within other parking lots available in the neighborhood
9	Landscape buffer trees' height when mature.	The trees that will be planted within the buffer area at the Northern perimeter of the site will be a mix of species and are anticipated to reach a maturation height of 20-30 ft, depending on their species.
10	Rat issues during construction	The construction team will pay close attention to this issue during demolition and construction. It is a shared interest to control any rodent infestation in the neighborhood and as a condition of the building permit you will have to have a plan for pest control during construction.
Source: 366 Broadway Neighborhood Meeting 2 Report		

Planning Board Hearing

The Planning Board Meeting to review the Application for development at 599 Broadway happened virtually on zoom in January 2022, six months after the second Neighborhood Meeting took place. This Application was the last item on the agenda for that night's meeting and included a Special Permit to seek relief from the parking requirements of Mid Rise 3 districts. The applicant team gave a similar presentation at the Neighborhood Meetings, reviewing existing conditions and the proposed building design and neighborhood impacts. The presentation ended with the applicant team explaining that the Special Permit for parking relief, a 25 percent reduction in required parking from 44 to 33 spaces, was based on requests at the Neighborhood Meeting for a reduction in parking.

The Board then asked questions regarding the parking and potential future tenants from the commercial lab space. A Board member asked about the results of the traffic impact study and if further lowering the parking would be possible. The applicant responded by explaining that potential tenants of the building said that employees would like the option to drive to Somerville for work. The meeting then continued with Public Testimony.

Public Comment

The Public Comment period began with individuals thanking the applicant team for their involvement in the neighborhood during the application process and ended with concerns. Table 10 summarizes the public comments during the hearing.

Table 10. 599 Somerville Planning Board Comments		
1	In support of community engagement	So thoughtful in considering the needs of the community looking forward for more commercial space. Thank you for incorporating feedback from a lot of the neighborhood. The applicant has been thoughtful in considering the needs of the community and looking forward to having more commercial space in the neighborhood.
2	Traffic on Spring Street	No plans to change the one-way traffic on Spring Street. The block with loading docks is two-way. With the new commercial use, the parking garage might create a safety issue. Can the street signage be updated to help traffic during rush hour?
3	Losing sunlight	GreenTown Labs was floated as a potential tenant during Neighborhood Meetings. Will 40 Pitman lose all sunlight with the development?
4	Privacy Concern	Why is the window treatment on abutting buildings based on resident action? I am very concerned about privacy.
5	Buffer Zone	Why is there no buffer zone between 619 and 599 Somerville Avenue?
6	Animal testing and nuisance control	Is this building going to have animal testing? What is the noise and smell control for this building as it is in a mostly residential area?

7	Parking and Aesthetic	This resident liked the design of the building; it reminds her of a Charlie car. The parking is still of concern – it is 0.6 miles away from Porter, could the parking spaces be lowered?
8	Privacy concern; Green score	Concerned about privacy, even with the tiered landscaping. There should be window tints or a trellis structure with vines to cover the view from the building. Will provide a list of plant species they would like to see in the design. A third of native plants is not enough, should not be counted towards the Green Score.
9	Demolitions	When is the demolition planned to begin? How does the applicant plan to contain residue on the site?
10	Traffic, street trees, and roof dimensions	Appreciative of the new crosswalk across Somerville Avenue and that the street trees will be protected during the project. Resident has been following the Land Use conversations, concerned about the mechanical penthouse dimensions. Also concerned about the section of Spring Street begin two-way and the traffic implications.

Planning Board Decision

At the continuation of the Planning Board Hearing, the Planning Board approved the applicant 5-0 subject to several conditions outlined in the Decision Memo in accordance with public testimony, review of the submitted plans, and discussion of the statutorily required considerations. Table 11 describes the Planning Board findings and conditions. The restriction on outdoor events, the bike room, and the widened sidewalk were incorporated based on Neighborhood Meeting comments.

Table 11. 599 Somerville Ave Planning Board Decision Findings	
Consideration	Planning Board Findings
The proposal will help to achieve the following goals from SomerVision, the comprehensive Master Plan of the City of Somerville.	Make Somerville a regional employment center with a mix of diverse and high-quality jobs. Support a business-friendly environment to attract and retain a diverse mix of businesses that can start here, grow here, and stay here. Link our corridors, squares, and growth districts to support future development and economic activity. Expand bike and pedestrian use by transforming existing infrastructure with accommodations for all bicyclist and pedestrians, resulting in safe, accessible, and well-connected networks.
The proposal is consistent with the intent of the zoning district where the property is located.	The proposal is consistent with the intent of the MR3 zoning district which is, in part “To create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for smaller scale, multi-use and mixed-use buildings and neighborhood-serving commercial uses”.
The Mitigation proposed to alleviate any impacts attributable to the proposed development.	The Board finds the proposal includes several design features in response to community feedback received at Neighborhood Meetings. As conditioned, the proposal does not produce any impacts that require mitigation.

Conditions related to Neighborhood Meeting Comments

Frontage area provided for a widened sidewalk along Somerville Avenue must be designed and paved to correspond with any sidewalk improvements.

A public right-of-way or pedestrian access easement must be provided in perpetuity by a covenant or other deed restrictions for the full area of the sidewalk.

Bike room must be constructed at grade or with a low slope ramp.

To mitigate noise pollution, outdoor events are not permitted.

A public art mural must be provided on the left exterior wall and food faith efforts must be made to solicit a local artist in coordination with the Somerville Arta Council to design and install the mural.

Source: City of Somerville 2022

Progress on Development

On August 12, 2022, a neighbor received an email from Rafi properties to notify them that four of the street trees (those mentioned at comment 9 during the Public Hearing) were removed during construction. The letter explained that they were initially “inadvertently removed”, the further cleared to maintain safety on the public walkway and roadway (see Appendix C for the full letter). The Urban Forestry Division fined Rafi Properties \$27,000.

This event runs contrary to statements made by the applicant in response to the several public comments of concern about the street trees. As of June 2025, construction of the building and sidewalk improvements are complete. The street trees have been replaced for a total of 6 street trees along the block of 599 Somerville.



Figure 7. Western corner of 599 Somerville Ave, August 2019 (Google Maps 2025)



Figure 8. The same corner, August 2024 (Google Maps 2024)

Tracking Participants

While I tracked the content of the applicants across the available projects in Midrise districts, the detailed roster of attendees for the 599 Site could allow further analysis. A total of 86 names were listed on the Neighborhood Meeting reports – after removing the applicant team and OSPCD staff, 48 unique participants were included in the count. As discussed in the literature review, participation in land use planning often only includes abutters and those neighbors who would experience a more immediate impact due to development. A list of participants was not included in the reports for 366 Broadway and many other project applicants, so the trends of the locations for Neighborhood Meeting participants and Planning Board hearing participants are only relevant to this case study.

Of the 48 participants who attended Neighborhood Meetings, 12 lived on properties abutting 599 Somerville Avenue or were within 300 feet. Of the seven individuals who left comments during the Planning Board hearing, only one lived outside of the 300 feet radius for required notice. Figure 9 shows that residents who attended Neighborhood Meetings live in several different neighborhoods around Somerville. This suggests that there is interest from neighbors across the areas in Somerville to engage in meetings with applicants. However, as discussed later, the presence of abutters in the Planning Board Meeting influenced the portions of the dialogue carried over from the Neighborhood Meeting into comments in front of the Planning Board.

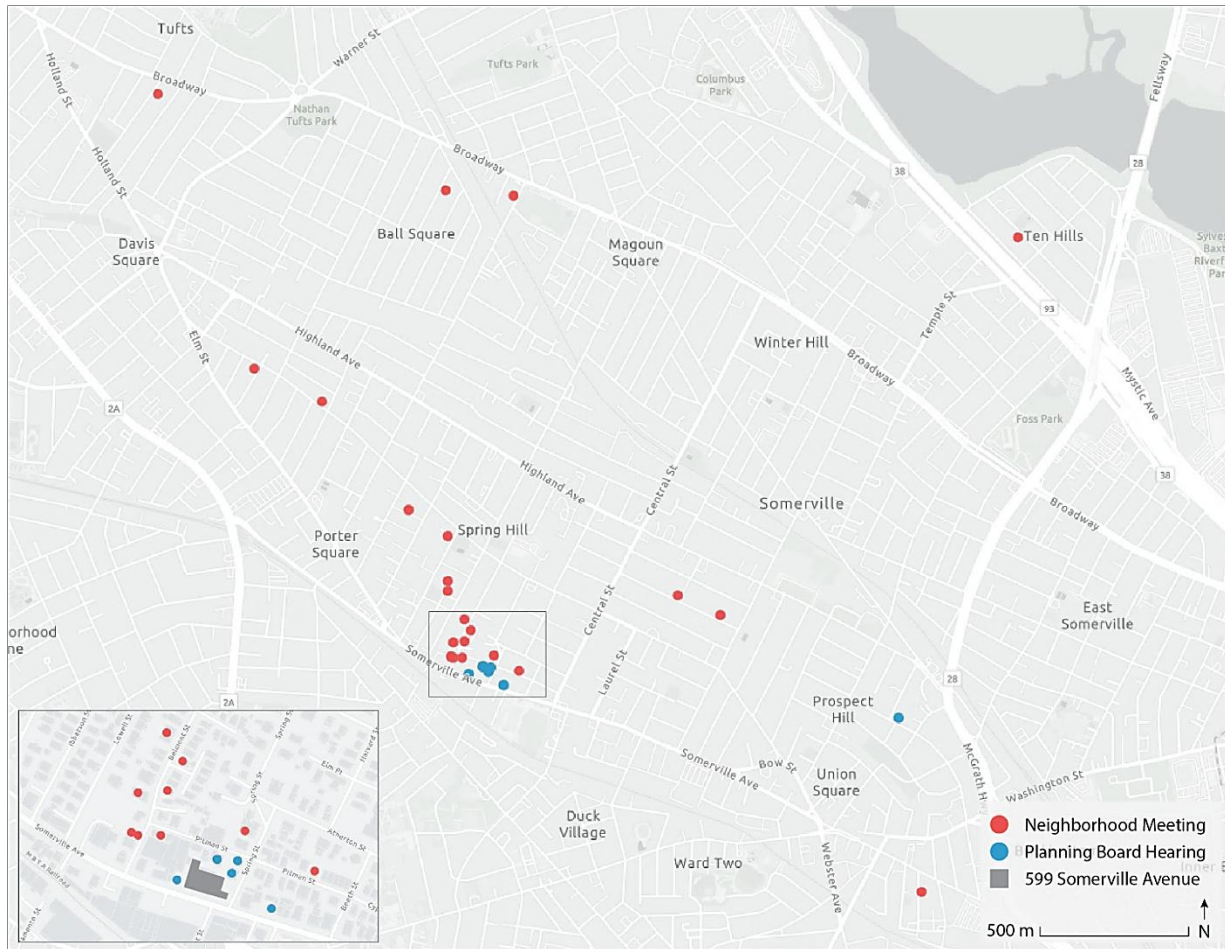


Figure 9. Registered Addresses of Resident Participants at Neighborhood Meetings and Planning Board Hearings. Planning Board Decision

6. Analysis

This section analyzes the participatory dimensions of the Neighborhood Meeting by drawing from the records available from the two Case Studies and the interviews conducted with individuals involved in Site Plan Approval. Attention is paid to both procedural aspects—such as how meetings were advertised and structured—and substantive ones, including how public feedback was documented, addressed, or integrated into project revisions. This analysis offers insights into how participation functions not only as a regulatory requirement but also as a practice shaped by institutional norms, applicant behavior, and community capacity.

Evaluation Framework

This thesis seeks to understand how the Neighborhood Meeting functions in a Site Plan Approval process that aims to uphold citywide visions of inclusive and participatory planning through a high control, FBC zoning code that works to streamline and invigorate development and growth. My initial intentions for reviewing the Neighborhood Meetings were to evaluate participation based on frameworks centered around the participation which occurred within the meetings. After reviewing Neighborhood Meetings and speaking to Somerville planners, I realized that may not be useful to understand the function of the NM. Empirical studies that evaluate participation in land use planning are limited, as are the city-specific metrics for monitoring these Neighborhood Meetings, due to the nature of participation in land use-related events. Oftentimes, a lack of participation in land use hearings and other participation venues are interpreted to mean consent or neutrality regarding the agenda items. Many individuals will not engage unless they object or wish to delay development projects. Tracking attendance alone would not reflect good participating; instead, understanding the goals and approach of different stakeholders around the Neighborhood Meeting would help identify areas of friction and cohesion between actors in the meeting process.

To evaluate how different planning approaches and the intentions of participants may influence the Neighborhood Meeting as a step in the SPA process, I first spoke with city staff, city councilors, applicants, and residents. These conversations revealed the current political climate surrounding development and land use in Somerville and how features of the case studies exemplified the typical process of a Neighborhood Meeting. Later, I analyzed ordinance text before and after the SZO of 2019. This chapter features three sections: 1) Design, 2) Process, and 3) Outcomes of the Neighborhood Meeting.

Designing the Neighborhood Meeting

To best answer my original research questions, I needed to first understand the origin of the Neighborhood Meetings and how the Ordinance describes them. The language of the Neighborhood Meeting in the Ordinance influences what elements of engagement are mandated and the authority of those individuals and organizations involved in each Neighborhood Meeting that occurs. I spoke to city staff and councilors about participation in development review before the SZO and asked about how the design of the Neighborhood Meeting advances other city initiatives surrounding collaboration with residents. I found that the concept of the Neighborhood Meeting represents a move towards increased transparency and involvement in response of the political climate of “Old Somerville” (as mentioned in the Case Context section).

