

# MAKING SPACE FOR ART

Securing Cultural Infrastructure in Boston, Cambridge & Somerville



## Municipal Action Plan

# *CITY OF SOMERVILLE*



CITY of **BOSTON**



# Municipal Action Plan Overview

Developed in 2024 and finalized in 2025, this action plan provides specific recommendations for Somerville to improve its policies and processes to preserve and expand cultural space based on findings from the Making Space for Art project. The action plan builds on Somerville's prior efforts to document cultural spaces at risk of displacement, adoption of local policies to preserve Arts and Creative Enterprise uses as part of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance, ongoing cultural planning efforts and staffing through the Somerville Arts Council. The overarching vision for this action plan is to outline arts and cultural spaces as a priority in Somerville's planning, development, and future growth in ways that further equity, support a vibrant cultural community and thriving creative economy.

## **GOAL 1: Somerville's planning and development review processes proactively account for impacts to cultural spaces and resources.**

### ***1.1 Use and improve cultural space data***

Cultural space data is critical to support a thriving creative economy by identifying where spaces exist, what activities and communities are served by those spaces, flagging potential impacts of new development, managing potential conflicts, and mitigating displacement.

- a. Standardize the integration of cultural space data into planning and development review processes.
- b. Continue ongoing data collection using the Making Space for Art digital tool.
- c. Continue review and verification of data by Somerville Arts Council staff.
- d. Share cultural space data across all Somerville departments.
- e. Establish a data validation protocol and review process for cultural space data and new spaces generated through ACE set-aside.
- f. As new cultural spaces come online, use permitting processes to collect data on cultural uses.

### ***1.2 Activate cultural plans***

The City of Somerville has documented existing assets, challenges and needs throughout the broader creative community to guide future investments and planning priorities.

- a. Use cultural planning documents to guide development review processes, including cultural plans, studies and data to document impact and need for cultural development.
- b. Use cultural plans and data on creative community needs to inform neighborhood and citywide planning efforts.
- c. Explore coordinated approaches for future development for arts and culture production spaces connected to opportunity areas with light industrial areas and cultural districts.
- d. Use planning efforts to document the economic impact of creative production and presentation spaces in Somerville.

### **1.3 Integrate arts and culture staff into municipal systems and processes**

Somerville Arts Council staff should be integral partners in Somerville's planning efforts and have a clearly defined role in development review processes to identify the cultural impact of proposed developments.

- a. Include Somerville Arts Council staff as part of standard development review meetings and processes, specifically drafting staff memos that inform development project approval.
- b. Formalize partnership and policy goals with the Economic Development Department to support production spaces for artists.
- c. Establish relationships through cultural planning efforts and the Somerville Redevelopment Authority.
- d. Incorporate existing cultural plans, studies and data related to arts and cultural uses into all of Somerville's planning efforts.

### **1.4 Engage arts community in public processes**

The community engagement process for development review should establish clear guidelines for how arts and culture stakeholders might provide evidence of impact and input on future development efforts.

- a. Document and evaluate the current Community Benefit Agreement process, and communicate process to the public.
- b. List prioritized items for arts and culture investments that might be leveraged for Community Benefit Agreement processes, potentially drawing from the Somerville Cultural Capacity Plan.
- c. Make community engagement processes for development review more accessible to artists and creative workers.
- d. Provide opportunities for community feedback about the cultural value of spaces within a community and the impact of spaces on the creative economy.

## **GOAL 2: Somerville's land use policies expand cultural space by allowing cultural uses in zoning bylaws and incentivizing development of additional accessible cultural spaces.**

### **2.1 Improve policy & definitions**

Codify and align policy language and definitions to support the development of arts and cultural uses.

- a. Refine Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) definition in the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to prioritize arts uses.
- b. Outline the requirements for the set-aside payment-in-lieu structure to ensure equitable payout for the value of property.
- c. Formalize a structure for transferring fees from the ACE set asides from payment-in-lieu and other funding sources to a Cultural Trust Fund.
- d. Establish a process for distributing Cultural Trust Funds to support equitable development and maintenance of cultural spaces.

