



May 26, 2023

Katjana Ballantyne
Mayor of Somerville
93 Highland Ave
Somerville, MA 02143

City Council
93 Highland Ave
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Mayor Ballantyne and City Council,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) is writing to recommend two FY24 budget priorities: launching a planning process for a north-south transit connector, and hiring a Curb Manager to support the implementation of the [Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study](#).

Background

We are hugely supportive of the investments the City of Somerville has made in recent years in multimodal infrastructure for safe streets. Quick-build improvements at Powder House Circle, resurfacing projects on College Avenue/Holland Street and Pearl Street, dozens of traffic calming installations, long-range planning and policy studies, and equity-based programs to expand transit access only begin to represent the City's commitment to transforming our streets and transportation system in people-centered ways. The City has further exemplified this commitment by recognizing that transformative change requires well-staffed and well-resourced teams. In FY21, OSPCD Mobility received funding for two additional senior planners, an outreach coordinator, bus and bike network planning, and mobility management for City and School employees.

The effects these investments are having on the safety of our streets and well-being of our neighbors are clear. Over the past decade severe crashes, pedestrian crashes, and bicycle crashes in Somerville have all been trending downward. We've seen a 12% drop in reported crashes, a 21% drop in injury-related crashes, and a 15% drop in crashes involving non-motorists. Today, 14 fewer intersections qualify as high-crash¹ compared with the period between 2014 and 2018². We also have indications that more Somerville community members are choosing non-car modes of transport, in line with our [SomerVision 2040](#) goals of encouraging sustainable behavior and reducing automotive vehicle miles traveled. For example, in 2022 Blue Bikes ridership was at an all-time high with over 200,000 trips taken in Somerville, representing a whopping 400% increase in trips compared to 2017³. Walking has also been steadily increasing in popularity, according to the City's annual Bike & Pedestrian Count. 2022 saw the highest number of pedestrians since the Count began, totaling over 23,000 pedestrians compared with 16,000 in 2010⁴.

But we still have much more to do. In Massachusetts, the past two years have been the deadliest for pedestrians in over a decade⁵. Despite crash rates trending downward in Somerville, we've still felt the devastating effects of fatal crashes every year since 2019 – including four in that year alone. In addition, public transit ridership has yet to recover to pre-pandemic

¹ High-crash intersections are defined as those that see 10 or more crashes annually.

² Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development - Mobility Division. (2022). [Mobility & Safety in Somerville: 2022 Key Performance Indicators](#).

³ Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development - Mobility Division. (January 2023). [January 2023 Mobility Division Update](#). *Mobility Division Newsletter*.

⁴ City of Somerville. (February 2023). [Pedestrian Counts](#).

⁵ MassDOT. (2023). [Statewide Crashes by Severity and Year](#). *IMPACT - Mass.gov*.

levels⁶. We should be doing what we can as a city to make riding transit as easy as possible, including through initiatives like the new [Transit Benefits program](#).

Not only do we know what interventions work to continue making our streets safer, we have the community support to accomplish them. Of the over 800 ideas generated through Somerville's first participatory budgeting process, more than 40% are related to streets and sidewalks⁷. The [top five most supported participatory budgeting ideas](#) include implementing bump-outs and safety improvements through green infrastructure, connecting the Community Path through Davis Square, pedestrianizing Elm Street, and providing safer multimodal connections between Assembly Row and East Somerville. Last year we also saw Somerville community members mobilize in strong support of robust bus infrastructure when they submitted over 6,400 public comments about route changes proposed in the [MBTA's Bus Network Redesign](#) (BNR). Those comments comprised over one-third of the 20,000 received on the initial bus network proposal. Because of that advocacy, the MBTA's revised network map is estimated to increase service within Somerville by 32% above pre-COVID levels⁸.

We are thrilled to see several projects in the [2023-2028 Capital Improvement Plan](#) that will improve Somerville's pedestrian and transit experience, including Union Square Plaza and streetscape designs, interim street and sidewalk improvements in Davis Square, Somerville Ave utility and streetscape improvements, West Broadway Vision Zero implementation, and the long-awaited reconstruction of Highland Ave. We hope to see a similar level of investment in the FY24 budget.

Priority 1: Planning for a North-South Transit Connector

The first item we feel strongly about including in the FY24 budget is a planning process for a north-south transit connector. Throughout the BNR process, both PTAC and the Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership (STEP)⁹ were vocal about the urgent need to create more north-south transit connections within the city. With the BNR, Somerville can expect north-south bus routes on College Avenue, Cross Street, and Grand Union Boulevard. These routes will complement the Green Line Extension's rapid-transit connections between Tufts, Ball Square, Magoun Square, Gilman Square, and East Somerville. While this planned and existing service is highly valued, it still does little to facilitate travel from densely populated, low-income areas on Mystic Avenue and in West Somerville, to key destinations like Davis, Porter, and Union Squares, through neighborhoods like Winter Hill and Spring Hill. This isolation reinforces long-standing racial and economic inequities, and leaves key environmental justice communities with few safe, non-car options for traversing some of Somerville's most dangerous roads including I-93, Mystic Avenue/Route 38, and Alewife Brook Parkway/Route 16.