Designing the Site Plan Approval Process

Conversations with city planning staff revealed that the concept of the Neighborhood Meeting existed informally under the previous zoning ordinance within the oversight of the Planning Board. Sarah Lewis, now a Senior Planner at the OSPCD, has been working in the Office since 2012 and was able to share the process of formalizing the Neighborhood Meeting. According to Lewis, Planning Board members would request that the applicant conduct a Neighborhood Meeting when public comment periods for a specific project included multiple dissenting comments or questions. During the Zoning Overhaul, City Councilors suggested formalizing the Neighborhood Meeting within the Site Plan Approval process. Throughout interviews, city councilors were often the first officials to hear about positive or negative resident sentiment regarding a project. By codifying the Neighborhood Meeting, councilors aimed to ensure that conversations occurred between residents and applicants about their concerns, creating more direct contact between neighbors and applicants. In the best-case scenario, development plans would be “co-created” by applicants and neighbors (Councilor Ben Ewen-Campen, interview with author, 2025).

The Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) works to incorporate feedback loops and iterative processes to encourage resident participation in planning. Lewis identified this pattern in the Somerville-by-Design approach for neighborhood Planning in the city, which abandons the classic “Decide-Present-Defend” public engagement model to the “Outreach-Dialogue-Decide-Implement” model. The new engagement model requires several rounds of participation to establish a full picture of existing conditions, future conditions, and final conditions based on “consensus” (City of Somerville 2017). During our conversation, Lewis suggested similarities between the design of the Somerville-by-Design

framework and the formalized meetings that are part of the SPA process. The Site Plan Approval process relies on iterative steps of dialogue between applicants, city staff and residents on a timeline that aligns with the stages of project development (Sarah Lewis, interview with author, April 2025).

Fundamentally, parameters related to zoning, according to OSPCD staff, should focus on mitigating negative consequences of a project on adjacent lots and the neighborhood. The Site Plan Approval process requires touchpoints throughout the development process with both experts and residents, to ensure that outcomes are as desirable as possible (Lewis, interview with author, April 2025). This reflects OSPCD's intention to bolster the relationship between residents and governing bodies, supporting outcomes of increased legitimacy in decision-making and shared governance as discussed in the literature review. The Neighborhood Meeting is not designed to ensure compliance with the form-based code or to negotiate neighborhood benefits because of development. As described by current OSPCD staff, its central purpose is to bring residents, applicants, ward councilors, and city staff together, ensuring that applicants are moving through the review process as intended (City Planner 2025). Early and inclusive engagement—inviting neighbors to learn about potential development and provide feedback—is a crucial step in building buy-in for the intended outcomes of a project and is an approach to engagement that the city incorporates into most of its land use planning procedure. Engagement approaches in previous planning efforts – including the SomerSuppers of SomerVision and the charettes for the Form-Based Code – are precedent for consistent involvement from the community on site level review.

The several steps required of applicants prior to submitting their applications for development intended to incorporate feedback loops into the development review process. The initial meeting with planning staff is intended to coincide with the very first steps of development, when the applicant has only general concepts to discuss rather than materialized schematic plans. After they are made aware of the anticipated permitting process, applicants are expected to hold the first Neighborhood Meeting to facilitate dialogue regarding what could be on a neighborhood site with residents. These conversations were intended to be based on visioning rather than logistics and accommodate conversations untethered to existing plans to bolster the influence of resident suggestions about the site (Lewis 2025). Resident feedback would then be incorporated into the draft site designs discussed at the meeting with the Urban Design Commission (UDC), allowing appointed officials with experience and training in design to review plan elements. After the UDC shares its recommendations with the Applicant, the process loops back around to a second Neighborhood Meeting to review the transformation of initial conversations about site plans to the more developed site plans and programming.

Two public meetings prior to submission may seem excessive, but OSPCD planners and councilors describe the importance of including scaffolded engagement in the process. The first Neighborhood Meeting gathers Applicants, city staff, and residents to discuss feedback on neighborhood conditions and desired outcomes without investment into specific plans. The second Neighborhood Meeting allows for plan-specific conversations and holding Applicants accountable for incorporating feedback from residents, the UDC, and planning staff (Lewis 2025). As emphasized by planners I interviewed, the second meeting should capture any outstanding concerns from the community and mark a point of consensus regarding the site plan. Lewis shared that the intention behind this process is to avoid any backtracking, as project progress is based on resident response. Prompting dialogue between residents and applicants in the first few stages of application development allows for the incorporation of feedback in a timely and cost-efficient manner. It also speaks to the core function of the Neighborhood Meeting discussed previously: to address unintended consequences and necessary deviations from the code in application.

Designing the Power Dynamic

The city's unique political climate and history shaped the success of Neighborhood Meeting. Several interviewees referenced a time when development decisions were concealed from the public, leading to widespread skepticism among residents about the integrity of city governance (Ewen-Campen 2025; UFC Member 2025). This collective memory remains vivid and continues to influence public assumptions about how power operates in Somerville. To address these concerns, city staff articulated how the Neighborhood Meeting could be used to established dynamics between stakeholders that promoted trust, transparency, and accurate records and testimony of the engagement process of how development happens (Lewis 2025). This emphasis on openness counteracts the city's historical reputation for closed-door decision-making and seeks to build trust with residents. By choosing to institutionalize more participation, the city provides a platform for engagement that could be swayed by those with existing influence on the development review process (like applicants and property owners) or could broaden sources of feedback.

Planners attend Neighborhood Meetings as a measure of checks and balances. Their presence helps verify the accuracy of the applicant's reporting on feedback at the Planning Board Meeting and in written reports. The SZO attributes the responsibility of agenda setting and record keeping to the applicants without setting a standard for how the record keeping should happen. Planners augment the NM reports with Staff Memos to the Planning Board and can speak to the Neighborhood Meeting in more detail if

relevant at PB hearings. Planning staff described their presence at NM to prevent misrepresentation of engagement and the topics discussed during these meetings (City Planner 2025). Accounts of development review both in PB meetings before and after adoption of the SZO include discrepancies between what is reported from applicants and residents about previous dialogue. Planners ensure that meetings proceed according to city standards, that feedback is properly documented, and that the process remains transparent and accountable (Ewen-Campen 2025). This oversight aims to help prevent the planning process from being used merely to satisfy procedural requirements without genuine community input, limiting opportunities for growth elites to facilitate resident feedback without implementing it.

City planners also attend the Neighborhood Meeting to act as a source of institutional knowledge regarding the SZO, the details of Mid-Rise zoning prescription, and the SPA process. They help ensure that community concerns are heard and that technical or procedural questions are answered accurately. The responsibility to provide information as an expert on the SPA process and city zoning practices can minimize potential mistrust or disengagement between residents and applicants (Lewis 2025). Planners provide information, clarify processes, and ensure that community input is formally recorded and considered in subsequent planning stages. City planners provide technical expertise regarding zoning, city codes, and the feasibility of proposed mitigations or improvements to help Applicants and residents navigate conversations limited by code.

Applicants play a pivotal role in Somerville's Neighborhood Meeting process, serving as both the primary drivers of proposed projects and as participants in a unique form of local power sharing. Professional developers have a degree of leeway in these meetings, reflecting their expertise and the city's recognition of the complexities involved in bringing housing and commercial projects to fruition (Preston 2025). However, this power is balanced by the expectation that developers engage directly with residents and city officials, making the process a true negotiation rather than a one-sided presentation. Incorporating direct engagement between Applicants and residents early in the process can humanize Applicants (Ewen-Campen 2025; Preston 2025). In the absence of engagement with individuals on a development team, residents who become involved in development review can form an idea of developers as faceless entities, making it easier for residents to direct frustration or suspicion toward them. In the words of Lewis, the meeting process puts real people in front of the community, breaking down stereotypes and fostering more nuanced interactions.

Developers I spoke with claim that the design of the Neighborhood Meeting and the Site Plan Approval process encourages developers to present themselves as approachable and responsive, understanding that their reputation and project success depend on building a degree of trust and goodwill. As one interviewee noted, while there is always the risk of adversarial encounters, most developers recognize that it is not good business to distance oneself and a project from the community (Preston 2025). Developers must explain their plans, answer questions, and respond to concerns in real time. This public forum discourages dismissive or evasive behavior, as developers who fail to engage constructively risk damaging their standing with both residents and city officials (Preston 2025). At the same time, the process provides developers with valuable feedback that can help refine their projects and increase the likelihood of approval (Local Developer 2025).

The Neighborhood Meeting is an opportunity for developers to demonstrate their commitment to the community and to the city's broader planning goals. By participating in these meetings, developers signal their willingness to be part of a transparent, collaborative process, which can help dispel lingering mistrust from past development practices in Somerville (Preston 2025). However, applicants cater to different bottom lines than planners when engaging with residents, as discussed in the literature review. Planners working for the city understand engagement within planning theory and the benefits of resident feedback on planning models in the city; applicant teams, while comprised of professionals with intimate knowledge of urban development, may not incorporate engagement into their practice. Ultimately, the success of a project often hinges on the developer's ability to balance business imperatives with genuine engagement and responsiveness to community needs in the early stages of Site Plan Approval.

Ward councilors play a crucial intermediary role in the Neighborhood Meeting and broader development process, acting as the direct link between residents and city government. They often hear complaints, concerns, or problems arising from new projects in their ward first, making it essential for them to stay informed about all ongoing and proposed developments. This proximity to the community means councilors are uniquely positioned to bring residents' lived experiences and perspectives into the decision-making process, ensuring that applicants seriously consider resident feedback (Ewen-Campen 2025; Ward Councilor 2025). They aim to communicate clearly and realistically about what aspects of a development can be influenced and where their advocacy can make a tangible difference. By being straightforward and approachable, councilors help manage community expectations and foster trust.

Parameters of the Neighborhood Meeting in the SZO

With the context of my discussions with those who shaped the process of the Neighborhood Meeting, I compared the language included in the SZO about the Neighborhood Meeting and Public Hearing to the previous Ordinance (Table 12). In the framework of a FBC, detailed descriptions of review processes help increase clarity and support swift development review processes.

Several notable improvements were made in the description of the process and expectations of engagement in the Neighborhood Meeting compared to the original Public Hearing language. Expectations for notice included the state requirements but were expanded to include “best efforts” to reach direct abutters through hand delivery, individuals who have requested to be notified around development, and local businesses (Somerville Zoning Ordinance 15.1.7.b.i). The Code also included specific time windows to accommodate incorporation of public feedback into plans while maintaining efficient review timelines. Neighborhood Meetings must be held on a weekday evening “in close proximity” to the project site.

The description of the agenda and process of the Neighborhood Meeting itself is rather broad compared to the previous succinct Order of Business described for Public Hearings. The format and agenda of the Neighborhood Meeting is left to the discretion of the applicant but must include the opportunity for attendees to hear and discuss each other’s feedback and for attendees to discuss project plans with the applicant.

The language differences between the previous ordinance and the SZO of 2019 are summarized in Table 12. Notice for the Neighborhood Meeting is expanded to include contacting individuals that have requested to be notified about development and requesting to publish notice in local businesses, requirements that are left out in the Public Hearing procedure. Additionally, the order of the Neighborhood Meeting is left to the discretion of the applicant, rather than to a more formalized process as previously required in the Site Plan Review. The Ordinance describes certain required elements of the record of the meetings in the Neighborhood Meeting report, including a roster of attendees and list of persons contacted. However, this requirement is rarely met in the Neighborhood Meeting reports for applications in the Mid-rise Districts.

Table 12. Comparing Public-Facing Procedures in Somerville’s Development Review before and after 2019

Site Plan Review Public Hearings	Site Plan Approval Neighborhood Meeting	SPA Public Hearing
Notice		
5.5.A: Publication of notice is expected by: 1) Posting notice in a Somerville newspaper at least 14 in advance of the hearing, with a second notice the following week, 2) Mailing notice to parties of interest, 3) Posting notice in the City Hall at least 14 days before the day of the hearing	15.1.7.b.i Applicants shall provide notice as follows: 1) Mailing notice to parties in interest, 2) Making best efforts to mail notice to the residents of addresses owned by parties in interest, 3) Making best efforts to hand deliver notice to each direct abutter, 4) Contacting individuals that have requested to be notified about development...via email or telephone; and, 5) Requesting local businesses to post notice in their establishment. 15.7.d.i The Director of Planning & Zoning shall post notice of a Neighborhood Meeting in a conspicuous place in City Hall at least (7) days in advance.	7.c.i The Director of Planning & Zoning shall publish notice of a public hearing in a newspaper and the City of Somerville website at least 14 days in advance. 7.d.ii The Director of Planning & Zoning shall post notice... in a conspicuous place in City Hall at least 14 days in advance. iii. Applicants shall post notice...in a conspicuous place at the subject property at least (14) days in advance.
Time and Place of Event		
5.5.B. Public hearings held...will normally be scheduled to occur during the regular meeting of the Board.	2.b.ii. Development review applications must be submitted within 120 days of the Neighborhood Meeting. 2.b.iii ...A Neighborhood Meeting must occur at least (14) days prior to any design review and at least (14) days prior to submittal of an application. 2.b.iv. Neighborhood Meetings should be held at a location near the subject property on a weekday evening after 6:00 p.m. or on weekends at any reasonable time.	8.a.i A public hearing must be held within 65 days after receiving a completed development review application that requires a Site Plan Approval.
Order of Business		
1) Reading of petition and legal notices by the clerk, together with presentation of exhibits 2) Applicants’ presentation 3) Presentation of staff report from Planning Staff 4) Testimony from any elected official 5) Public Testimony	5.3.b.ix The format and agenda are at the discretion of the Applicant, in consultation with the Ward representative from the City Council and any neighborhood council, subject to the following conditions:	Based on past Planning Board Hearings, the order of business is as follows: 1) Reading of petition and legal notices by the clerk, together with presentation of exhibits 2) Applicants’ presentation

6) Applicant's rebuttal 7) Questions from Members of the Board 8) Closing of public hearing, followed by Board discussion 9) Motion and vote	1) Attendees must be able to hear and discuss each other's feedback at the Neighborhood Meeting and opportunity must be provided for substantive engagement between attendees and the Applicant. 2) Applicants are required to bring all materials required by the Building Official.	3) Testimony from Planning Board 4) Public Testimony in support and to express concern 6) Questions from Planning Board 7) Applicant's response 8) Deliberations / discussion by the Board 9) Motion and vote
Record of Minutes and Agenda		
6.4.E. The minutes shall include all votes of the Planning Board, names of individuals who spoke at the meetings, and a summary. 6.6.D The Planning Director shall issue a written record of the site plan review decision, including a detailing of the findings and analysis that were the basis for the decision, within 10 business days of the Hearing.	15.3.xi. The Director of Planning shall keep a public record that includes, but may not be limited to, the following: a). A list of persons contacted, and the manner and date of contact, b). The date, time, and location, c). A roster or signature sheet of attendees, d). Copies of all materials provided by the applicant at the meeting. 15.3.b.xii. The Director of Planning & Zoning shall record minutes of the Neighborhood Meeting and provide a summary of the meeting to the review boards. (Known as the Staff Memo) 3.b.xiii. Applicants are responsible to submit a response to concerns raised and a description of any changes to the proposed development made because of the feedback. (Known as the Neighborhood Report)	8.c.i The Director of Planning & Zoning shall post all relevant development review application materials on the City website prior to the notice of a public hearing.
Source: Somerville Zoning Ordinance, 2019.		