## **2.2 Establish clear process for implementation**

Ensure that the Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) set asides are documented early in the process to ensure data capture and maintaining ACE use.

- a. Confirm ACE set-aside implementation plan when issuing a building permit, rather than Certification of Occupancy to ensure ACE spaces can be built to meet local needs.
- b. Conduct an annual review of the ACE set-aside spaces to ensure continued ACE use.

## **2.3 Develop shared language for development community**

Share guidance with developers about core cultural use needs within the local arts community.

- a. Create guidance for developers on specific space needs for arts and cultural uses, borrowing from the Boston Live-Work Artist Housing Guidelines
- b. Develop an arts development training or certification program and an active list of developers with interest in arts-development projects.
- c. Actively broker partnerships with developers and cultural space operators.

## **2.4 Expand cultural use**

Prioritize land use that supports arts and culture uses in targeted areas, like the Brickbottom Neighborhood or the proposed East Somerville Cultural District.

- a. Identify properties in the Fabrication District and similar areas that have potential for ACE set-asides.
- b. Use cultural space data to identify areas of priority investment for arts and culture development (i.e., what types of spaces exist and where do they exist, who is able to access these spaces).

# **GOAL 3: Somerville is known as a place where nightlife, live entertainment, and cultural gatherings are valued and protected.**

## **3.1 Improve sound management policy**

Establish a structure to support the management and mitigation of conflicts for entertainment related sound.

- a. Establish a working group to guide adoption of agent of change principles including local venues, developers and sound engineers.
- b. Develop a process for initiating and conducting sound studies for venues located in proximity to new development, particularly when that development includes residential uses.
- c. Develop a list of resources and department staff that can support venues and developers to navigate sound regulation.

## **3.2 Adopt agent of change**

Adopt agent of change principles into policy practices to support local venues and cultural gathering spaces.

- a. Use cultural space data to identify venues and cultural establishments that produce sound (i.e., music venues, rehearsal spaces etc.).
- b. Incorporate relevant cultural space data into development review process to flag when sound mitigation assessment is needed (e.g., within 50 feet of venues/spaces).

- c. Assign responsibility of sound mitigation to party initiating changes in development.
- d. Require initial sound assessment for new venues and cultural spaces with entertainment uses.

### ***3.3 Mitigate sound impacts on residential development***

Incorporate standard noise mitigation into the planning and approval process for residential and mixed-use development in proximity to cultural venues and artist workspaces.

- a. Establish sound management standards for new residential construction to reduce impacts of sounds from nearby cultural venues and establish process to resolve related conflicts.
- b. Initiate working group on mitigating sound impacts from artist workspace in mixed-use development to inform policy development.
- c. Require sound disclosure agreements for residential tenants in buildings within proximity to cultural venues.

In addition to this action plan, other priority areas for the team and Somerville Arts Council include developing a cultural trust, managing municipally owned cultural spaces, supporting and training cultural space operators, and improving the event permitting process to set deadlines for events and batch approval processes.

## 2026 Update: Ongoing and Emerging Work

While this Municipal Action Plan was developed in 2024, with final edits completed in 2025, the work of securing and sustaining cultural space in Somerville is ongoing and constantly evolving. Since the launch of the Making Space for Art project, the City has made meaningful progress on several of the plan's core recommendations, while also advancing new initiatives in response to current conditions, emerging opportunities, and lessons learned through implementation.

Current priority efforts include continued collaboration with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to explore Cultural Trust models and funding mechanisms that could support the long-term preservation, development, and stewardship of cultural space. Internally, the City is actively working to formalize an Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) zoning requirement policy framework, including the development of a tracking and monitoring mechanism to support transparency, accountability, and long-term compliance. This work also includes advancing an ACE payment-in-lieu structure to help achieve equitable cultural space outcomes when on-site provision is not feasible.

