

City of Salem, Massachusetts



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City Ordinance Sections 2-2028 through 2-2033."**

The City Council Committee on Committee of the Whole

met in the Council Chamber on Monday July 27, 2026 at 6:00 PM

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

June 24, 2026 at 3:54 P.M.

(This meeting is being recorded)

ATTENDANCE

COW – Merkl (President/Chair), King, Prosniewski, Davis, Flynn, Holappa, Sydoriak, Hapworth (left prior to vote), Turowski, and Smith. **From the city** – Tom Devine, Senior Planner and Robyn Lee, Senior Planner of Department of Planning and Community Development. **From the Salem Partnership** – Beth Debski, Executive Director.

ABSENT WERE: Varela

SUBJECT(S)

#328 Jefferson Ave. Corridor Study.

Merkl - As the order states, we are here for the presentation of the Jefferson Avenue Corridor Plan, examining challenges such as housing costs and climate risks, and activating the corridor's key parcels and new development. We will start with a presentation from Tom Devine and Robyn Lee, then we will have discussion and questions from the counselors, and finally, we will take public comment in person and on Zoom.

Presentation by Tom Devine and Robyn Lee -

This is the preliminary proposal for the Jefferson Avenue Corridor Plan, explaining that the study is intended to address housing affordability, climate resilience, transportation improvements, and redevelopment opportunities along Jefferson Avenue, particularly in anticipation of the planned South Salem train station. Senior Planners Tom Devine and Robyn Lee noted that the presentation would provide an overview of the planning process, community vision, draft recommendations, and preliminary zoning concepts, while emphasizing that public and City Council feedback would help shape the final proposals.

Devine highlighted the extensive collaboration behind the project, including the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), Weston & Sampson, a diverse working group of residents, businesses, institutions, City staff, and City Councillors, as well as Beth Debski's leadership coordinating the corridor planning with the train station project. The study area encompasses Jefferson Avenue between Salem Hospital, Salem State University, and the future train stop, with the goal of activating key development parcels while aligning growth with the community's established priorities.

The presentation reviewed the planning context, explaining that the corridor plan builds upon previous City initiatives, including the *Imagine Salem* vision, the Housing Roadmap, transportation planning for the South Salem train station, and the City's climate resilience efforts. Existing policies related to housing production, multimodal transportation, wetlands protection, flood resilience, and earlier studies of redevelopment opportunities all aided in the current planning effort.

Staff also outlined the project timeline, noting that work began with an extensive existing conditions analysis, followed by months of community engagement, visioning, and development of draft recommendations. They emphasized that the recommendations and zoning concepts presented are preliminary and intended to generate discussion. Feedback from the Council and the public will be incorporated before formal zoning amendments are drafted and presented later in the fall.

Senior Planner Robyn Lee summarized the planning team's development of a shared vision for the Jefferson Avenue Corridor, beginning with an extensive analysis of existing conditions. The study identified significant environmental constraints, including wetlands, flood risks, filled land, and contamination from former industrial uses. It also found that 41% of corridor households are housing cost-burdened, Jefferson Avenue presents safety and connectivity challenges for pedestrians and motorists, transit access is limited, and existing zoning restricts opportunities for multifamily housing while creating a patchwork of land uses.

Lee highlighted the project's extensive public engagement efforts, which involved more than 750 participants through surveys, public meetings, pop-up events, stakeholder outreach, and direct mailings. Community feedback indicated that more than 85% of the respondents felt the corridor does not currently reflect their vision for the area. Residents consistently identified priorities including improved walkability and safety, stronger transportation connections, additional affordable housing, traffic and transit improvements, greater flood resilience, more trees and open space, and neighborhood-serving businesses. Many also expressed concern that warehouse, storage, and auto-oriented uses are overrepresented along the corridor.

Based on this feedback, the planning team developed five guiding principles for the corridor: promoting transformative land use over time, creating a vibrant streetscape and neighborhood identity, building resilient communities, improving mobility and connectivity, and supporting existing residents, businesses, and institutions. These principles guided the draft recommendations, which were refined following a second round of community feedback that showed broad support for the proposed direction.