Process of the Neighborhood Meeting

Misalignment of the NM with Development Processes

In practice, interviewees reported points of tension in the process that inhibit the intended integrative, collaborative nature of Neighborhood Meetings and the site plan approval (SPA) process. Interviewees who work on the applicant side of the development review process tended to prioritize financial feasibility and the burden of working through the 11-step SPA process in their discussion of the Neighborhood meeting and the process. Russell Preston, a planner whose firm develops zoning codes and has contributed to development applications in Somerville, explained that costs and financial backing require that the applicant team move the development design at a pace that does not always align with the intended timelines of the SPA.

Often, the first Neighborhood Meeting will already include the architectural design, or at the very least, the massing, general facade, setbacks, and height requirements, as well as the programming of the site (UDC Member 2025; Preston 2025). For example, the plans for 366 Broadway already included schematic designs and detailed street views of the proposed project. The plans presented at the first Neighborhood Meeting are the result of feasibility estimations and work done to create financially sound plans for the entities backing the development. Even with resident feedback, cost feasibility often seems to outweigh what is shared during the first Neighborhood Meeting (Ward 3 Resident 2025; UDC Member 2025). The process for 366 Broadway reflects this; although the allotment of studios and 1-bedroom apartment concerned residents at the first Neighborhood Meeting, the unit mix remained unchanged until the request of the Planning Board. The only changes made to the plans proposed between Neighborhood Meeting 1 and 2 were design alterations suggested by the Urban Design Commission.

The feedback from the residents who engage in the Neighborhood Meeting should not be anything that the applicant team had not previously considered in prior resident engagement, Preston shared. To minimize pushback, the applicant will often go “door-to-door” to abutters to discuss the development components abutters would like or are wary of before the Neighborhood Meeting (Preston 2025; Local Developer 2025). As a member of the applicant team for 599 Somerville Avenue, Preston incorporated this method of engagement into the application process. In both the Planning Board Hearing and the Neighborhood Meetings, residents of 40 Pitman Street (a project abutter) mentioned the applicant team’s effort to listen to their concerns. This method of engagement outside of the documented Site Plan Approval process has potential to place much of the engagement incorporated into a development

process “outside the dialogue”. If used to supplement and inform the conversations in Neighborhood Meetings, this method exemplifies participation from multiple sources. This method of engagement is driven by the applicant’s desire to minimize opposition to existing power holders in traditional land use engagement -- the development team wants to minimize opposition from abutters and property owners on behalf of the power holders who are the equity investors involved in the project.

Developers also cited the extensive pre-development costs of navigating the complicated SPA process. To ensure that a project is compliant and can move forward, a certain amount of design work must take place and be presented to banks or financial backers to demonstrate viability (Local Developer 2025). The visions and outcomes desired in Somerville—specifically those outlined in the comprehensive plan, SomerVision—can conflict with the bottom line of market-rate development. Without extensive subsidies to encourage the development of affordable housing and family-sized units, such projects are not considered viable or worthy of financial backing (Local Developer 2025; Ward 4 Resident 2025; Ward 5 Resident 2025). As seen in the Site Plan Approval process for 366 Broadway, applicants would rather contribute a one-time fractional payout to the city’s affordable housing fund and keep desirable studio and one-bedroom apartments rather than accommodate family-sized households, even with explicit community support.

The process also requires applicants to navigate the tension between project ambitions and community expectations. Developers often arrive at meetings with proposals that include features or requests they know may be negotiated, anticipating the need for compromise (UFC Member 2025; Ward 4 Resident 2025). However, repeated revisions and ongoing engagement can be costly, and applicants are generally reluctant to make significant changes after initial plans are set due to the expense and complexity involved. This dynamic underscores the importance of early, transparent dialogue in the Neighborhood Meeting, where both sides can clarify priorities and avoid surprises later in the process.

Manifestation of Power in the NM

The roles of major players within the Neighborhood Meeting often differ greatly from the intended design. In the case studies, planners attended the meetings and responded only to questions about the zoning ordinance or other concerns. Furthermore, the planners present at the 366 Broadway did not incorporate development outcomes shaped by comprehensive goals, parameters of neighborhood-level plans, or even district-specific requirements when discussing regulations around the project. The planners in both case studies observed and spoke during the Neighborhood Meetings to answer questioned related

to parking requirements. With several Neighborhood Meetings and development applications to monitor, city staff have limited capacity to engage with applicants (Ward 3 Resident 2025; City Staff 2025; UDC Member 2025). The biggest role planners play to facilitate the consideration of resident feedback in the Site Plan Approval process is through the Staff Memo published to the public and shared with Planning Board members before a hearing.

The discussions at Neighborhood Meetings can be both hyper-local and philosophical, ranging from the minutiae of building materials to broader debates about economic systems and urban change. This sometimes leads to frustration among participants, as the conversation can veer between practical concerns and big-picture ideals. Applicants shared some negative feelings towards resident input, describing some residents like “nosy neighbors” or outsiders when weighing in on technical aspects of development, likening their input to telling a heart surgeon how to perform surgery (Preston 2025; Local Developer 2025). At the same time, residents shared skepticism toward an applicant’s genuine interest to hear feedback. Residents described the dynamic as one of opposition rather than collaboration, where residents must strongly advocate for any modification to an application that is typically well established, even at the Neighborhood Meeting stage (Ward 5 Resident 2025; Ward 3 Resident 2025).

Residents

Residents shape much of the dialogue that happens in a Neighborhood Meeting. The people who attend Neighborhood Meetings tend to fall into two main groups: direct abutters who feel the impact of a proposed development, and advocates who champion broader public goods such as affordable housing, green space, or improved infrastructure. These advocates often push for outcomes that benefit the wider community, such as more affordable housing, tree plantings, or wider sidewalks. The comment analysis included in Figures 10 and 11 notes frequent discussion about the environment or tree cover in Site Plan Approval engagement – this is in large part due to a single resident who attends most of the Planning Board Hearings and Neighborhood Meetings. The presence of persistent single-issue residents ensures that the conversation extends to those facets of neighborhood planning.

However, these residents belong to a small pool of community members who can participate in the Neighborhood Meeting. Those who show up are typically individuals with the time, capacity, or motivation to engage—often because they have a direct stake or a strong passion for a particular cause. Many “normal” residents, as described by interviewees, may not care enough to attend or may feel the process is not relevant to them. Despite efforts to broaden outreach—such as flyer-ing tenants directly, which goes

beyond the legal requirement to notify property owners—many residents remain disengaged, sometimes expressing apathy or frustration with the process. During the Planning Board Hearing for 366 Broadway, a resident described how “without that level of organization [referring to Neighborhood Councils], residents have a difficult time keeping track of the high rate of development” (Tori Antonino in Planning Board Meeting 2023). Antonino, as part of the Union Square Neighborhood Council, recognized that residents who live in areas without comparable neighborhood organizations often lack the capacity to engage in these meetings.

The value of neighborhood groups came up in several interviews with residents. A resident from Ward 4 mentioned that there is an energy for advocacy and building a more inclusive Somerville where people want to help shape their communities, but it’s challenging to know where to start. The applicant presentation during Neighborhood Meetings is full of technical phrases and references to the SZO. A typical resident lacks the time to come to Neighborhood Meetings prepared with contextual information, and when they do, residents noted the difficulty of accessing application materials during the pre-submission process, so depend on the explanation provided by applicants at the beginning of the Neighborhood Meeting (Ward 5 Resident 2025; Ward 3 Resident 2025). One resident even distanced himself from the typical neighbor, saying that his position as advocate is only possible based on the time and energy he has in retirement (Ward 6 Resident 2025).

Councilors

Councilors approach Neighborhood Meetings with a sense of responsibility to weigh the feedback they receive from attendees, recognizing that those who participate often have strong opinions or are directly impacted. At the same time, they remain mindful of the many residents who do not attend these meetings but still have a stake in the outcomes. Ward councilors strive to act in the best interests of the entire community, balancing the input of vocal participants with the needs and concerns of the broader, and sometimes quieter, constituency (Ewen-Campen 2025; Ward Councilor 2025).

Ultimately, ward councilors see themselves as stewards of local democracy—showing up when important issues arise, listening to constituents, and making decisions that reflect both the expressed and unspoken interests of the people who elected them. Their visible presence and engagement in the Neighborhood Meeting process demonstrates accountability and responsiveness in city governance. The applicant often takes on the responsibility of answering specific questions, while the planner acts as an overseer and the councilor provides a certain political perspective on buy-in and feasibility based on

constituent concerns. For example, the second Neighborhood Meeting for 366 Broadway included a conversation about parking permits for residents between the applicant, councilor, and residents. Interviewees frequently described the Neighborhood Meeting by comparing it to other forms of public participation in land use decisions. The Neighborhood Meeting is seen as an opportunity to reduce adversarial interactions and foster compromise to achieve desirable outcomes for both applicants and residents. These meetings provide options that can be discussed within the parameters of zoning and financial considerations (UDC Member 2025; Ewen-Campen 2025). Notably, the case studies capture the role of councilors as representatives of broad constituent attitudes rather than engaged advocates. In the case of 366 Broadway, the Councilor did not comment on the lack of consideration for changing the unit mix between the first and second Neighborhood Meeting despite direct constituent feedback but engaged in a conversation around community sentiment surrounding parking near T-stops. As another witness to the Neighborhood Meeting process, councilors can play an important role in incorporating the results from engagement into Planning Board considerations. However, neither Planning Board Hearing in the cases studied had a councilor present.

Participation Across Midrise Districts

Participation data across the 14 applications in Midrise Districts reflect how the content and reach of engagement within the Neighborhood Meeting is distinct from Planning Board Hearing participation and that which is conventionally pictured in land use processes. To capture this, I coded the Neighborhood Meeting feedback captured in the 12 Neighborhood Meeting reports that included descriptions of resident comments. I used the coding scheme found in the book *Neighborhood Defenders*, where authors Einstein, Glick, and Palmer coded all public comments during Special Permit hearings across 97 municipalities in Massachusetts (Einstein et al. 2020). I tracked every comment made about the 12 projects based on the authors' 20 original categories, adding "Development timing", "Unit mix/Housing", "Engagement", and "Trash" based on the content of the Neighborhood Meetings (See Appendix D for descriptions of each category). Many residents made comments that included several categories, so each distinct sub-question or comment was tallied. Of 342 attendees across 12 meetings, 277 comments were coded. The same coding scheme was used for the 47 comments made during the Planning Board hearings for each of the applications. Resident engagement in the Neighborhood Meeting covered more of the topic categories (twenty-one categories) compared to Planning Board Hearing comments (fifteen categories).

In the Neighborhood Meetings, residents discussed issues of parking, building use, noise or construction logistics, and traffic most frequently. Figure 10 shows that parking comments far outpaced any other topic – issues with multifamily apartment buildings and parking capacity is frequently an issue in development. From 2019 to 2024, buildings sites within a 0.5-mile radius of an MBTA station had minimum parking requirements waived. This exception stirred much conversation, with residents sharing the need for parking in proximity to T stations and the need for more onsite parking in districts where people were expecting the demand for parking to increase. In 2024, the city eliminated parking minimums across all districts, eliminating the varying expectations from residents across neighborhoods.

Other than comments about parking, the Neighborhood Meetings represented a variety of topics and very few of the preselected topics in the coding scheme were excluded. Abutter-centric topics like construction, trash, building height, and the development timeline were included in several of the meetings coded. This could be expected based on who received the required notification for the Neighborhood Meeting: those living within 300 feet of the development. However, Neighborhood Meetings just as often included discussions of housing, affordability, pedestrian and bike improvements, considerations of green space, and engagement logistics. These topics speak to the conditions of development in the Neighborhood more broadly and how development could impact neighborhood trends for housing, the public realm, and engagement in land use decisions.

The comments from the Public Hearing covered fewer topics and with fewer number of residents participating. In the public comment session. Figure 11 illustrated that many of the neighborhood-level comments and those relating to city-wide goals for development mentioned earlier, like bike and pedestrian improvements, are limited. Abutter concerns are still present in the Planning Board hearing comments, with comment topics like privacy, construction, and parking and traffic being incorporated.

The persistence in abutter-centric comments could be related to the commitment to change from residents speaking about broader neighborhood issues and those speaking about abutter impacts. Between each neighborhood Meeting and the Planning Board Hearing, the diversity of topics in each discussion drops. Consistent comments across all engagement opportunities include concern for those residents living adjacent to the project.