Since the development of this Action Plan, Somerville has also completed several foundational initiatives that directly inform and strengthen this work. These include the City's first comprehensive Cultural Plan (the [Somerville Cultural Capacity Plan](#)), findings and recommendations from the [Anti-Displacement Task Force Creative Committee](#), and the [Armory Master Plan](#), alongside the issuance of an [Request for Proposals](#) for leasing space in this City-owned arts and cultural facility. Together, these efforts reflect a growing alignment between cultural planning, anti-displacement strategies, and public investment.

This Action Plan is intended to function as a living framework. As policies are refined, new data becomes available, and conditions on the ground continue to shift, the City will continue to adapt its approaches to ensure cultural spaces are protected, expanded, and accessible—supporting a vibrant creative community and a more equitable city for artists, culture bearers, and residents alike.

For questions about this work or the direction of arts and cultural planning in Somerville, please contact the City's Arts and Cultural Planner, Michael Rosenberg, at [mrosenberg@somervillema.gov](mailto:mrosenberg@somervillema.gov)

# Accounting for Cultural Space in Development Review Processes

Understanding the development review process is a critical component for preserving cultural spaces, and each city has a unique process for reviewing proposed development projects for approval. These processes are integral to flagging potential conflicts between proposed developments and zoning and regulations, and they often require developers to assess potential impacts related to transportation, environment, historical resources, and neighboring businesses or residents.

During the development review processes, municipal planners rely on existing data and plans to assess the impacts of new development. The review process also includes meetings with the developer and often provides an opportunity for community members to provide input on the proposed development.

This section highlights the core recommendations for incorporating cultural space into municipal development review processes.

## ***Cultural Space Data and Mapping***

- Integrate cultural space data (including location data) into standard development review processes to trigger cultural impact assessments and flag potential conflicts with or displacement risk to existing cultural uses.
- Track cultural space square footage, type of cultural spaces, and the economic impact of cultural spaces (e.g., total employment) to be incorporated into municipal development review decisions.

## ***Cultural Planners and Developers***

- Include cultural planners in municipal development review processes as key contributors to staff memos documenting potential cultural impacts on existing cultural spaces and resources.
- Train developers on local cultural space needs and uses as part of any required set-asides, and guide planning efforts to mitigate cultural space displacement, such as conducting sound studies.