Most of Somerville's north-south streets are not considered busable in large part due to their high grades and narrow widths, and even less so when factoring in winter conditions¹⁰. This is particularly unfortunate given that with the BNR's prioritization of frequency over one-seat rides, riders may need to walk further in order to reach their route¹¹. While we agree with this prioritization, we recognize its disproportionate impact on community members with mobility impairments - especially when their starting point or destination is on one of Somerville's many steep streets.

We encourage you to fund a planning process for a north-south transit connector in FY24, reliant on vehicles that can traverse Somerville's steep and narrow streets. Routes explored should prioritize direct connections with Mystic Ave, as well as connections with the GLX stations that remain disconnected from bus service in the final BNR map (Magoun and Gilman Squares). The connector should be affordably priced with reduced rate options for low-income riders. Somerville has several local paratransit and shuttle providers from whom to learn, including [SCM Transportation](#), [Tufts](#), [Partners Healthcare](#), and [Boynnton Yards](#). We are skeptical, however, of microtransit providers that operate on demand through a ride-hailing model rather than on a fixed route crafted based on the needs and expertise of community members, including City staff. The

⁶ OSPCD Mobility. (2022).

⁷ Participatory Budgeting Team. (May 4, 2023). Participatory Budgeting Brainstorming Event Next Wednesday at 6PM. *City of Somerville*. Email.

⁸ For details, see PTAC's letters on the [initial proposed BNR network](#) (July 2022) and on the [revised network map](#) (December 2022).

⁹ For details, see STEP's letters on the [initial proposed BNR network](#) (June 2022) and on the [revised network map](#) (November 2022).

¹⁰ MBTA. (April 27, 2022). [Creating a Road Map of "Busable" Streets](#). *Opmi Data Blog*.

¹¹ MBTA, MassDOT. (February 2023). [MBTA Bus Network Redesign: Final Report](#).

ride-hailing model has failed several times across the U.S., in big cities like Denver and small cities like Montpelier¹². We are confident in the Mobility Division's ability to lead a planning process attuned to these nuances, in partnership with community members who stand to benefit most from this service.

Priority 2: Hiring a Curb Manager

The second item we think must be included in the FY24 budget is the new role of Curb Manager to sit within the Parking Department and play a lead role in implementing the landmark Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study. This study's implementation will be critical for making Somerville's transportation system more equitable, dependable, sustainable, and safe. In doing so it will reduce our city's car reliance and facilitate people-centered rather than parking-centered development, aligning with Somerville's climate and anti-displacement goals. Among the study's strengths are its actionable, data-driven recommendations for prioritizing parking space for those who need it most, including community members with mobility limitations and low incomes as well as community institutions with pickup/drop-off and commercial loading needs – all while reallocating curb space to match true demand and maximize shared mobility.

The Curb Manager position is identified as a high-priority recommendation in the study. In addition to “spearhead[ing] curb policies and projects from the planning perspective,” the Curb Manager will “coordinate with planners in OSPCD, serving as an internal champion for the strategies developed in this study, leading the management and collection of curb data, and continuing to stay informed on emerging curb issues.” The clear leadership and interdepartmental collaboration this role will provide is indispensable for this kind of major, long-term citywide project. This model of designated curb management is already operating successfully in Seattle¹³.

We encourage you to fund the Curb Manager role, and do so with a competitive salary that will attract and retain top candidates.

Conclusion

Thank you for being champions of safe, equitable streets in Somerville. We look forward to seeing the transformative changes that come from these priority initiatives and beyond.

Sincerely,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Ted Alexander	Christopher Ferry
Ginny Alverson	Vitor Pamplona, <i>Vice Chair</i>
Caroline Bodager	Zach Rosenberg
Meredith Brown	Alessandra Seiter, <i>Chair</i>
Thomas Coen	Carole Voulgaris, <i>Secretary</i>
Laura Evans	

CC: City Clerk, City of Somerville
OSPCD Mobility, City of Somerville
Director of Traffic and Parking, City of Somerville

¹² Sisson, Patrick. (February 28, 2023). [NYC's Shadow Transit Network Seeks a Greener Future](#). *Bloomberg CityLab*.

¹³ City of Somerville. (September 2022). [Parking and Curb Policy Study](#), p. 40-41.