

City of Somerville  
Community Dialogue: Next Steps for Police-Community Relations

January 22, 2020  
6:30 – 8:30

Argenziano School Cafeteria  
290 Washington St.  
Somerville, MA

**Draft Report on Community Feedback**

This Draft Report on Community Feedback was prepared by the Consensus Building Institute (CBI). The goal of this report is to summarize the proceedings at a January 22, 2020 forum on police-community relations in Somerville, and chronicle feedback provided by community participants in the forum as accurately and concisely as possible. The comments, ideas, and recommendations in this report come entirely from participants at the community forum. They do not reflect ideas or recommendations from CBI. The report itself is not intended to offer a verified factual record nor an exhaustive study of all the concerns or perspectives of stakeholders generally, but rather the accounts, statements, and opinions voiced by those participants who were present during the discussion. Any errors and omissions in this report are the sole responsibility of CBI. Comments from meeting participants about any inaccuracies or omissions are welcome and should be sent to Toby Berkman at [tberkman@cbi.org](mailto:tberkman@cbi.org).

On January 22, 2020, the City of Somerville hosted a community forum to address next steps for police-community relations. The dialogue was part of the City's response to resident concerns regarding the "Boston Straight Pride Parade" and counter-protest of August 31, 2019. Roughly 85-100 members of the community were in attendance. City staff and elected officials were also in the room to listen or take notes.

The forum aimed to provide an opportunity for members of the community to

- Express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding the relationships between the Somerville Police and the community
- Listen and hear from others about these same issues
- Work together to develop options for next steps and on-going actions to improve relationships and increase trust between the Somerville Police and Somerville residents

**Welcome and Overview**

The forum began with remarks from City officials. Mayor Joseph Curtatone opened the meeting by welcoming participants. He expressed his commitment to policing that protects the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the community, and apologized for the trauma experienced by many of those who attended the "Boston Straight Pride Parade" counter-protest.

Lance Davis, Ward 6 Councilor, provided a welcome on behalf of the City Council, and noted his support for legislative measures such as an active body camera resolution.

Chief of Police David Fallon spoke as well. He reaffirmed that it is a vital concern for the police if members of the community feel unsafe. To be effective, he said, police forces in Somerville and elsewhere need to provide the type of policing that the community demands. He indicated that his plan for this meeting was simply to be quiet and listen to community input on how to improve.

Doug Kress, Director of Health and Human Services, reviewed a timeline of events since the “Straight Pride Parade” and leading up to the community forum, and sought to clarify the purpose of the forum and next steps. He emphasized that the forum was designed as a space where the City could listen to resident concerns and ideas for improvement. Moving forward, the City would consider the community’s input in deciding on next steps and respond in detail to their comments and questions — both those coming out of the forum itself and those offered earlier at the September 18, 2019 public hearing.

Next, Stacie Smith and Toby Berkman, facilitators from the [Consensus Building Institute](#) (CBI), provided an overview of the meeting objectives, agenda, roles, and ground rules.<sup>1</sup> They explained that the format of the meeting, which involved small group discussions, was intended to help elicit thoughtful feedback and sharing of ideas. Each small group had a facilitator from the City, most being from the Department of Health and Human Services, to help guide the discussion, as well as a note-taker whose job was to capture all of the comments and suggestions. Participants were also invited to write down comments and questions on note cards, placed on each of the tables.

After the meeting, CBI would compile the notes and note cards and draft a report on community feedback, which would be published online (initially in draft form) and open to comments to help ensure its accuracy. The City would then review this report, consider the community input, and issue a detailed, public response to the ideas and questions raised. During the meeting itself, the City would be in “listening mode” in order to provide an open space for residents to share their concerns.

After these initial introductions, the facilitators guided the groups through a series of three conversations: one on their hopes for police-community relations, a second on their stories and experiences with the Somerville Police Department, and a third on their ideas and suggestions for improvement moving forward. Feedback from these conversations is summarized below. The report strives to reflect each of the various ideas expressed by participants, while grouping similar comments together in order to avoid repetition. In some cases, comments in quotations

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<sup>1</sup> CBI is a locally-based non-profit organization with its headquarters in Cambridge, MA. CBI’s mission involves helping communities and other stakeholders engage more effectively around difficult public issues. Its staff are trained as impartial facilitators and public issue mediators.

have been lightly edited from the note-takers shorthand or the comment cards in order to more closely reflect natural speech.

### **Hopes for police-community relations**

In the first small group conversation, the facilitators asked participants to write down and share one hope that they had for police-community relations in Somerville. They then invited participants to share their insights with the group as a whole. The summary of ideas below is based on those shared remarks as well as a synthesis of the ideas from the note cards that were turned in by participants, organized by theme.

Overall, while some participants expressed their ideas as hopes for the future, the majority of comments were framed as critiques of the status quo and ideas or demands for reform. In addition, some of the comments included very specific suggestions for change. For clarity, these ideas for change are described in general terms below and in more detail in the section on “ideas and suggestions.”