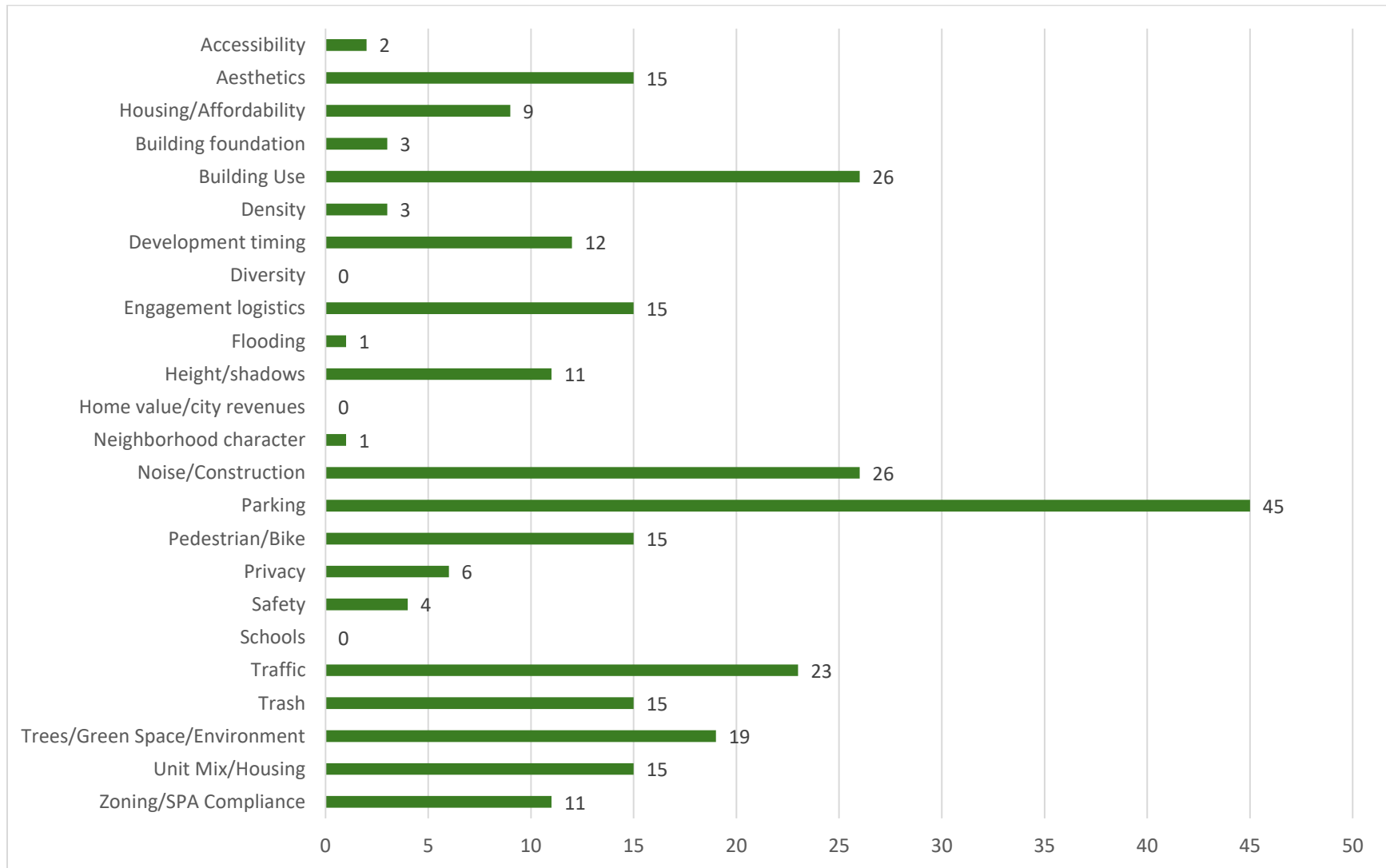


Figure 10. Frequency of Topic in Neighborhood Meeting Participation (277 comments). Source: Somerville Reports and Decisions.

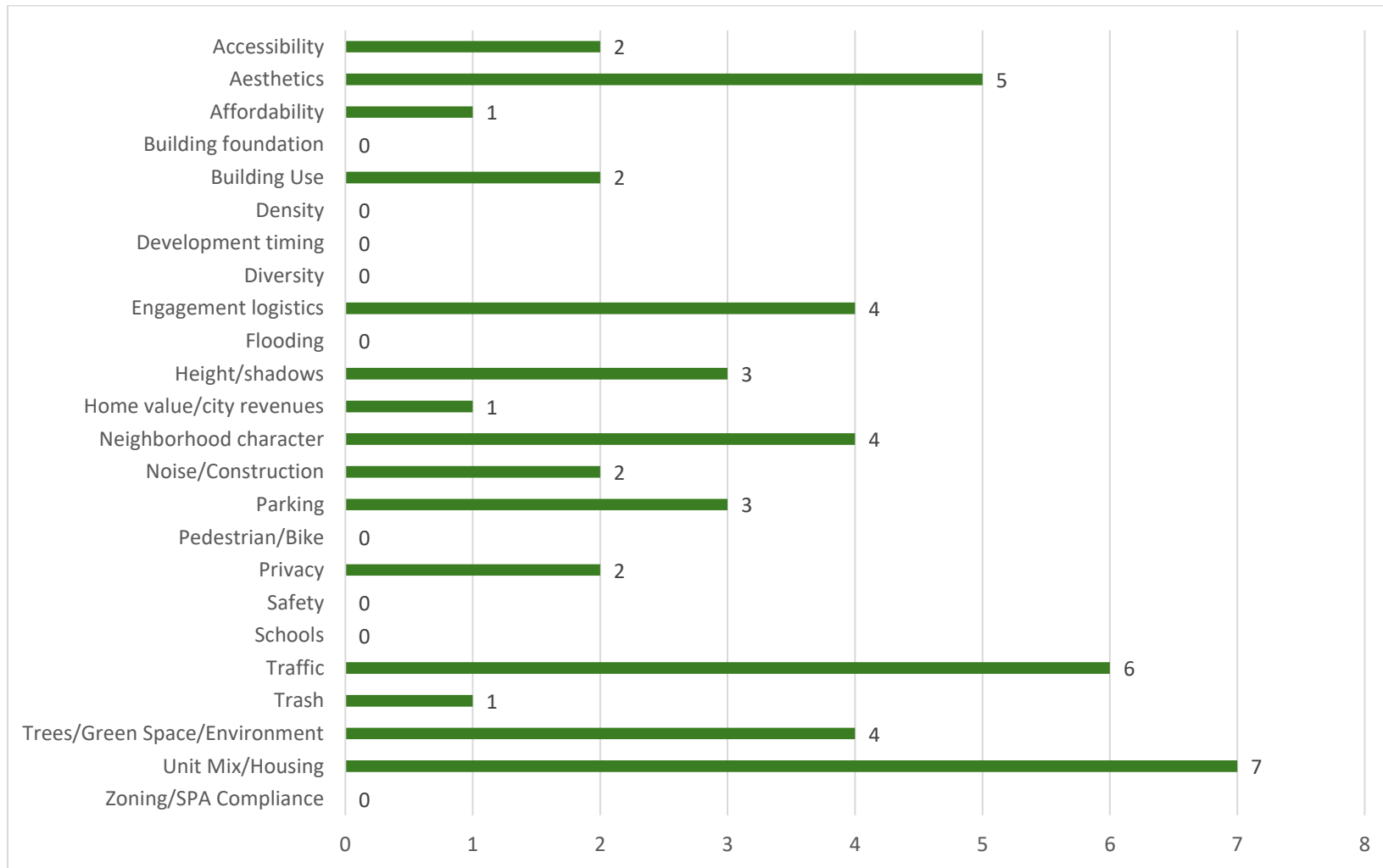


Figure 11. Frequency of Topic in Planning Board Hearing Public Comment (47 comments) Source: Somerville Reports and Decisions.

Outcomes of the Neighborhood Meetings

While Neighborhood Meetings in other communities may be characterized by low turnout or a tendency to simply reduce the scale of projects, Somerville's political conditions foster a more dynamic and unpredictable engagement. Interviewees affiliated with the city noted that, contrary to stereotypes, these meetings often produce unexpected and meaningful exchanges between stakeholders, reflecting the city's ongoing efforts to include diverse voices and lower barriers to participation. The perceived success of Neighborhood Meetings in Somerville is inseparable from the city's political context: a community determined to overcome past shortcomings by embedding transparency, accountability, and genuine public involvement into the heart of its planning processes.

Conceptualizing the Success of a Neighborhood Meeting

I asked interviewees at the end of our conversation how they would describe a "successful" Neighborhood Meeting. Interviewees demonstrated a range of approaches to evaluating whether a Neighborhood Meeting achieved its intended effects or was desirable. Planning staff noted that establishing a qualitative or quantitative framework to determine the success of Neighborhood Meetings does not address a fundamental, historical problem of land use participation—namely, that a lack of attendance at a public-facing event does not necessarily imply a lack of outreach. Instead, it may indicate that most residents who received notice of the meeting are satisfied with the proposed development. One can use this assumption to explain the feedback in the Neighborhood Meetings for 366 Broadway and 599 Somerville. Most comments slanted negative or critical, with each resident seeking clarification or change concerning an element of the process or of the development. Of the 45 comments catalogued for the case studies, only three were positive (with two noting appreciation for community engagement). Rather than attendance serving as a positive endorsement, a lack of attendance may just as easily imply tacit approval.

For planning staff, the success of a Neighborhood Meeting is based on meeting state requirements and ensuring that any changes or alterations discussed do not contradict existing plans for the area (Lewis 2025). However, identifying these potential conflicts may not occur until the staff memo to the planning board is prepared, rather than immediately after the Neighborhood Meeting while the application is still in the pre-submission phase. This delay could potentially extend the development timeline and require a "return to the drawing board" (UDC Member 2025). The documented delays in the case studies, mainly in the Planning Board decision, were based on requests to change the unit mix, improve the pedestrian

safety in an adjacent intersection, and add window treatment to protect abutters' privacy. These revisions, while requested by Planning Board members, stemmed from public comments made at both the Neighborhood Meetings and the Planning Board hearing. These delays, which occurred because the applicant did not effectively incorporate public feedback, indicate an opportunity for efficiency in the Site Plan Approval process on the part of applicants and planning staff. Truly considering resident input pre-submission – as OSPCD staff originally designed it – would lessen the likelihood of Planning Board members needing to push decisions on behalf of changes made based on public comment.

For applicants, a key advantage of the Neighborhood Meeting is the opportunity to put faces to the projects being developed. Residents interviewed overwhelmingly characterized developers as being in opposition to the work of resident advocacy groups and city-wide missions for affordable housing, perceiving that developers prioritize profit over any beneficial effects of development (Ward 6 Resident 2025; Ward 4 Resident 2025). One Planning Board Hearing public comment for 366 Broadway shares this sentiment: “developers are coming in and making a killing”. However, many residents also commented positively about direct contact or discourse they were able to have with applicants. In the case studies, the contact mentioned was the “outside the dialogue” conversations the 599 Somerville team had with direct abutters prior to the first Neighborhood Meeting. Adversarial interactions are described as isolated incidents, and the process is generally viewed as a successful opportunity to foster person-to-person relationships. There are mixed views, as expressed in interviews and public comments, about whether this opportunity is used to the fullest.

Both residents and applicants acknowledged the potential for applicants to “steamroll” through the Site Plan Approval (SPA) process. Residents described applicants as ranging from “respectful professionals” to “steamrollers,” conveying broad shifts in understanding about the attitudes and intentions of developers in these Neighborhood Meetings (Ward 4 Resident 2025; Ward 6 Resident 2025). Residents prioritized conversation over mere statements. The process was also described with some pessimism, with some suggesting that applicants typically use bargaining strategies to facilitate false compromises, ultimately ending up with project schematics they intended to pursue from the outset. City staff and residents described outlandish first proposals that are then negotiated down to something more in line with the existing fabric of the surrounding area (Ewen-Campen 2025; Ward 3 Resident 2025). This was not apparent in the case studies, where the initial proposed development bore much similarity to the approved application. At the same time, applicants suggested that extensive pre-SPA outreach is used to

create buy-in and collect input on potential initial ideas, and that initial schematics must be reasonable to be viable within the realm of feasible development (Preston 2025).

City planners clarify which improvements and mitigations fall under the city's authority rather than the developers. For example, while developers may be required to plant street trees or upgrade sidewalks to accommodate increased pedestrian traffic from a new building, broader community amenities (like adding a bench to a nearby park) typically remain outside the developer's direct obligations and within the city's purview. This distinction ensures that required mitigations are appropriate, enforceable, and aligned with city policy rather than ad hoc requests (Lewis 2025). These neighborhood improvements are common and encouraged among applicants, who seek to gather support from residents in the area (Preston 2025; Local Developer 2025). In both case study decisions, the Planning Board approved the projects with conditions that cater to the public realm and direct desires from the public comment period of the Hearing, rather than what was said in Neighborhood Meetings, though meeting conversations have similar content.

Participation Across Midrise Districts

The case studies show that the level of participation in Neighborhood Meetings varied across building type. However, participation across the two Neighborhood Meetings for a site is greater than the public engagement at Planning Board hearings. The sample of applications is limited but in comparing the case studies, commercial development attracts larger numbers of residents. Based on the comment category, questions and concerns regarding the lack of housing, loading and unloading, and privacy all arise with frequency in meetings regarding commercial development. Because the building was applying for a commercial principal use in a mostly residential area, the Neighborhood Meetings for 599 Somerville included many more questions about the building use, i.e. the noise, smell, privacy, and schedules for deliveries.

A broad limitation regarding the assessment of the engagement, as shared by resident testimony and in my own experience collecting data for this thesis, was the lack of available information regarding attendance at Neighborhood Meetings. Additionally, the formatting of the Neighborhood Meeting report varied across applications. As stated previously, the extensive documentation for 366 Broadway's Neighborhood Meeting, including the materials presented and video recordings of the meetings, were made available at a resident's request. For 599 Somerville, only the city-mandated documents, like the Neighborhood Meeting report and staff memo, were available for review. The lack of information within

many applicant-provided Neighborhood Meeting reports disqualified many of the Mid-Rise applications for case study review. Some reports were a narrative summary of the dialogue between applicant and residents; others included a video recording or written transcript to allow an unbiased review of the participation. The most common formatting of these Neighborhood Meeting reports included a matrix with the resident concern listed next to a prepared response from the applicant. This is likely not the response given during the Neighborhood Meeting but rather a prepared follow-up as required in the SZO (Section 15.3.b.xiii.). Several Neighborhood Meeting reports lacked information about the number of attendants and commonly listed attendees as the applicant team and “local abutters”. Table 13 shows the type of Neighborhood Meeting report supplied by applicants.