## ***Arts Community***

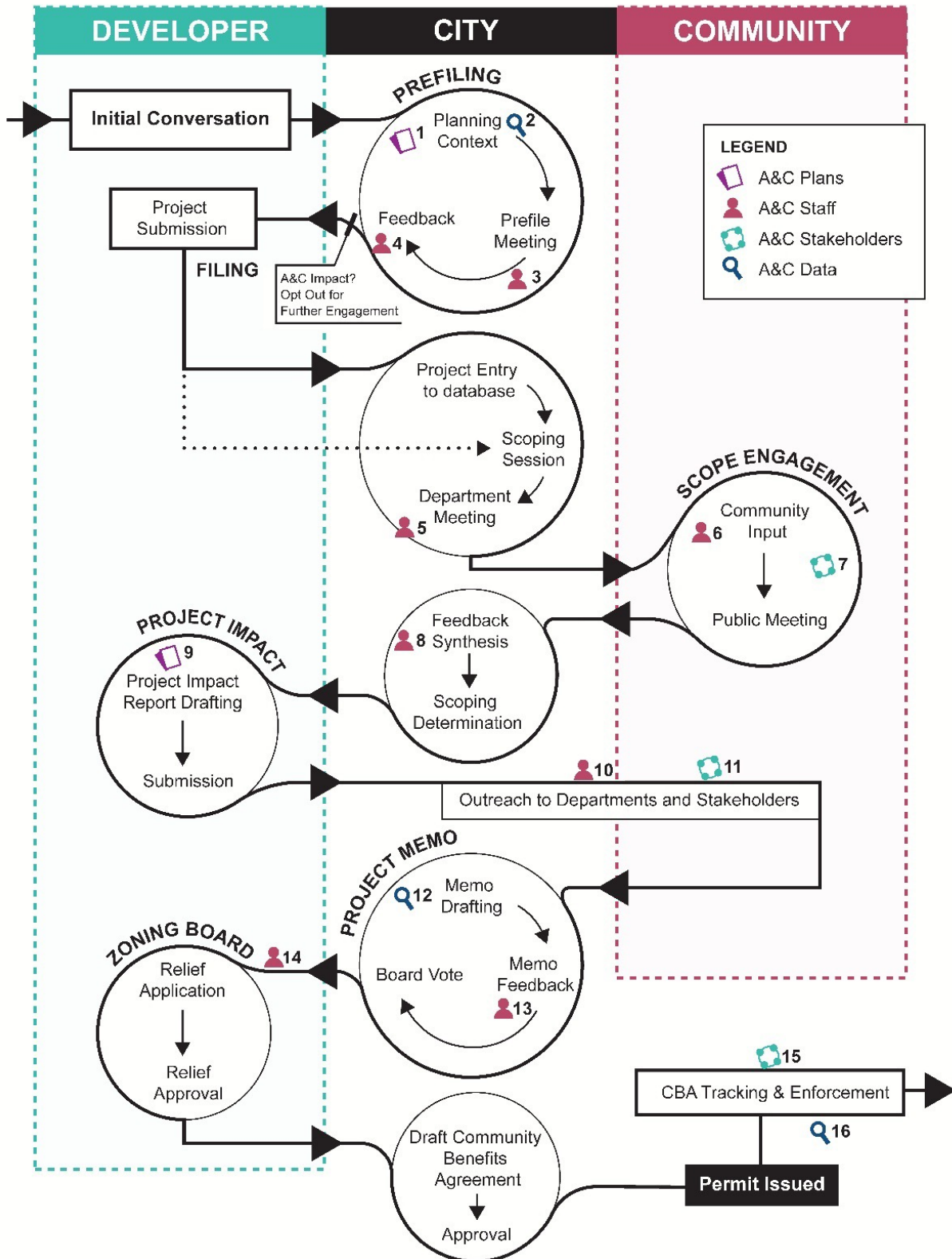
- Collaborate with representatives of the arts community to identify community needs, update and maintain cultural space data, collect input, and determine the impacts of proposed development on cultural spaces.
- Coordinate with representatives of the arts community to ensure developments implement the cultural space set-asides impact studies and provide equitable opportunities to access cultural spaces.

To account for cultural space in Metro Boston, cultural space data, cultural planners, and arts communities must be integral to the development review process.

# Somerville Development Review Process Diagram

Somerville’s development review is coordinated by the Somerville Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD). Somerville has multiple processes for development review.

The Somerville 2019 Zoning Ordinance includes the Arts and Creative Enterprise Set-Aside, intended for by-right developments and special-permits. See the briefing paper on Defining Cultural Use for more information about this cultural use definition.



# Somerville Development Review A&C Touchpoints

## Key points for community input and feedback are:

- Pre-submittal Community Meetings
- Public Hearing of the Development
- Community Benefits Agreement (currently an optional step of the process)

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<b>1</b>	Include any Arts & Culture Plans into checklist of existing conditions and documentation
<b>2</b>	Flag parcels with abutting Arts & Culture space; Use Arts & Culture Data to identify opportunities for future development
<b>3</b>	Include Arts & Culture Stakeholders in Pre-submittal Community Meetings
<b>4</b>	Request A&C staff to comment on application
<b>5</b>	Request A&C staff to attend (optional) department meeting
<b>6</b>	Incorporate Arts & Culture data into staff report
<b>7</b>	Reference Arts & Culture plans and documents in writing the report
<b>8</b>	Include Arts & Culture Stakeholders in Public Hearing
<b>9</b>	Include Arts & Culture Stakeholders in Community Benefits Agreement Negotiations
<b>10</b>	Flag and update Arts & Culture data tracker after approval of the development
<b>11</b>	Arts & Culture Stakeholders notified of final decision, use, and included in the implementation of Community Benefits
<b>12</b>	By-right developers connected with A&C staff to review ACE Development Requirements

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