

City of Salem, Massachusetts



**"Know Your Rights Under the Open Meeting Law, M.G.L. c. 30A ss. 18-25 and
City Ordinance Sections 2-2028 through 2-2033."**

The City Council Committee on Committee of the Whole

met in the Council Chamber on Tuesday August 4, 2026 at 6:00 PM

for the purpose of discussing the matters(s) listed below. Notice of this meeting was posted on

June 23, 2026 at 9:43 A.M.

(This meeting is being recorded)

ATTENDANCE

COW – Hapworth (acting chair), Merkl, King, Holappa, Davis, Turowski, Varela, Smith & Sydoriak.

ABSENT WERE: Flynn & Prosniewski.

SUBJECT(S)

#588 City Seal Task Force Report

This is the first meeting specifically devoted to considering the City Seal Task Force Report. The task force had completed its work and submitted an advisory report and recommendation to the Council. Hapworth emphasized that the recommendation is not binding and that the Council ultimately has responsibility for deciding whether to retain, reinterpret, modify, or replace the existing city seal, as well as determining whether any additional actions are necessary.

This meeting is an initial discussion rather than a decision-making session. The goal is to establish a common understanding of how the issue reached the Council, clarify the Council's role, allow councillors to ask initial questions, and identify matters requiring further discussion. Hapworth acknowledged that the seal issue has generated strong and deeply emotional views concerning representation and respect and urged councillors to separate the substance of the issue from the controversy surrounding it. A meeting was already scheduled at the end of August to focus more directly on possible options and paths forward.

Hapworth also established ground rules for discussion, emphasizing civility and adherence to Council procedures. Councillors were instructed not to respond directly to individual members of the public, engage with social media disputes, speculate about people's motives, or make disparaging or personal remarks about the task force members, councillors, staff, or members of the public. Personal attacks, interruptions, discussions unrelated to the posted matter, and arguments focused on personalities rather than the report were also prohibited. Councillors were encouraged to avoid unnecessarily revisiting issues that the task force had already considered and addressed in its report.

Finally, councillors were encouraged to approach the report with open and curious minds and to recognize that they may agree with the task force majority, the minority, or neither. Hapworth stressed that disagreement does not diminish respect for the task force's work or process. The Council was also reminded that previous councils made the decisions that resulted in the current seal, and that the present Council's responsibility is to understand those historical choices, evaluate the task force's work, and make its own decision with fairness, humility, and respect.

Discussion -

The City Seal Task Force Report recommended replacing Salem's existing city seal. The discussion emphasized that the task force's recommendation was advisory and that the final decision rests with the City Council. The task force had conducted an extensive process, including 17 public meetings, three listening sessions, expert presentations, written feedback, and more than 400 online submissions. It ultimately voted 5–1 to recommend a new seal.

Several councillors expressed support for changing the seal, focusing particularly on how the image is experienced today by Salem's AAPI community. Councillors argued that the historical intent of the seal should be considered alongside its contemporary meaning and that residents should not be expected to understand the complex historical context behind the image every time they encounter it. Others emphasized that the original seal may have been intended to commemorate Salem's relationship with Sumatra and an aspirational message of peace and cautioned against erasing an opportunity to interpret and discuss that history.

The Council identified several possible paths forward: retain the existing seal, replace it, modify it, retain it with additional historical interpretation, or retain the historic seal for official purposes while creating a separate civic logo for public-facing use. Councillors generally agreed that additional work would be necessary to determine the design, legal process, implementation, and cost of any change.

There was also a discussion about whether to act immediately or leave the matter in committee for further public input. Some councillors wanted additional time to hear from residents, particularly because two Council members were absent and some councillors had not yet received substantial feedback from their wards. Others argued that the issue had already been under consideration for many months and that the Council should move forward with the task force's recommendation. At first, public comment was not going to be allowed but ultimately was allowed.

Public Comment -

Public comment reflected strongly differing views about the city seal, as well as concerns about the Council's process and opportunities for public participation.

Steve Kapantis questioned whether the task force had actually completed the work it was charged with. Based on his participation in many of its meetings, he argued that the task force ended its work because some members felt they were being treated inappropriately, rather than because the work was complete. He urged the Council to review the task force's final meeting and finish the work before deciding. He also noted that some members of the public had been told there would be no public comment at this meeting and therefore were unprepared to speak.

Darlene Millis described the seal as aspirational, arguing that it represented an effort at person-to-person diplomacy and Salem's maritime history. She said that if the Council replaces the seal, it should first identify what the new seal is intended to represent. She encouraged the Council to create an aspirational symbol that reflects Salem's maritime heritage and clearly communicates what the city values today.

Flora Tampa spoke from personal experience about being subjected to racial teasing and mocking as a child, arguing that stereotypical images contribute to those attitudes. She said she wants children growing up in Salem to be free from that type of experience. She rejected the argument that the existing seal is adequately justified by its historical context, pointing to the violence associated with Salem's trade with Sumatra at the time the seal was adopted. She argued that harmful imagery should be removed rather than preserved with historical explanations.

Jeff Cohen criticized the Council for taking so long to revisit the issue and questioned the idea of treating both sides as equally valid. He argued that elected officials should exercise their own judgment rather than simply follow public opinion. He also challenged the suggestion that the issue should be dismissed because Salem's AAPI population is relatively small.

Justin Whittier focused heavily on the public process, criticizing the fact that he and others had been told there would be no public comment. He argued that this left residents unprepared and made the process unfair. On the substance, he said there

were significant misunderstandings about Salem's history and trade with Sumatra and argued that the claim that the seal represents racism or a caricature is incorrect. He called for a fuller and more honest discussion of the seal's history and meaning.

Polly Wilbert also raised concerns about the transparency and accessibility of the Council's process. She said the issue appeared to have been set aside for a significant period and criticized the simplicity of the meeting agenda, which did not make clear what would occur. She urged the Council to provide more information and opportunities for citizens to understand and participate in the decision rather than relying primarily on the task force's work.

Emmylou Manwell emphasized the importance of public symbols and interpretation. Drawing on her experience creating tours based on symbols, she argued that the Salem's seal should represent the city's present-day identity while also acknowledging its history. She did not believe simply adding explanatory text to the existing seal would provide sufficient historical context. Instead, she suggested that a new seal could preserve historical references, such as maritime trade, peace, and the dove, without depicting the figure that some residents find harmful.

Overall, the comments demonstrated that there was no consensus among speakers. Some urged changing the seal because of its contemporary impact, while others urged preserving its historical meaning or providing a more thorough process before deciding.

Vote -

Varela moved to accept the City Seal Task Force's recommendation to change the city seal and was seconded by Davis. The motion did not establish the specific design or implementation process; those details would require subsequent action, including potentially a separate committee involving the City Solicitor, City Clerk, and Council members.

The roll-call vote was:

- 7 Yes: Davis, Turowski, King, Smith, Varela, Holappa, Merkl
- 2 No: Sydoriak and Hapworth
- Motion carried, 7–2.

Hapworth clarified that this was not the final vote to change the seal. The matter would still need to go before the full City Council at a regular meeting for final consideration.

On the motion of C. Varela, the meeting adjourned at 7:11 P.M.



(Chairperson)