Table 13. Recorded Neighborhood Meeting Participants, Planning Board Hearing Participants, and the Formatting of the Neighborhood Meeting by Site, 2021 to 2025.							
	Street	Number	Building Type	District	NM Participants	PBH Participants	NM Report Type
1	Somerville Ave	379	General	MR5	Unknown	0	Not available
2	Broadway	872	General	MR3	17	0	Summary
3	Somerville Ave	599	Commercial	MR3	86	8	Concern/Response
4	Bow St	59	General	MR5	20	8	Summary
5	Broadway	28-44	General	MR6	49	8	Notes and Partial Transcript
6	Highland Avenue	371	General	MR5	Unknown	0	Not available
7	Medford Street	16 & 20	General	MR4	Unknown	3	Summary
8	Alpine Street	2-4	General	MR4	Unknown	3	Concern/Response
9	394 McGrath Hwy	394	Residential	MR4	Unknown	2	Concern/Response
10	Washington Street	7	Residential	MR4	5	0	Concern/Response
11	Broadway	366	Residential	MR4	32	4	Concern/Response, Video Recording
12	White St	32/40/44	Commercial	MR4	80	0	Summary
13	Broadway	720	General	MR4	22	7	Summary
14	Chester St	53	General	MR4	Unknown	4	Concern/Response

Timeline of the Site Plan Approval Process

Based on literature around Form-Based Codes, prescriptive zoning ordinances will streamline development review processes to foster growth, all the while keeping costs low for developers. For the

fifteen SPA processes in Mid-Rise districts, the timeline from application completion to the Planning Board decision stayed within the mandated 120 days in the SZO. The average 117 days for a decision to be made included two separate Planning Board hearings with a period for written public testimony between. This is slightly shorter than the 127.1 days the same process would take in the previous Zoning Ordinance for Site Plan Review. While it is difficult to compare the duration of the informal pre-submission process of the old Zoning Ordinance, over three-quarters of the Site Plan Approval process is in the pre-submission phase, with the average time from the first Neighborhood Meeting to submission taking 511 days, or 1.4 years.

Table 14. Duration of Public Facing Development Review		
	Pre-SZO Overhaul (2016-2020)	Post SZO Overhaul (2021-2025)
Number of Applications	10*	15
Range of time from Submission to Decision	26-226 days	58-235 days
Average time from Submission to Decision	127.1 days	117.0 days
Average duration of Site Plan Approval Process	N/A	511.0 days
*The applications considered in the 2016-2020 period were those that used the previous Zoning Ordinance to apply for new construction, which required a Site Plan Review process. It should also be noted that of the 10 sites, only four are located within what is now zoned as a Mid-Rise district.		

7. Findings

Based on the case studies and interviews, emergent themes showcase areas of friction between resident participation and development review timelines. This chapter discusses these themes below

The institutionalization of public engagement in the form of the Neighborhood Meeting brings public and municipal awareness to projects earlier in the application process. The purpose of the Neighborhood Meeting, described in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, is to:

promote the submittal of a development review application that is more responsive to community concerns, expedite the review process, and to lessen the cost of development review by reducing continuances and appeals (15.1.3.a.iii of the SZO).

Based on the analysis in this thesis, the current pre-submission process is over three-quarters of the Site Plan Approval Process as a whole. As the city continues to prioritize engagement feedback loops in land use decision-making, city officials need an opportunity to review the record of public discourse in a systematic way. Knowing what the public has said and how these conversations shaped iterations of the application as it goes through planning and design review helps keep both officials and applicants accountable to the desires of the community.

Some of the language in the SZO still leaves room for applicant discretion. There is no order of business or specific agenda stated, leaving it to the applicants to decide. While the requirements of application materials encourage a presentation-based meeting – the format chosen for all 14 Midrise applications reviewed – the way public comments and applicant responses take place is up to the applicant. This results in variations in the way feedback is gathered and addressed. Some responses are included in the Neighborhood Meeting reports, others choose to give the best response they can during the meeting.

The realignment of power in the design of the Neighborhood Meeting uplifts the political element of land use participation. In the previous Zoning Ordinance, applicants were obligated to engage with residents during the public comment period of the Planning Board hearing. The comment period accepted statements of endorsement and concern, informing the subsequent deliberation between applicant and board. While public comments may prompt board members to consider components of a plan not previously discussed, this period does not establish direct communication between resident and application. Institutional, invitational participation tends to become an empty gesture of engagement in land use participation. Design elements of the Neighborhood Meeting attempt to address these issues through the restructuring of power in meeting discourse.

In addition to establishing iteration to application review, the Neighborhood Meeting aims to realign power among parties involved. As described by OSPCD planners and the SZO, the Neighborhood Meeting's purpose is to facilitate "substantive discussion" between resident and applicant. The Neighborhood Meeting ideally generates resident feedback that applicants can incorporate during expected revisions of the application. Planning staff oversee the entire process and OSPCD keeps track of the documentation and the required notice for Neighborhood Meetings through the city website. Incorporating city councilors as hosts of the Neighborhood Meeting elevates city officials, as representatives of the neighborhood constituency, to the same level of influence as applicants in the engagement process. In theory, this makes it easier to amplify resident feedback; councilors can leverage their influence as hosts of the Neighborhood Meeting to support the feedback of their constituency. However, the dialogue generated by councilors, applicants, and residents may not influence project applications until the Planning Board hearing.

Applicants pursue engagement with abutters outside of the Neighborhood Meeting to create buy-in for existing site plans. Working within strict cost and timing constraints and the ultimate bottom line of keeping a project within budget and designed to create profit, applicants are motivated to engage with residents to facilitate buy-in on their project proposal. This conflicts with the city's conception of the process of Site Plan Approval and the role of the Neighborhood Meeting on application development. Individuals with experience on application teams, and with the Site Plan Approval process overall, explain that they prefer to know what feedback to expect at the Neighborhood Meeting based on communication with abutters beforehand. This method of engagement can be supplemental to the Neighborhood Meetings but may create bias towards the topics covered by abutters in Planning Board Hearings like construction timelines and noise. Effort from the applicant team to address the abutter comments before a Neighborhood Meeting may create the feeling resident feedback has already been addressed and may limit the capacity for applicants to address further comments from the Neighborhood Meeting.

Developers characterize the Site Plan Approval process as cumbersome, convoluted, and costly. Site Plan Approval requires developers to hire teams equipped to proceed through the 11 steps involved in getting a project approved in a Mid-Rise district. Even in the first step of meeting with planning staff, it behooves applicant teams to have a fleshed-out idea for development so there is minimal revising. By meeting with residents they know will receive notice of the Neighborhood Meeting beforehand, applicants can prepare for a smoother engagement process with fewer revisions, minimizing unexpected costs of major plan revisions or changes in the project that might influence anticipated profit.

The Neighborhood Meeting does not solicit substantial engagement from a broad resident base.

Although the zoning ordinance makes specific demands concerning the notice for Neighborhood Meetings (see Table 12), cost and timeline feasibility still drive applicants to prioritize the input they seek outside of the SPA process. The notices for Neighborhood Meetings in the case studies met the minimum requirements described in the SZO. Both applicant teams notified abutters within a 300 feet radius and posted a flyer to the OSPCD site. This resulted in 118 individuals, including applicant teams, participating across the four Neighborhood Meetings studied. This value includes 59 participants for the first Neighborhood Meeting of 599 Somerville Avenue; while the highest number of participants for a single meeting across all 15 Mid-Rise applications studied, this could be explained by the building's commercial principal use next to mainly residential abutters. Residents were evaluated based only on their place of residence for this research; further study on the participants of Neighborhood Meeting could include other demographic characteristics to better describe the resident base of participants.

The number of participants does not effectively convey the narrowness of concerns raised by residents within the Neighborhood Meeting. Based on data available in the case studies, the spread of Neighborhood Meeting participants is much wider than in the Planning Board hearing for the same project (see Figure 7). However, only a portion of these participants provide feedback during the Neighborhood Meeting. Those who provide feedback, based on the content of their comments and questions, are often abutters and property owners invested in the potential impact of the project on their property. Referring to the tables of the comment type and frequency (Figures 10 and 11), participants often come to seek clarification on how development will impact their quality of life and their neighborhood. These types of comments were abundant during the Neighborhood Meetings for 599 Somerville Ave, where many comments concerned privacy, noise, construction logistics, and traffic impacts (see Table 8). This could lead to interpretation of the Neighborhood Meeting as an avenue for property owners to have the ear of applicants with the city as witness.

The dialogue found in the Neighborhood Meetings is to protect what residents have, not advance what could be shared. Even when comments incorporated concern about broader community or comprehensive goals, like affordable housing, many of the residents making these comments identified as community advocates or as being involved in larger resident organizations. The content of the engagement within Neighborhood Meetings suggests it is heavily influenced by those residents with the capacity to engage even in more traditional, invitational engagement methods. The SZO requests an applicant's "best efforts" to flyer in local businesses and reach any interested parties for notice of the

Neighborhood Meeting. Even with a high level of notice, the Neighborhood Meeting remains an opportunity for engagement with residents who have preexisting conceptions of local land use issues, time and freedom to attend the meetings, and existing influence on land use planning processes.

In response to Planning Board frustrations regarding the limited participation in hearings, member Lynn Richards proposed strategies to better incorporate engagement into Site Plan Review in an April 2025 Planning Board hearing. These methods, which included resident-led dialogues at home, were varied in location, frequency, and most importantly, in who was responsible for leading the discussion. The hearing included references to OSCPD work on modifying the extent of notice for Neighborhood Meetings, alluding to the widespread desire for change within municipal organizations.

The sociopolitical conditions of Somerville illicit conversations in the Neighborhood Meeting not typical of traditional land use planning dialogue. Based on the sample of public minutes available for municipalities across Massachusetts, Einstein et al. suggest that engagement with land use processes is often prompted by strong reactions, positive or negative. Topics most frequently addressed in these minutes included neighborhood character, parking, the environment and open space, aesthetics, density, and traffic (Einstein et al. 2020, 117). The sample from Neighborhood Meetings shows that the most frequent topics included in discussion were parking (14.1 percent), noise/construction (8.1 percent), building use (8.1 percent), traffic (7.2 percent), and environment and open space (5.9 percent). The Neighborhood Meetings create opportunities for dialogue that covers a broader range of topics than in Planning Board hearings. Resident engagement in the Neighborhood Meeting covered more of the topic categories (21 categories) compared to Planning Board Hearing comments (15 categories).

Most parties involved have incentive, based on the political legacy of Somerville, to facilitate substantial community participation in land use decisions. Active resident coalitions and neighborhood councils, formed in response to the swift change in development patterns in the wake of the Green Line extension, have prepared individuals with the capacity and knowledge to address and advocate for community concerns, maintaining the connection between the project plans and the goals of the city's comprehensive plan. City councilors work to support the desires of their constituency, while a fundamental function of planning staff is to apply long-range plans on the neighborhood and site level, and applicants want to build community support for their project to limit delay.

Many concerns raised from neighbors are not adequately addressed by applicants until the Planning Board hearing. The Planning Board hearing minutes about 366 Broadway exemplify this issue and all the

interviews with residents included concerns about the lack of follow-through from the Neighborhood Meeting. Both Neighborhood Meetings for 366 Broadway included public comment about revising the unit mix to accommodate more family-sized units, a suggestion consistent with the goals of SomerVision. When the Planning Board director asked about the neighborhood reaction to the unit mix, the applicants first responded by saying there was no major feedback. Only once an additional public comment was made during the hearing and the director asked about it again did applicants note that in fact the unit mix was reviewed during the Neighborhood Meetings. Based on this, the Board requested a modified unit mix that included more family-sized units. The applicants complied and the number of these units doubled.

Based on the case studies, it does not seem that the discussion within the Neighborhood Meeting has much influence until similar comments are made in the Planning Board hearing. If consideration of public feedback only happens once the Planning Board members are exposed to them through public comment, participation in development review still heavily depends on existing power structures. As designed, residents should have more influence on elements of the applications; in practice, residents who engage still depend on already influential civic leaders to consider their input.

Several factors can extend development review timelines. On a project level, applicants must learn how to navigate the different steps of the Site Plan Approval process and establish a budget that accommodates the number of pre-submission meetings required to develop in a Mid-Rise district. The public engagement expected of applicants requires sharing notice and taking time to document and respond to resident feedback. Meetings with city staff and the public may prompt revisions to the ongoing application. Interviewees often commented on the sequencing of the Urban Design Commission meetings between the two Neighborhood Meetings, explaining that UDC input is prioritized over nonexpert input from the first Neighborhood Meeting. On a neighborhood or city level, city planners and residents alike struggle to stay on top of the number of Neighborhood Meetings hosted throughout the year. Two separate engagements for a single project, while providing the opportunity for extensive engagement may falter if planning staff cannot effectively monitor meetings or if the typical resident cannot make time to attend the meetings that are of importance to them.

Documenting the Neighborhood Meeting influences how the dialogue from meetings is considered. The Staff memo on the entire Site Plan Approval process often includes notes on the Neighborhood Meetings for a project that provide more detail on the conversation than some Neighborhood Meeting reports. The case study of 366 Broadway was the only project with recordings of the Neighborhood

Meeting. Without evidence of exactly what happened during one of these meetings, the record depends heavily on how the applicants and city staff choose to report on participation. Furthermore, the Planning Board hearings studied include board members asking questions directly to applicants rather than to the written record, allowing for applicant interpretation to influence the Board's understanding of the engagement process.

Dissimilarity throughout record keeping makes it difficult to understand public sentiment regarding certain developments in retrospect. Many of the obstacles within this thesis stemmed from inconsistent record keeping across Site Plan Approval processes. Much of the engagement in land use planning stems from concern or critique. A consistent public record of the participatory proceedings since the adoption of the SZO could show a record of consistent themes of dialogue between resident and applicant.

