



SOMERVISION2040

Sustainability • Diversity • Opportunity • Connectivity • Community

Somerville Business Owners Forum

Date of the event: April 11, 2019

Attendance: 12

Target participants: Business owners of Somerville

Language of forum: English

Location: The Independent

What do you love about the Somerville Community? What aspects of Somerville do we want SomerVision 2040 to enhance or preserve?

- Somerville can't fit much more manufacturing, but it does have the ability to attract talent from universities and house business development efforts. "This is the center of the universe for that attraction and retention" of talent in sectors like biotech and technology.
- Somerville is diverse and has a strong young population while maintaining its "old school" character. The city was built as a mixture and of uses and communities, and that keeps it vibrant.
- The level of engagement and communication from officials throughout the City is appreciated, and made some businesses want to stay in Somerville rather than look elsewhere. Businesses appreciate being able to walk to City Hall and speak to someone face-to-face, and find that is relatively easy to figure out who you need to talk to.

What problems and challenges affect the Somerville community? Which are the most important to you personally?

- Staff seems to be coming not just from Somerville, but Cambridge, Everett and Chelsea. It is hard to recruit staff that's local because the cost of living is high and increasing.
- Although young talent isn't a major challenge, mid-career retention is for some employers.
- Retaining a diversity of workforce talent and businesses should be a priority in how the city thinks about licensing and permitting, transportation equity, and housing.



- Diversity is what makes Somerville thrive and spurs innovation, and a loss of diversity in workforce talent, housing availability, transit options threatens that ecosystem, and makes staffing and doing business in Somerville more difficult.
- New commercial development threatens to displace existing businesses.
- The business and health licensing procedures can be a major obstacle for some business owners, both because of the process in general, limited staffing, and the fact that health codes don't evolve on pace with innovative ideas.
- Businesses are facing space constraints—where do they move when they expand with so little commercial spaces coming online? Or, if businesses find a possible property, they might need to spend \$3M in the build out to bring it up to code because it's falling down. In addition, businesses that do not work well in residential neighborhoods might need to start looking outside of Somerville if current industrially-focused areas become more mixed-use.
- Construction for infrastructure projects has been complicated. Although there are efforts to organize the projects so that areas are as operational as possible, there are instances where disruptions occur without enough notice.
- It's important to encourage daytime foot traffic to and within business districts affected by construction.
- The history of Somerville is not celebrated enough.

What are some ideas you would like the community to explore? These could be solutions to some of the problems we identified or other programs or initiatives?

- Hire additional staff at the Health Department to speed up application processes and enhance clarity around what they expect from businesses participating in the process.
- Having infrastructure for high speed data offerings would be nice.
- Enhance existing commercial districts.
- Find a way to rework Inspectional Services to become a regional model. It would be difficult to make the changes necessary, but this was the “#1 issue” to at least one business owner.
- Find ways for the City to more easily permit innovative business models like shared kitchens. This could involve adopting more recent food codes to catch up with other cities, some of which already allow innovations like shared kitchens.
- Explore ways that zoning can protect a variety of different uses, including lab space and food manufacturing, for example.
- Encourage food trucks but find a way to provide the necessary physical infrastructure to accommodate them.
- Modernize the business parking permit program so that applications don't need to happen annually. This is a fantastic benefit to businesses, but it could be made easier to use.