The recommendations are organized into four focus areas. For existing residential neighborhoods, staff recommended anti-displacement strategies, preservation of neighborhood-scale housing, improved pedestrian connections, and measures celebrating the Castle Hill neighborhood's history. For wetlands and open space, recommendations focused on climate adaptation and expanding trail connections. Along Jefferson Avenue itself, staff proposed streetscape enhancements, Complete Streets improvements, traffic calming, safer intersections, expanded Blue Bikes access, reduced impacts from surface parking, and support for neighborhood-serving businesses. Finally, for larger industrial and commercial properties identified as redevelopment opportunities, the plan recommends encouraging flood-adaptive mixed-use and multifamily development, improving bicycle and pedestrian connections, enhancing placemaking and wayfinding, implementing additional safety improvements, and supporting existing small businesses. These redevelopment areas will form the basis for the draft zoning proposals presented later in the study process.

Senior Planner Tom Devine explained that while the corridor plan includes many recommendations, zoning changes will be the primary tool for implementing the long-term vision. He noted that Salem has already adopted several policies that align with the corridor's goals, including stronger flood resilience requirements, increased affordable housing standards, flexible parking requirements for multifamily development, architectural design review, wetlands protections, and historic preservation regulations. However, the current zoning remains a significant barrier because most of the proposed redevelopment area is zoned for industrial, single-family, or two-family uses, effectively prohibiting multifamily and mixed-use development.

To address these limitations, staff presented a draft zoning framework focused exclusively on the corridor's designated "areas of transformation," primarily the larger industrial and commercial parcels north of Ocean Avenue West. The proposal would establish an overlay district allowing three- to six-story multifamily and mixed-use buildings while permitting existing businesses and industrial uses to remain and evolve over time. Additional concepts under consideration include encouraging active first floor uses such as neighborhood retail, community space, or resident amenities; creating corridor-specific design standards rather than relying solely on existing citywide design review; and potentially offering height incentives within the six-story maximum for projects that provide additional public benefits, such as greater affordability, more open space, or enhanced active street-level uses.

Devine illustrated the scale of development envisioned by referencing recent projects in the North River Canal Corridor, while emphasizing that Jefferson Avenue would have its own design guidelines tailored to the corridor's character. He also noted that any future development would be subject to Salem's strengthened affordability, flood resilience, and environmental regulations.

The presentation emphasized that redevelopment is expected to occur gradually rather than rapidly. Many potential redevelopment sites currently serve important community functions, including the Department of Public Works facility, Salem Hospital parking areas, and the Amazon distribution center, making rapid redevelopment unlikely. The vacant recycling facility at 53 Jefferson Avenue was identified as the site with the greatest redevelopment potential, although environmental remediation will likely be necessary. Staff noted that EPA cleanup funding could help support redevelopment consistent with the corridor vision.

Devine concluded by stressing that both the recommendations and zoning concepts remain in draft form. Feedback from the City Council and the public will be incorporated before staff prepares detailed zoning language, design standards, and the final corridor plan. The team expects to return in the fall with a formal zoning proposal and additional opportunities for public comment.

Summary of the City Council Question and Answer Session -

City Council members expressed strong support for the Jefferson Avenue Corridor Plan, commending the planning staff for the extensive public engagement process and comprehensive analysis. Councillors generally agreed that the corridor presents a significant opportunity to address housing needs, improve transportation, enhance climate resilience, and support long-term economic development while preserving the character of surrounding neighborhoods.

A major theme of the discussion was the proposed zoning framework. Several councillors supported the concept of an overlay district allowing three- to six-story mixed-use and multifamily development, particularly in the designated redevelopment areas. There was broad interest in the proposed "height bonus" concept, with councillors viewing it as a creative incentive to encourage additional community benefits such as affordable housing, open space, active first floor uses, and flood resilience. Some members suggested exploring additional flexibility, including density bonuses or taller buildings where appropriate, while others emphasized the need to balance increased height with neighborhood compatibility, shadow impacts, and overall design quality.

Transportation and mobility generated extensive discussion. Councillors encouraged expanding planning beyond the west side of the proposed South Salem train station to include redevelopment opportunities east of the tracks. Members emphasized the importance of creating multiple pedestrian and bicycle connections across the rail corridor, improving dangerous intersections, extending Complete Streets improvements to nearby side streets, expanding Blue Bikes, and incorporating secure bicycle parking into future developments. Several councillors also advocated for exploring fixed-route public transit to better connect the train station, Salem Hospital, Salem State University, downtown, and surrounding neighborhoods, arguing that improved transit could reduce parking demand and support more vibrant, walkable development.

Councillors also focused on creating active, neighborhood-oriented development. Drawing lessons from the North River Canal Corridor, several members cautioned against allowing parking garages to dominate building ground floors and encouraged zoning and design standards that prioritize neighborhood-serving retail, cafés, daycare facilities, convenience stores, and other small businesses. They urged staff to ensure that future design guidelines produce lively streetscapes rather than inactive building frontages.