8. Recommendations

For the City of Somerville

Evaluate the Site Plan Approval process in response to several participant observations. Planning Board members, OSPCD staff, and Ward councilors all recognize limitations to how residents of Somerville engage with land use decisions. The Neighborhood Meeting design accommodates substantial engagement by requiring that it be held before the application submission; nevertheless, its design elicits engagement from residents traditionally already involved in land use planning. In a similar vein to Boston’s Article 80 Modernization Project, an assessment of applicant and resident attitudes around the Neighborhood Meeting and Site Plan Approval would help the city establish a record of how participants feel about the process. This process would also help determine the ideal scale of resident feedback – the city can revise the Neighborhood Meeting to encourage site-specific and abutter-centric feedback or position the discourse between applicants and residents to focus on city-wide planning goals.

Determine how to evaluate success of the Neighborhood Meeting and other Land Use participation methods. Interviewees demonstrated a range of approaches to evaluating whether a Neighborhood Meeting achieved its intended effects or was desirable. Planning staff noted that establishing a qualitative or quantitative framework to determine the success of Neighborhood Meetings does not address a fundamental, historical problem of land use participation—namely, that a lack of attendance at a public-facing event does not necessarily imply a lack of outreach. Instead, it may indicate that most residents who received notice of the meeting are satisfied with the proposed development. For applicants, a key advantage of the Neighborhood Meeting is the opportunity to put faces to the projects being developed. Residents described applicants as ranging from “respectful professionals” to “steamrollers,” conveying broad shifts in understanding about the attitudes and intentions of developers. An OSPCD review of the Plan Approval Process, and the findings within, may help refine what a successful Neighborhood Meeting could do and how to conduct discussions that meet the desires of those involved.

Compare the Site Plan Approval process with peer cities. Extended development timeline burden applicants and constrain their capacity to fruitfully engage within the SPA process and Neighborhood Meeting. In interviews, city staff and applicants mention that between 90 and 180 days is an ideal development review timeline, from first Neighborhood Meeting to Planning Board decision. Incorporating different engagement models can streamline or extend reviews. Denver’s Large Development Review

(LDR) approach takes between 79 and 102 days for intermediate commercial and residential projects, respectively (Suder and Jackson 2023). While the population and scale of peer cities with innovative Site Plan Review are greater than Somerville's, the cities used in Boston's project represent the most forward-thinking approaches to meaningful land use participation. These methods should also be considered with respect to the typical timeline of development review, as efficiency is a major factor in satisfaction across stakeholders.

Considering Somerville's legacy of strong community involvement, resident council and other more formalized resident groups, like Portland's Development Review Advisory Committee, would be feasible. Positioning residents as advisors to ensure process optimization for applicants and transparent review processes aligned with the city's land use goals would generate feedback based more on how site development contributes to broader planning goals in the city. Alternatively, incorporating documents like Denver's Community Benefit Agreements and Good Neighbor Agreements catalog commitments between resident and developer that are easier to oversee among planning and building inspection staff.

When asked about ideal forms of engagement, many interviewees mentioned formats that rely on resident-led conversation without the presence of existing powerholders like planning staff or applicants. Planners often mentioned that ideas and goals generated among residents, without the presence or influence of experts, give residents more power and expand the scope of their engagement. Depending on residents to create and catalog discussion, like in SomerSuppers, planners depend on residents to report on takeaways and next steps. This enables residents to have responsibility and agency in land use discussion.

Encourage City Councilors to attend Planning Board hearings. Councilors are responsible for hosting every Neighborhood Meeting that occurs across the city. As a result, they can speak to the events of each Neighborhood Meeting and could provide information about the comments from the community outside of the report provided by planning staff and applicants. Participation opportunities that include applicants benefit from the presence of advocates (like Somerville's neighborhood councils) or city officials elected to represent neighborhood constituencies (like city councilors). As documented in the review process for 366 Broadway, accurate recordkeeping without parameters for applicant reports may not be guaranteed. By attending the Planning Board hearings, councilors can advocate for those residents who provided feedback in the Neighborhood Meeting but could not attend the hearing.

Introduce formatting and content requirements for the applicant-submitted Neighborhood Meeting report. Standardized requirements would help ensure that reports accurately reflect what happened at the meeting and prevent applicants from omitting or misrepresenting concerns raised by the public. Furthermore, requiring certain details to be included in the reports, such as a roster of participants or a precise attendance number, helps planning staff and boards to review them efficiently. Consistent records across projects will make assessments of the city's Neighborhood Meetings easier and enable residents and policymakers to compare the process of these meetings more accurately. Finally, requiring certain details in the report or submitting a transcript reduces the chance of selective reporting by developers that may naturally happen as applicant team members attempt to summarize the events of a Meeting.

For Further Research

Due to the specificity of this thesis on the pre-approval Neighborhood Meeting and the five years of limited documentation of previous Site Plan Approval processes, the findings discussed reflect only the circumstances around the two case studies and the attitudes of those interviewed about this process. Themes that emerged because of the interviews do not reflect the sentiments of the Somerville community, nor its city government. Furthermore, there were opportunities for analysis that required comparing sets of data that while similar were kept differently. This refers to the variety of Neighborhood Meeting reports assessed and the documents relating to Site Plan Review for the previous zoning ordinance. Broader research regarding resident participation in site development review should address best practices for evaluating resident participation in land use planning.

Furthermore, a comparison of participation methods – e.g. resident advisory groups or resident round tables – would help provide a better understanding of how power dynamics and the relationships between resident, applicant, and city staff can determine substantial assessment of resident feedback. Finally, comparing development timelines across municipalities is exceedingly difficult as development review processes vary widely and some cities attempt to address community input in traditionally closed-door processes. Monitoring development review across peer cities to assess where project applications experience delay, and for what reason, would help assess the role and impact of resident participation in extended review timelines. Assessing the approach in other municipalities with a Form-Based Code would provide a more refined comparison of participation techniques.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of public engagement in the form of the Neighborhood Meeting brings public and municipal awareness to projects earlier in the application process. The work in this thesis displays that the design of the Site Plan Approval (SPA) process intended to incorporate transparent, iterative conversations between applicant and resident, addressing the first research question concerning participation and SPA's design and implementation. In implementation, applicant discretion creates variation in how Neighborhood Meetings are recorded and incorporated into plans. Applicants, in methods to minimize dissent for projects, potentially undermine the city's conception of the Site Plan Approval (SPA) process and the role of the Neighborhood Meeting on application development if comments from the Neighborhood Meeting are not meaningfully addressed. My research questions separated implementation and participation influence as factors in the SPA process. In reality, distinguishing these two elements was a challenge throughout the assessment of the Neighborhood Meeting and SPA process. I framed my questions as such to allow for my findings to lend more easily to existing participation and policy evaluation metrics; however, the small sample size and varied documentation of engagement made this difficult.

My final research question addressed the tension between participation and development efforts in Mid-Rise districts. The sociopolitical conditions of Somerville elicit conversations in the Neighborhood Meeting not typical of traditional land use planning dialogue but still attract residents conventionally involved in land use engagement. Additionally, concerns raised from neighbors are not adequately addressed by applicants until the Planning Board Hearing, suggesting typical power dynamics in land use decisions still hold, regardless of the development review design. The Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, city councilors, and Planning Board members could collaborate to explore different methods of resident participation to foster substantial engagement and streamlined development review. While Somerville is experiencing similar challenges in their development review process as other municipalities, it is uniquely equipped with a highly engaged community and existing resident organization structures to allow for change that would accommodate applicant and resident interests.

Bibliography

- 366 Broadway LLC. 2022. "Neighborhood Meeting Reports." <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/2023-05/Broadway%20366,%20P&Z%2021-175%20%E2%80%93%20Neighborhood%20Meeting%20Report%2020220924.pdf>.
- Albrechts, Louis. 2012. "Reframing strategic spatial planning by using a coproduction perspective." *Planning Theory*, 12(1), 46-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095212452722>.
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4): 216-224. doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2018.1559388#d1e93>.
- Bergstrom, Danielle, Kalima Rose, Jillian Olinger, and Kip Holley. 2012. *The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Sustainable Communities Initiative.
[https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE_LY_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE_LY_FINAL%20(1).pdf).
- Brody, Samuel D., David R. Godschalk, and Raymond J. Burby. 2003. "Mandating Citizen Participation in Plan Making: Six Strategic Planning Choices." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 69 (3): 245–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360308978018>.
- Burdette, Jason T. 2004. "Form-Based Codes: A Cure for Cancer Called Euclidean Zoning?" Master's thesis, Master of Urban and Regional Planning, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/284b8a50-e51a-4244-811d-e1a2fa60cca9/content>
Summary: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d9a1/5fd1e4e64173b337a6cf4afacc9aaa2b51fd.pdf>.
- Callahan, Kathe. 2007. "Citizen Participation: Models and Methods." *International Journal of Public Administration*, 30 (11): 1179–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900690701225366>.
- City of Portland. 2025. "Permit Metric Dashboard."
https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/ppdmetrics/viz/PermitMetricDashboard_top_public/PortlandPermitMetricDashboard
- City of Somerville. n.d. "Reports and Decisions."
<https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/planning-and-zoning/reports-and-decisions>.
- City of Somerville. 2012. *SomerVision 2030. Comprehensive Plan 2010-2030*.
<https://www.somervision2040.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/11/somervision-comprehensive-plan.pdf>.
- City of Somerville. 2013. *The RA/RB Report: An Analysis and Discussion of Current Residential Zoning Regulation*. <https://www.somervillezoning.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/02/ra-rb-report-final-web.pdf>.
- City of Somerville. 2017. "Somerville by Design." <https://www.somervillebydesign.com/>.

- City of Somerville. 2021a. "599 Somerville Ave Planning Board Decision." <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/599%20Somerville%20Ave%20Decision%202022%2002%2003%20Stamped.pdf>.
- City of Somerville. 2021b. *Somervision 2040. Comprehensive Plan Update 2010 – 2040*. <https://www.somervision2040.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/10/Somervision-2040-Adopted.pdf>.
- City of Somerville. 2021c. "599 Somerville Ave Staff Memo". [https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/599%20Somerville%20Ave%20Staff%20Report%20\(SPA\)%202021%2012%2015.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/599%20Somerville%20Ave%20Staff%20Report%20(SPA)%202021%2012%2015.pdf).
- City of Somerville. 2023a. "366 Broadway Staff Memo." <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/2023-07/Broadway%20366,%20P&Z%2021-175%20-%20Staff%20Memo%202023%2005%2030.pdf>.
- City of Somerville. 2023b. "366 Broadway Ave Planning Board Decision". <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/2023-10/Broadway%20366,%20P&Z%2021-175%20-%20Decision%20Stamped%2020230815.pdf>.
- Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. "Neighborhood Defense Tactics." Chapter. In *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis*, 115–45. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Faga, Barbara. 2014. "Formers Versus Zoners: How and Why Communities Shift to Form-Based Zoning." Dissertation, Georgia Institute of Technology. <https://repository.gatech.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/128fbae3-2d78-410e-8ba9-a4b11b30edc6/content>.
- Fagotto, Elena, and Archon Fung. 2006. "Empowered Participation in Urban Governance: The Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 30(3): 638-655. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00685.x>.
- Forester, John. 1982. "Planning in the Face of Power." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 48:1, 67-80, DOI: 10.1080/01944368208976167. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01944368208976167?needAccess=true>.
- Fürstenau, Daniel, Flavio Morelli, Kristina Meindl, Matthias Schulte-Althoff, and Jochen Rabe. 2021. "A Social Citizen Dashboard for Participatory Urban Planning in Berlin: Prototype and Evaluation." In T. X. Bui (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 2358-2367). *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*. <https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2021.288>
- Hack, Gary, Eugenie L. Birch, Paul H. Sedway, and Mitchell J. Silver, eds. 2009. *Local Planning: Contemporary Principles and Practice*. Washington, DC: ICMA Press, 2009
- Harvey, David. 2008. "The Right to the City." *New Left Review*. Issue 53. <https://davidharvey.org/media/righttothecity.pdf>.
- Hirt, Sonia A. 2009. "Premodern, Modern, Postmodern?" *Journal of Planning History*, 8(3): 248-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513209338902>. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/1538513209338902>.

- Innis, Lolita Buckner. 2007. "Back to the Future: Is Form-Based Code an Efficacious Tool for Shaping Modern Civic Life?" *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change*, 11(4): 75-103. Penn Carey Law, Legal Scholarship Repository. <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1071&context=jlasc>.
- Jonas, Andrew EG, and David Wilson. 1999. *The Urban Growth Machine: Critical Perspectives, Two Decades Later*. SUNY Press. https://books.google.mk/books?id=aTgEaZafnv8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbv_atb#v=onepage&q&f=false.
- Kohr, R. Todd. 2004. "From Form to Function: An Evaluation of the Effectiveness and Potential of Form-Based Zoning Codes." Master's Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Urban Studies, and Planning. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4385552.pdf>.
- Kopáček, Miroslav. 2021. "Land-Use Planning and the Public: Is There an Optimal Degree of Civic Participation?" *Land*, 10(1): 90. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land10010090>.
- Lefebvre, Henri, 1968. *Le droit à la ville*. Anthropos. 1996. *The Right to the City*. (English translation). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/henri-lefebvre-right-to-the-city>.
- Lee, Gina Hanhee. 2014. "Participatory Zoning: Collectivity, contradictions, and the politics of inclusion in neighborhood planning." Master's Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Urban Studies, and Planning. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/152478>.
- Lemar, Anika Singh. 2021. "Over participation: Designing Effective Land Use Public Processes.", 90 *Fordham Law Review*. 1083.. <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5899&context=flr>.
- Madden, Mary and Russell, Joel. 2014. "An Introduction to Form-Based Codes: How Form-Based Codes Are Written." *Planners Web*, December 5, 2014. <https://plannersweb.com/2014/12/fbc4/>.
- MirafTAB, Faranak. 2009. "Insurgent Planning: Situating Radical Planning in the Global South." *Planning Theory*, 8(1): 32-50. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/1473095208099297>.
- Molotch, Harvey. 1976. "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place." *American Journal of Sociology* 82(2): 309-332. <https://www.jstor-org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/stable/2777096?seq=1>.
- Ostrander, Susan A. 2013. *Citizenship and Governance in a Changing City: Somerville, MA*. Temple University Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt4fb>.
- Parolek, Daniel G., Karen Parolek, and Paul C. Crawford. 2008. *Form-Based Codes: A Guide for Planners, Urban Designers, Municipalities, and Developers*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Polyzoides, Stefanos. 2008. "The Time is Now." Foreword to *Form Based Codes*, by Parolek, Parolek, and Crawford., xiii- xviii. John Wiley & Sons.
- Proakis, George. 2016. "Strategies for Project Review under a Form-Based Code." *Congress for New Urbanism*, March 28, 2016. <https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2016/03/28/strategies-project-review-under-form-based-code>.

