

City of Salem, Massachusetts



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

The City Council Committee on Ordinances, Licenses and Legal Affairs co-posted Committee of the Whole

met in the Council Chamber on August 17, 2026 at 6:00 P.M.

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

July 29, 2026 at 10:20 A.M.

(This meeting is being recorded)

ATTENDANCE

OLLA – Varela (chair), Holappa (zoom), King (temporary appointment to committee for this meeting only). **COW** – Merkl and Davis.

ABSENT WERE: **OLLA** – Hapworth, Prosniewski, Smith. **COW** - Flynn, Sydoriak and Turowski

#386 Ordinance Relative to Zoning – Roof-Mounted Wind Energy Systems

Varela – Appointed King to OLLA committee for this meeting only. He supports allowing roof-mounted wind energy systems in Salem, arguing that residents should be empowered to improve their own energy resiliency. He noted that wind complements solar because wind tends to be stronger at night and during the winter, while solar is most effective during longer summer days.

His main concern is that current zoning regulations create a barrier to residents adopting small-scale wind energy systems. He stated that, since Salem already permits residential solar installations, the city should similarly make it legal and practical for residents to install roof-mounted wind systems.

King – She explained that the proposed ordinance would update Salem’s zoning code to allow small roof-mounted wind energy systems by right on all buildings, with size restrictions to ensure they remain small-scale residential systems. She emphasized using the term “wind energy systems” rather than “windmills” because commercially available systems come in a variety of designs, including units that resemble small fans. The proposed ordinance change is intended to treat rooftop wind similarly to residential solar while giving residents another option for producing or offsetting energy.

She stated that rooftop wind can be a useful alternative or complement to solar, particularly because wind and solar can produce energy at different times of day and year. Solar incentives have declined, and not every home has a roof that is well suited for solar because of its orientation or location. Small wind systems could therefore provide another way for homeowners to reduce energy use, particularly in a coastal, windy community like Salem. She also noted that these systems are much more common in European countries, where stronger energy and building-code incentives encourage their use.

The ordinance establishes clear limits to keep the systems small at no more than 15 kilowatts of capacity per turbine and no more than 10 feet in height. These limits are based on the size of small systems currently available on the market and are intended to let Salem gain experience with the technology without opening the door to larger wind installations. She characterized this as a way for Salem, as a coastal community with climate-resilience goals, to “dip our toes in the water.”

The zoning changes would add roof-mounted wind energy systems as a permitted use by right, similar to rooftop solar. The ordinance would also incorporate wind systems into the existing provisions for rooftop solar while establishing the separate 10-foot height limit. Additional definitions would clarify terms such as wind energy system, capacity, and height.

Finally, the proposal would clarify the distinction between these small residential rooftop systems and Salem’s existing zoning provisions for large-scale industrial/offshore wind development. She said this separation is intended to keep the existing large-scale wind provisions intact while clearly establishing a separate framework for small rooftop systems. The Assistant City Solicitor also reviewed and helped draft the proposed language.

Discussion –

The committee discussed a proposed zoning amendment to allow small, roof-mounted wind energy systems as an accessory use, largely by aligning them with existing provisions for rooftop solar. Councillors focused first on basic technical parameters, particularly the maximum system capacity and overall height. There was broad comfort with reducing the draft capacity limit from 15 kilowatts to 10 kilowatts so that wind systems would match the existing 10-kilowatt cap for roof-mounted solar installations. Councillors also acknowledged that common rooftop turbines on the market are taller than the 10-foot height figure initially contemplated, which pushed the group toward a more realistic upper limit of 20 feet.

Height and visual impact generated a more detailed conversation. Councillors noted that residents are generally most concerned with how far equipment projects above the existing roofline, rather than the absolute height of the structure. Under current zoning, certain elements such as spires, chimneys, antennas, and the proposed roof-mounted wind systems are exempt from strict building height limits. This raised the concern that a house already close to the maximum height could still install a tall turbine at the highest point and effectively overshoot what neighbors find reasonable. To address this, councillors discussed approaches like capping turbine height at around 20 feet, or tying it to the maximum allowed building height plus an additional buffer (for example, 5–10 feet).

Setbacks were another major point with the committee looking to the existing solar language as a model. Section 4.1.2(8) currently requires small and medium ground-mounted solar systems to be at least 10 feet from the front, side, and rear lot lines. The simplest proposal was to insert “roof-mounted wind energy systems” into that same clause so the same 10-foot setback from property boundaries would apply. Clarification was provided that this is measured from the lot line, not the edge of the building: if a structure sits directly on the lot line, a roof turbine must be placed at least 10 feet in from that edge; if the house is already well set back, placement on the roof can be more flexible. This approach aims to protect closely spaced abutters while allowing more freedom on larger lots.