Housing affordability and neighborhood stability were recurring priorities throughout the discussion. Councillors encouraged zoning that supports a variety of housing types and unit sizes, including family-sized apartments, two-family homes where appropriate, and deeply affordable housing developed through nonprofit partnerships. Members also discussed strengthening anti-displacement efforts, preserving existing neighborhood character, and ensuring that redevelopment accommodates both growing families and older residents seeking to downsize while remaining in Salem.

Several councillors encouraged staff to explore additional planning and financing tools, including value capture strategies such as tax increment financing, joint development opportunities, and other mechanisms to reinvest future increases in property values back into the corridor for infrastructure, environmental improvements, and affordable housing. Members also suggested reviewing lessons from previous zoning overlays, including the Bridge Street Neck and North River Canal Corridor districts, to ensure the new overlay effectively delivers the desired mix of uses and community benefits.

Council members asked numerous clarifying questions about planning terminology, including fixed-route transit, Complete Streets, green infrastructure, height bonuses, flood resiliency requirements, and the timeline for redevelopment. Staff

explained that redevelopment is expected to occur gradually over many years due to existing uses, environmental constraints, and market conditions. They also confirmed that flood resiliency standards require new buildings to be designed for projected 2070 flood conditions, while acknowledging that surrounding streets may still experience flooding during major events.

The discussion concluded with updates on the planned South Salem train station by Beth Debski. Debski reported that the project has reached the 15% design stage, the MBTA has assumed responsibility for advancing design, and federal funding remains in place. Councillors expressed optimism that the train station will catalyze long-term redevelopment while emphasizing the need for careful planning of pedestrian access, parking management, emergency access, and integration with the surrounding neighborhood. Devine thanked the Council for its feedback and confirmed that the comments would be incorporated into the draft zoning proposal and final corridor plan that will return for public hearing in the fall.

Public Comment Summary -

Two members of the public offered comments in support of the Jefferson Avenue Corridor planning effort while raising considerations for future zoning and redevelopment decisions.

Laura Portney, a Bertuccio Avenue resident and practicing architect specializing in multifamily and mixed-use development, praised the planning process as thoughtful and expressed enthusiasm for the corridor's potential. Drawing on her professional experience, she suggested that the unusually deep redevelopment parcels could accommodate a more flexible site design by locating single-story commercial buildings along Jefferson Avenue with multifamily residential buildings set farther back on the lots. She explained that this arrangement could create a more active streetscape while better meeting the operational needs of residential buildings. Portney also supported the proposed six-story height limit, noting that it represents an effective balance between development feasibility and neighborhood scale. She cautioned that buildings taller than six stories become significantly more expensive to construct, while allowing heights of 10 to 12 stories would likely be out of character for the corridor.

Polly encouraged the city to provide more detailed data before advancing zoning changes. She recommended maintaining a regularly updated inventory of housing units that have recently been approved, completed, or are already in the development pipeline so that policymakers and residents can better understand the city's progress toward its housing goals. She also requested information on the corridor's current employers, employment levels, and commercial-industrial tax base to evaluate the potential fiscal impacts of converting industrial and commercial land to residential use. Additionally, she expressed concern about the limited number of parks and green space within the corridor and cautioned that redevelopment should include meaningful open space rather than focusing solely on housing production. Finally, she raised concerns about potential gentrification and the possibility that new market-rate development could increase housing costs in surrounding neighborhoods, emphasizing the need for more detailed analysis to inform future decisions.

Further City Council discussion -

King expressed support for exploring a development pattern that places residential buildings farther back from Jefferson Avenue while reserving the street frontage for commercial or mixed-use space. She suggested that a one-story commercial base with office space above could create opportunities for local businesses while softening the visual impact of taller residential buildings by setting them back from the street. She asked the Planning Department whether this concept could be considered as part of the zoning analysis.

Devine and Lee stated that they would examine the idea as they continue working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) on zoning, site test fits, and financial feasibility. King also acknowledged concerns raised by Holappa about the difficulty of filling ground-floor commercial space, noting her own experience living in a building where retail space remained vacant for several years, illustrating the challenges and costs associated with requiring commercial storefronts.

Sydoriak motions to receive and file the presentation and second by Prosniewski. Motion carries 9-0 (Hapworth left prior to vote).

On the motion of C. Sydoriak the meeting adjourned at 8:13 P.M.

Alice Merkl

MBC

(Chairperson)