- Purcell, Mark. 2009. "Resisting Neoliberalization: Communicative Planning or Counter-Hegemonic Movements?" *Planning Theory*, 8(2), 140-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095209102232>.
- Rafi Properties. 2021. "599 Somerville Ave Neighborhood Meeting Report." <https://s3.amazonaws.com/somervillema-live/s3fs-public/Neighborhood%20Meeting%20Report.PDF>.
- Ramezani, Sara, and Homayoon Nooraie. 2023. "A comparative study of participatory land-use planning and the theory of the right to the city." *GeoJournal*, 88, 5173–5203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-023-10912-8>.
- Stapper, Michiel (E. W). and Jan Willem. Duyvendak. 2020. "Good residents, bad residents: How participatory processes in urban redevelopment privilege entrepreneurial citizens." *Cities*, Volume 107, 2020, 102898, ISSN 0264-2751, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102898>.
- Suder, Sean and Racquel Jackson. 2023. "Peer City Review and Analysis." <https://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/9e000103-b719-4de9-a553-0d989946ee0b>.
- Tagtachian, Daniela A., Natalie N. Barefoot, and Adrienne L. Harreveld. 2019. "Building by Right: Social Equity Implications of Transitioning to Form-Based Code." *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law*, 28 (1): 71–115. <https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/building-right-social-equity-implications/docview/2292028132/se-2>.
- Talen, Emily. 2013. "Zoning For and Against Sprawl: The Case for Form-Based Codes." *Journal of Urban Design*, 18 (2): 175–200. doi:10.1080/13574809.2013.772883. <https://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/doi/full/10.1080/13574809.2013.772883#d1e206>.
- Thorpe, Amelia. 2017. "Rethinking Participation, Rethinking Planning." *Planning Theory & Practice*, 18(4): 566-582. DOI: 10.1080/14649357.2017.1371788 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14649357.2017.1371788?needAccess=true>
- Walters, David and Dustin C. Read. 2014. "Form-Based Zoning from Theory to Practice." *Real Estate Issues*, 39 (1): 29–37. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1538585098/fulltextPDF/1874E2298CC340AAPQ/1?accountid=14434&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.
- Westin, Martin. 2019. "Rethinking power in participatory planning: Towards reflective practice." Dissertation, Uppsala University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden. https://pub.epsilon.slu.se/16462/7/westin_m_191125.pdf.
- Wright, Ian and Herbert Geer. 2013. "Are we all neoliberals now? Urban planning in a neoliberal era." ISOCARP. https://www.isocarp.net/data/case_studies/2412.pdf Anika Singh Lemar. 2021. Over participation: Designing Effective Land Use Public Processes, 90 *Fordham L. Rev.* 1083. Available at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol90/iss3/2>.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Materials

A.1. Interview Protocol

Scheduling Interviews

Researcher sends all communications and finalizes meeting times and agendas

Available times will be shared with a Google sheet so interviewees can choose a 45-minute window in a 3-week period.

- Research interviewee to add or adjust interview questions
- Send zoom link and reminder email to the interviewee

Conducting the Interview

Researcher follows the Interview Structure document based on the type of stakeholder being interviewed and edits made based for each interviewee

- Informed consent for recording and quote attribution
- Follow interview structure guide

Close the call with a reminder of the follow-up email with draft interview report and request for additional interview contacts

After the Interview

Researcher will summarize notes and record potential emerging themes

- Recording will be transcribed using tools available through Microsoft Word to supplement live notes
- Follow up on potential other interviewees
- Send follow-up email with thank you and draft interview report, confirm comfort with incorporated quotes

A.2. Interview Structure

A.2.1. Interviews with City Staff and Councilors

Call Introductions

- Informed consent to record
 - Before I explain my thesis and begin asking you some questions, I am hoping to record this conversation so I can review our conversation as it occurred and not rely solely on the notes I take while we speak. Would you be comfortable with me recording this conversation for my own reference?
- 12. Once my writing has progressed further, I will share what I incorporate from this conversation in my thesis. If you would rather, I not refer to you by name based on what is included, please feel free to respond to the draft with that request. I will also remind you of this option when I send the draft.
- Explanation of Research Study

- This study's purpose is to understand how the Neighborhood Meeting is used as a tool for engagement in the Site Plan Approval process. I am limiting my analysis to Neighborhood Meetings as used in Mid-rise Districts and how elements of the SPA design and implementation affect some of the intended outcomes of the Form-Based Code in the SZO.
- With all that said, do you have questions about my study before we continue?

Introductory Questions

- What is your experience with Neighborhood Meetings?
- 13. How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?

Participation in the Neighborhood Meeting

- 14. What do you hope is different between the participation that occurs in development review with the new zoning ordinance compared to the previous zoning code?
- Have you seen this to be the case?
- Does the approach to public participation across Neighborhood Meetings seem consistent or aligned across the city? What unifies the approach?
- Part of this requirement in the SZO is to notify “neighboring landowners and the general public”—who do you commonly see at these meetings?
- In your experience, how do you evaluate if a Neighborhood Meeting has been successful? What are you looking for?
- Have you seen a change in development outcomes from Neighborhood Meetings?

Form-Based Code

- How does the inclusion of the Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval Process impact development outcomes in the context of the Form-Based Code in the SZO?
- What is the impact of the Neighborhood Meeting on development in Mid-rise districts?
- How much of the input from residents that happens at a Neighborhood Meeting is connected to the form of the development or its impact on the public realm?
- George Proakis, when speaking about the Somerville FBC, mentioned that the Neighborhood Meeting was incorporated to help address the unintended consequences and support the necessary deviations from the code.
- 15. A set code cannot anticipate every development consequence that will happen in the city. Do you think the Neighborhood Meeting helps address these consequences and necessary deviations in a way the standard Public Hearing cannot?

A.2.2 Interview with Applicant

Call Introductions

- Informed consent to record
 - Before I explain my thesis and begin asking you some questions, I am hoping to record this conversation so I can review our conversation as it occurred and not rely solely on the notes I take while we speak. Would you be comfortable with me recording this conversation for my own reference?
- Once my writing has progressed further, I will share what I incorporate from this conversation in my thesis. If you would rather, I not refer to you by name based on what is included, please feel

free to respond to the draft with that request. I will also remind you of this option when I send the draft.

- Explanation of Research Study
 - This study's purpose is to understand how the Neighborhood Meeting is used as a tool for engagement in the Site Plan Approval process. I am limiting my analysis to Neighborhood Meetings as used in Mid-rise Districts and how elements of the SPA design and implementation affect some of the intended outcomes of the Form-Based Code in the SZO.
- With all that said, do you have questions about my study before we begin?

Introductory Questions

- What is your experience with Neighborhood Meetings?
- How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?

Participation in the Neighborhood Meeting

- How are developers approaching the Neighborhood Meetings? For example, does the development team see these meetings to inform abutters of project plans, for collaboration and feedback, or something else?
- What do you hope is different between the participation that occurs in development review with the new zoning ordinance compared to the previous zoning code?
- Have you seen this to be the case?
- In your experience, how do you evaluate if a Neighborhood Meeting has been successful?
- Have you seen a change in development outcomes from Neighborhood Meetings?

Form-Based Code

- How does the inclusion of the Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval Process impact development outcomes in the context of the Form-Based Code in the SZO?
- What is the impact of the Neighborhood Meeting on development in Mid-rise districts?
- How much of the input from residents that happens at a Neighborhood Meeting is connected to the form of the development or its impact on the public realm?
- George Proakis, when speaking about the Somerville FBC, mentioned that the Neighborhood Meeting was incorporated to help address the unintended consequences and support the necessary deviations from the code.
- A set code cannot anticipate every development consequence that will happen in the city. Do you think the Neighborhood Meeting helps address these consequences and necessary deviations in a way the standard Public Hearing cannot?

A.2.3 Interview with Resident

Call Introductions

- Informed consent to record
 - Before I explain my thesis and begin asking you some questions, I am hoping to record this conversation so I can review our conversation as it occurred and not rely solely on the notes I take while we speak. Would you be comfortable with me recording this conversation for my own reference?

- Once my writing has progressed further, I will share what I incorporate from this conversation in my thesis. If you would rather, I not refer to you by name based on what is included, please feel free to respond to the draft with that request. I will also remind you of this option when I send the draft.
- Explanation of Research Study
 - This study's purpose is to understand how the Neighborhood Meeting is used as a tool for engagement in the Site Plan Approval process. I am limiting my analysis to Neighborhood Meetings as used in Mid-rise Districts and how elements of the SPA design and implementation affect some of the intended outcomes of the Form-Based Code in the SZO.
- With all that said, do you have questions about my study before I ask you some?

Introductory Questions

- What is your experience with Neighborhood Meetings?
- How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?

Participation in the Neighborhood Meeting

- How has communication between neighborhood and developer, city staff and developer changed from project to project? How has the dynamic felt different between different projects?
- How does your position as a resident in a Neighborhood Meeting feel different than in a Public Hearing?
- In your experience, how do you evaluate if a Neighborhood Meeting has been successful?

Form-Based Code

- How much of the input from residents that happens at a Neighborhood Meeting is connected to the form of the development or its impact on the public realm?
- George Proakis, when speaking about the Somerville FBC, mentioned that the Neighborhood Meeting was incorporated to help address the unintended consequences and support the necessary deviations from the code.
- A set code cannot anticipate every development consequence that will happen in the city. Do you think the Neighborhood Meeting helps address these consequences and necessary deviations in a way the standard Public Hearing cannot?

A.3. Interviewee Recruitment Email

A.3.1. Interview Invitation for City Staff and Ward Councilors

Hi _____,

I hope this email finds you well! My name is Fiona Gain, and I am a graduate student in the Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning program at Tufts University. I am currently preparing my final thesis on participation in land use planning, more specifically the function of the mandatory Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval process for Mid-Rise districts in Somerville. I am curious about how the City of Somerville developed the 11-step Site Plan Approval process, specifically the Neighborhood Meetings required pre-submission for projects in MR districts. I believe you can provide very valuable insight as I progress with my thesis.

The conversation should not last more than 45-minutes and would include the following central questions:

1. How does the inclusion of the Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval Process impact development outcomes in the context of the Form-Based Code in the SZO?
2. Can you describe how the community visioning within the Form-Based Code interacts with the community views expressed in Neighborhood Meetings?
3. How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?
4. Why does the inclusion of the Neighborhood Meeting in the 11-step Site Plan Approval process support the “Outreach-Dialogue-Decide-Implement” goals of Somerville by Design?

I have shared this Google sheet (link embedded) with some windows of time that I am available over the next few weeks. I am hoping to speak with City staff, members of development teams, and Somerville residents—this Google sheet will be shared with everyone—but interviews will be one-on-one. If you would like, you can sign your name next to the block of time that works for you, or you can respond to this email with the time you have selected.

Thank you for considering speaking with me, and I look forward to your response!
All the best,
Fiona

A.3.2. Interview Invitation for Applicants

Hi _____,

My name is Fiona Gain, and I am a graduate student in the Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning program at Tufts University. I am currently preparing my final thesis on participation in land use planning, more specifically the function of the mandatory Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval process for Mid-Rise districts in Somerville. I am curious about the development-side coordination of working the Neighborhood Meetings into the Site Plan Approval process, and I am hoping to speak to some professionals with first-hand experience. Based on your experience working in Somerville, I believe you can provide unbelievably valuable insight as I progress with my thesis.

If your schedule allows, I would appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions by zoom or phone call. The conversation should not last more than 45-minutes and would include the following central questions:

1. How does the inclusion of the Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval Process impact development outcomes in the context of the Form-Based Code in the SZO?
2. How are developers approaching the Neighborhood Meetings? For example, does the development team see these meetings to inform abutters of project plans, for collaboration and feedback, or something else?
16. How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?

I have shared this Google sheet (link embedded) with some windows of time that I am available over the next few weeks. I am hoping to speak with City staff, members of development teams, and Somerville residents—this Google sheet will be shared with everyone—but interviews will be one-on-one. If you would like, you can sign your name next to the block of time that works for you, or you can respond to this email with the time you have selected.

Thank you for considering speaking with me, and I look forward to your response!
All the best,
Fiona

A.3.3. Interview Invitations for Somerville Residents

Hi _____,

I hope this email finds you well! My name is Fiona Gain, and I am a graduate student in the Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning program at Tufts University. I am currently preparing my final thesis on participation in land use planning, more specifically the function of the mandatory Neighborhood Meetings in the Site Plan Approval process for Mid-Rise districts in Somerville. I am curious about the perspective of residents who have previously participated in the Neighborhood Meeting. I have selected two case studies, the projects of 366 Broadway and 599 Somerville Avenue, as the main examples of how residents can participate in the development process.

If your schedule allows, I would appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions by zoom or phone call. The conversation should not last more than 45-minutes and would include the following central questions:

1. Could you describe what effective participation means for you? How do Neighborhood Meetings fit into your understanding of effective participation?
2. How do Neighborhood Meetings effectively facilitate the relationship between the developer, the public, and the city?
3. What role should residents' input during Neighborhood Meetings play in the broader context of the City's Form-Based Code, which has been designed through previous community consensus?

I have shared this Google sheet (link embedded) with some windows of time that I am available over the next few weeks. I am hoping to speak with City staff, members of development teams, and Somerville residents—this Google sheet will be shared with everyone—but interviews will be one-on-one. If you would like, you can sign your name next to the block of time that works for you, or you can respond to this email with the time you have selected.

Finally, if you have any neighbors who have also been involved in a Neighborhood Meeting and would be willing to speak with me, I would appreciate any additional contacts. Thank you for considering speaking with me, and I look forward to your response!