The committee also touched on noise, structural load, and governance issues. On noise, informal legal guidance from the solicitor suggested that decibel limits are more properly handled under the city’s general noise ordinance rather than in zoning, and future experience could drive targeted noise amendments if needed. For structural loading, councillors recognized that turbines can weigh significantly more than solar panels and that snow load is a factor, but agreed that these issues are best addressed through the building permit process, where applicants must demonstrate that their roofs can safely support the systems. At a governance level, several councillors expressed frustration that department heads and the mayor did not attend despite invitations, emphasizing that technical staff input is important to defining “reasonable” limits. They discussed using two procedural tools to secure that input, sending the proposal to a required joint public hearing with the Planning Board, which starts the statutory clock and may spur engagement, or invoking a city charter provision that obligates the mayor or a designee to attend and answer written questions submitted a week in advance. Councillors wanted to proceed cautiously, ensuring that expert feedback from the building department and other staff reviews the final technical details before any ordinance language is adopted.

Public Comment –

Josiah Guthrie spoke in support of modernizing Salem’s zoning regulations to allow small rooftop wind energy systems, stating that the city should future-proof its regulations as technology and community needs evolve. The proposed ordinance would treat small rooftop wind systems similarly to existing solar regulations. He emphasized that while Salem receives less sunlight than the national average, it has an unusually strong wind resource because of its coastal location. He said that Salem currently has no meaningful pathway for residents to take advantage of that resource through small-scale wind energy.

Guthrie acknowledged concerns about the economic viability of rooftop wind systems but said that public policy itself is one of the major barriers to adoption, alongside the cost of competing energy sources. He said the city should not prevent residents from making their own decisions about whether a technology is financially worthwhile. He framed the proposal as part of Salem’s broader effort to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, increase energy resilience, and take advantage of local renewable resources.

He also distinguished modern small rooftop systems from the large, traditional wind turbines often associated with noise and vibration concerns. He described newer systems as smaller, more adaptable designs, including systems that resemble sculptures or flowers, systems with no moving parts, and spiral-based designs intended to work with the wind rather than against it. He cited examples from countries such as Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands, where small systems are being used to provide a significant portion of household energy needs.

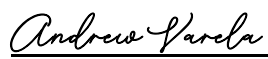
Finally, Guthrie stated that wind, solar, and battery storage can complement one another, with wind often producing more when solar production is lower and batteries storing excess energy for periods when both are less productive. He connected the proposal to Salem’s existing climate and resilience commitments, including the Resilient Together partnership with Beverly, and urged the Council to expand residents’ renewable-energy options as part of the city’s broader commitment to clean energy, resilience, and climate action.

Vote –

The committee considered and approved a set of amendments to the zoning ordinance to better regulate roof mounted wind energy systems. The discussion emphasized that these changes arose from proactive resident input and collaboration with the Ward 5 councillor, and that they are meant to modernize zoning rules while remaining practical for residential use. Councillors stressed that many existing ordinances do not reflect current needs or future-facing policy, and that this proposal represents a constructive example of community-driven legislative work. The councillors expressed disappointment that no one from the mayor’s office or department heads attended the meeting, although they were invited several weeks in advance.

Under the zoning ordinance for Roof-Mounted Wind Energy Systems, the following amendments were proposed. The first amendment is in Section 3, under definitions. For the definition of “Wind Energy System, Roof Mounted”, strike 15 kilowatts per turbine, and replace it with 10 kilowatts per turbine. Strike height up to 10 feet and replace it with height up to 20 feet. Section 2 will be entirely rewritten so strike the language in subsection 7. Section 2, Section 4.1.2, subsection 8 - Notes to Table of Dimensional Requirements is hereby amended by inserting the line “and roof-mounted wind energy systems” after medium-scale ground-mounted solar energy systems. Also inserting a new subsection 10, which will read “The limitations on height of buildings shall apply to roof-mounted wind energy systems, with an additional allowance of 5 feet over the maximum height of the building”. Clarification regarding the setbacks - Section 2 amends Section 4.1.2, which is the Notes to Table of Dimensional Requirements, in two ways. The first way is it adds roof-mounted energy systems to subsection 8 that has the setback requirements (currently states “Small- and medium-scale ground mounted solar energy systems accessory to principal use may be located no closer than ten (10) feet from the front, side, or rear lot line”). Then the second change adds a new subsection 10, which has the height change. It made more sense to add a new subsection for that, because there’s no other section in the zoning ordinance that has that type of height with an extra allowance type of language. Motion was made by King and seconded by Holappa for the amendments to proposed ordinance. Motion carried with roll call vote 3-0. King motioned and Holappa seconded to send the amended ordinance with a positive recommendation for a joint public hearing with the Planning Board and City Council. Motion carried with roll call vote 3-0.

On the motion of C. King the meeting adjourned at 6:52 P.M.



(Chairperson)