All the best,
Fiona

A.4. List of Interviewees

Listed in the order they are introduced in the thesis.

Sarah Lewis, Senior Planner, City of Somerville Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD)

Ben Ewen-Campen, Ward Councilor

Ward Councilor #2

Russell Preston, Founder and Director, Principle Group

Local Developer

City Planner, OSPCD

Urban Forestry Committee (UFC) Member

Resident, Ward 3 #1

Resident, Ward 3 #2

Resident, Ward 5

Resident, Ward 6

Lynn Richards, City of Somerville Planning Board Member

Appendix B: Public Notices

B.1 366 Broadway Notices

Neighborhood Meeting 1

Notice of Neighborhood Meeting #1

Please join Councilor Jesse Clingan and 366 Broadway Somerville LLC for a 1st Neighborhood Meeting under SZO Section 15.1.3

**To meet the developer and introduce conceptual designs for a new residential Apartment Building project at
366 Broadway, Somerville**

(Current site of the Winter Hill Professional Building, a two-story brick office building)

Monday, January 31, 2022 @ 6:00PM

Virtual:

Join with Zoom

ID: 860 6230 5934

Passcode: 969394

OR

Join by phone

16465588656

ID: 860 6230 5934

Passcode: 969394

Please join us to learn more about this project and share your feedback prior to the development of more detailed design proposals.

Representatives from the design team will be available to answer questions. Everyone is welcome to attend. Community participation and feedback is welcomed as we work toward the redevelopment of the site. If you are unable to join us but have questions or concerns, please e-mail us at nzozula@mqmlp.com or call Councilor Clingan at 617-290-1904.



Neighborhood Meeting 2

Notice of Neighborhood Meeting #2

Please join Councilor Jesse Clingan and 366 Broadway Somerville LLC for a 2nd Neighborhood Meeting under SZO Section 15.1.3

To meet the developer and introduce conceptual designs for a new residential Apartment Building project at
366 Broadway, Somerville

(Current site of the Winter Hill Professional Building, a two-story brick office building)

Thursday, June 30, 2022 @ 6:00PM

Virtual:

Join with Zoom

ID: 840 2096 9978

Passcode: 708515

OR

Join by phone

16465588656

ID: 840 2096 9978

Passcode: 708515

Please join us to learn more about this project and share your feedback prior to the development of more detailed design proposals.

Representatives from the design team will be available to answer questions. Everyone is welcome to attend. Community participation and feedback is welcomed as we work toward the redevelopment of the site. If you are unable to join us but have questions or concerns, please e-mail us at nzozula@mqmlp.com or call Councilor Clingan at 617-290-1904.



Planning Board Meeting Notice



City of Somerville PLANNING BOARD

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

PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

The **Somerville Planning Board (PB)** will hold a virtual public hearing on **Thursday, July 20, 2023**, at 6:00pm through GoToWebinar.

Pursuant to Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022, this meeting of the Planning Board will be conducted via remote participation. An audio recording of these proceedings will be available by using the registration link once the meeting has concluded.

TO USE A COMPUTER

Link: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/4278346410886983007>

Webinar ID: 382-297-531

TO CALL IN

Phone number: 1 (415) 655-0052

Access code: 189-631-606

The Planning Board will consider the following pursuant to M.G.L. 40A and the Somerville Zoning Ordinance:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| 366 Broadway | 366 Broadway Somerville, LLC proposes to develop a four (4)-story LEED Gold and Net-Zero Ready apartment building and establish a Household Living principle use for 58 dwelling units in the Mid-Rise 4 (MR4) zoning district. This proposal requires Site Plan Approval and one (1) Special Permit for Household Living. |
| 32/40/44 White Street | SGL Development, Inc. proposes to develop a four (4)-story Commercial Building in the Mid-Rise 4 (MR4) district. The proposal requires Site Plan Approval and one (1) Special Permit for relief from the roof-mounted mechanical equipment and screening height. |

Development review application submittal materials and other documentation may be viewed online at

<https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/planning-and-zoning/reports-and-decisions>.

Interested persons may provide comments to the Planning Board at the hearing or by submitting written comments by mail to Planning & Zoning Division, 3rd Floor City Hall, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143; or by email to planning@somervillema.gov.

7/5/23, 7/12/23 The Somerville Times

B.2 599 Somerville Avenue Notices

Neighborhood Meeting 1

Neighborhood Meeting 2

Planning Board Meeting Notice



City of Somerville

PLANNING BOARD

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

PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

The Somerville Planning Board (PB) will hold a virtual public hearing on Thursday, January 6, 2022, at 6:00pm through GoToWebinar.

Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2021, this meeting of the Planning Board will be conducted via remote participation. An audio recording of these proceedings will be available upon request to planning@somervillema.gov.

TO USE A COMPUTER

Link: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/2271350649628773392>
Webinar ID: 699-414-259

TO CALL IN

Phone number: 1 (415) 655-0052
Access code: 132-200-192

The Planning Board will consider the following pursuant to M.G.L. 40A and the Somerville Zoning Ordinance:

599 Somerville Ave Rafi Properties LLC proposes to develop a 3-story LEED Platinum commercial building in the Mid Rise 3 (MR3) zoning district which requires Site Plan Approval and one (1) Special Permit.

Development review application submittal materials and other documentation may be viewed online at <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/ospcd/planning-and-zoning/reports-and-decisions>.

Interested persons may provide comments to the Planning Board at the hearing or by submitting written comments by mail to Planning & Zoning Division, 3rd Floor City Hall, 93 Highland Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143; or by email to planning@somervillema.gov.

Appendix C: Case Study Analysis

Table C.1. Case Information for Site Plan Review Timelines, 2016-2019

Source: Somerville Reports and Decisions

	Case Number	Street	Number	Application Submission	Decision Date	Duration(days)
1	PB 2014-34-R4	Assembly Square	Block 5	8/30/2017	12/14/2017	106
2	PB 2016-16	Broadway	118-120	10/6/2016	8/3/2017	301
3	PB 2016-79	Broadway	1060	6/24/2016	9/22/2016	90
4	PB 2017-05	Assembly Square	Block 5B	2/22/2017	4/20/2017	57
5	PB 2017-06	Assembly Square	Block 8	2/22/2017	5/18/2017	85
6	PB 2017-23	NorthPoint-Parcel EF Design		10/5/2017	12/14/2017	70
7	PB 2017-27	McGrath Hwy and Middlesex Ave	845 & 74	10/17/2017	4/5/2018	170
8	PB 2018-07	Middlesex Avenue	5	3/15/2018	6/7/2018	84
9	PB 2018-09	McGrath Hwy	845	4/19/2018	5/15/2018	26
10	PB 2018-12	Revolution Drive	290	7/5/2018	11/8/2018	126
11	PB 2019-04	Prospect St	10	2/11/2019	7/11/2019	150
12	PB 2019-08	Somerville Avenue	346	2/19/2019	10/3/2019	226
13	PB 2019-18	Broadway	28-44	7/10/2019	11/21/2019	134
14	Average Time from Submission to Decision					120.3 days

Table C.2. Case Information for Site Plan Approval Timelines in Midrise Districts, 2020-2025

Source: Somerville Reports and Decisions

	Case Number	Street	Number	Application Submission	Decision Date	Duration(days)
1	CZC20-000104	Somerville Ave	379	4/2/2021	7/9/2021	98
2	P&Z 20-026	Broadway	872	8/10/2021	11/4/2021	86
3	P&Z 20-031	Somerville Ave	599	11/22/2021	1/20/2022	59
4	P&Z 21-017	Bow St	59	6/26/2022	2/16/2023	235
5	P&Z 21-029	Broadway	28-44	10/25/2021	6/16/2022	234
6	P&Z 21-041	Highland Avenue	371	8/30/2021	11/18/2021	80
7	P&Z 21-057	Medford Street	16 & 20	5/18/2022	8/18/2022	92
8	P&Z 21-119	Alpine Street	2-4	9/25/2023	12/7/2023	73
9	P&Z 21-122	McGrath Hwy	394	6/15/2022	10/14/2022	121
10	P&Z 21-147	Washington Street	7	6/8/2023	9/27/2023	111
11	P&Z 21-175	Broadway	366	3/29/2023	8/15/2023	139
12	P&Z 22-054	White St	32/40/44	5/23/2023	7/20/2023	58
13	ZP24-000047	Broadway	720	9/4/2024	2/20/2025	169
14	ZP24-000054	Chester St	53	12/3/2024	2/24/2025	83
	Average Time from Submission to Decision					117.0 days

C.3 Rafi Properties Letter

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **599 Somerville** <599@rafiproperties.com>

Date: Fri, Aug 12, 2022 at 17:28

Subject: Our sincere apologies

To: 599 Somerville <599@rafiproperties.com>

599 Somerville neighbors, friends and those who care deeply about Somerville's urban forest -

We are reaching out to express our sincere apologies and address the removal of the public street trees from the 599 Somerville job site earlier this week.

During the afternoon of Monday, August 8th, 2022, an excavator accidentally hit and jeopardized the western most public street tree while removing a curb on Somerville Avenue. Due to safety concerns because of the location being a public walkway or roadway, the site foreman immediately removed and eliminated the risk. During the process, each of the four public street trees were inadvertently removed.

We've had many meetings with the community in which residents spoke passionately about the importance of preserving the trees on Somerville Avenue between Spring Street and the MBTA bus stop. It was made abundantly clear that these trees were of great priority to the community and as such, Rafi and the 599 Somerville team prioritized the preservation of these trees. We worked with the City of Somerville's Urban Forestry Division on detailed plans for protecting the trees throughout construction and as part of the new 599 Somerville site design.

You trusted us as stewards of your neighborhood to ensure the public shade trees remained protected throughout construction. Due to the mistakes made by members of our team on-site Monday, we failed in our responsibility to you all.

Attached you will find a copy of the letter we received from Somerville's Urban Forestry Division, we've paid the fines accordingly. As we've heard from many of you that this is not enough, we will be hosting weekly office hours starting Wednesday, August 17th, 9-10am at Forge Bakery to discuss how to best move forward. Please stop by, we want to hear your feedback.

Your neighbor and partner,

Rafi & 599 Somerville team



Appendix D: Coding Scheme

In *Neighborhood Defenders*, authors Einstein, Glick, and Palmer wanted to learn more about local participatory land use institutions in the municipalities around Massachusetts, particularly concerning housing matters. Researchers collected the public minutes from 97 municipalities to code the reasons individuals supported or opposed new housing proposals (using the matrix in Table D.1). This process yielded 2,784 comments.

I decided to use this matrix to categorize the content of public meetings to monitor the ways in which Somerville resident participation was predictable and how dialogue in the city is separate from other municipalities. After coding the comments across MR district SPA Neighborhood Meetings and Public Hearings, I decided to add four additional categories. Those additions are highlighted in table D.1.

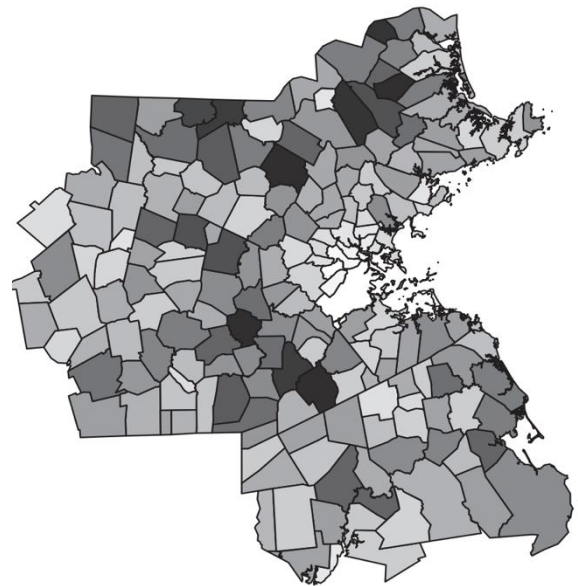


Table D.1. Modified Comment Issue Coding Scheme

Source: Appendix B. Einstein et al., 2020.

Neighborhood Defenders. 181-183.

Category	Description/Examples
Density	Arguments that the new development will make the population too dense in the area
Height/shadows	The building will be too tall/short and will cast unacceptable shadows. Includes arguments about wind from the building (often a result of the height)
Parking	Too much strain on parking, proposal doesn't account for enough parking.
Traffic	Vehicular traffic only (not pedestrian)
Schools	Arguments that the development will harm/improve/influence the quality of the local public schools
Affordability	Arguments about the development increasing housing prices, including affordable housing, etc. includes income diversity
Diversity	Arguments about impact on diversity. Includes disabilities (handicap accessible)
Flooding	Construction may lead to flooding either during or after. Project may affect drainage.
Building Formation	Construction will damage the foundation of neighboring buildings
Noise	Construction causing noise or the development making the area noisier
Privacy	New development too close with views into property and other related concerns
Trees/Green space/Environment	Arguments about trees, parks, green space, wildlife, and environmental impact; includes air pollution concerns
Aesthetics	"It's ugly." "It doesn't match the other buildings" "building doesn't fit." Includes arguments about visual and historic character of area.
Zoning/SPA Compliance	Concerns that the development does not comply with zoning laws (often argue that zoning laws are agreed to after a collective participatory process, therefore should not be ignored)

Safety	Raises safety concerns about children, snow removal, intersections etc.
Pedestrian/Biking	Pedestrian Includes pedestrian/bicycle traffic. Also sidewalk issues.
Neighborhood character	To show difference between density and explicit fears of socioeconomic/racial diversity, arguments about preserving history and questions of “fit” that are not about the building itself. Concerns about who will be moving into the neighborhood and using neighborhood resources; arguments that this is a “great addition to the neighborhood.”
Home value/city revenues	Includes arguments about a development decreasing property values and reducing city revenues, “hurting my property values,” or questions about whether a property will be a “net financial gain for the city.”
Engagement	Comments inquiring about how residents will hear about updates concerning development. Includes requests for more materials and information.
Trash	Logistics around construction debris and routine trash pickup.
Development timing	Concerns about when development will occur.
Unit Mix/Housing	SPA comments included conversations about increasing the number of options for family-size housing in Somerville.