#### *Police mindset and approach*

A large number of comments focused on hopes for a change in the Somerville Police Department’s (SPD’s) overall mindset and approach, in particular a change in its attitude towards activists and focus on protecting marginalized groups that are at a heightened risk of violence. One participant suggested, for example, that the police should be “protecting activism and activists instead of being afraid of them.” Several comments expressed confusion and alarm that the police seem to be “afraid of activism” based on misinformation about activists’ intentions, and instead seem to focus their efforts on protecting or even supporting violent “fascists” and “Nazis.”

A number of participants questioned why the police used force against non-violent counter-protestors and members of marginalized communities, while “the straight pride people [were] left alone.” More than one participant put the issue in straightforward terms, suggesting simply “Don’t protect Nazis,” or “Don’t send police to help terrorize people counter-protesting fascists.” Another argued that there needs to be a commitment to protecting “the vulnerable rather than the powerful.”

A number of participants requested specific changes to the SPD’s approach. Some focused on the importance of a commitment to de-escalation and suggested that the standard for police behavior needed to be higher than “we didn’t hospitalize anyone we arrested,” which was one of the claims made in the After Action Report. One noted that many police forces only receive de-escalation training for a few hours a year. Another suggested that the police should be unarmed on regular patrols, which would lead residents to be less fearful. Some comments also identified specific behaviors for the police to avoid, including the use of pepper spray and, more generally, use of violence against peaceful counter-protestors. Another expressed hope that the police would welcome witnesses when they perform stops.

### *Rebuilding trust*

Another set of comments focused on the lack of trust between the community and the police. One commenter suggested they were “scared to call the cops for fear they’ll make a bad situation worse.” Another suggested that the blame for the lack of trust lies with the police, not the community. “[T]he actions of the police show they cannot be fully trusted to protect us instead of attack or exploit,” they commented. “The police must change, not attempt to convince us to trust them.”

### *Relationship with the Boston Police*

A number of comments expressed concerns about the relationship between the SPD and the Boston Police Department (BPD). Some suggested that the SPD simply should not work with the BPD moving forward.

### *Composition of the police force*

A handful of comments expressed hope that the SPD could attract more diverse officers moving forward — including women, people of color, non-binary people, and LGBTQ people — and that this would lead to a change in attitude. Another argued, “I want SPD to have more hippies.”

### *Transparency, oversight and funding*

A significant number of comments expressed hope for more transparency and oversight over the SPD and police funding. These comments varied in their specificity and hoped-for degree of change.

Some simply argued for improved transparency around police officers’ actions and/or police funds. Others argued for specific new oversight mechanisms, such as an elected community oversight or review board and an end to civil asset forfeiture, or a use of forfeiture funds to support grassroots movements that help marginalized communities. One commenter argued, for example, “The use of civil forfeitures to pay overtime is obscene & taxpayers should not foot the bill for hate groups! There NEEDS to be a civilian run council that manages police skirmishes budgets and complaints.” Still others went a step further, arguing that the police should be defunded, put under the direct control of civilian-elected officials, or even abolished.

### *Accountability and acknowledgment of mistakes*

Many commenters expressed hope for a future where members of the police force would be held accountable for misconduct and do a better job acknowledging mistakes. A number of comments questioned why the SPD seemed to be protecting members of the BPD who committed abusive actions and expressed alarm that no Somerville police officer reported any misconduct by BPD officers. By failing to speak up more forcefully, some suggested, the SPD

was tacitly endorsing the commission of violence on marginalized communities. One commenter argued simply, “SPD should condemn the actions of the BPD.” Another suggested, “It is the responsibility of all good people to not tolerate bad behavior in their midst — not cover it up.” Still another argued, “If SPD broke ranks with other police departments it would actually have an effect.”

Other comments expressed hopes for better accountability moving forward, where abuses of power are met with real consequences such as probation, firing, or other “mechanisms to remove bad apples from the police.”

### *An organized and empowered community*

At least one participant emphasized the importance of building community power through organizing. The participant noted, “Police will listen to the community when it has power and it only has power when it is organized.” They felt that the goal should be to organize in order to make real demands, make the City and the police listen, and achieve real reforms.

### **Stories and Experiences**

The next conversation involved participants sharing their individual stories and experiences with the Somerville Police. Participants were asked to discuss what they personally had experienced with the Somerville Police, whether at the “Straight Pride Parade” counter-protest or elsewhere, and their feelings about these experiences. While some of these comments focused on experiences with the SPD, others focused on overall police actions, including those of the BPD, or the City’s response more generally. Responses are reported below, again organized by theme.

### *Experiences at the parade*

Many participants shared their personal experiences at the parade. They described the police at the parade as “aggressive,” “violent,” engaging in “unprovoked attacks” against protesters, and seemingly arresting people “at random.” Some commented that the police actions took place after the crowd had already begun to disperse. In general, these comments focused on the behavior of the police overall, not necessarily the SPD, although some comments were specific to the SPD. First-person accounts included the following observations, among others:

- “I saw a lot of violence and illegal bag searches from police, and no reason for use of pepper spray.”
- “I saw absurd militarization. When they decided they thought the protest was over, I saw officers pick up their bikes and hit people and then pepper spray them.... The cops were the antagonists and it was different from anything I’ve seen.”
- “I witnessed [the police] ram motorcycles into the crowd with no warning.”
- “The protesters had to protect and provide medical care for each other.”
- “At the place where SPD officers were positioned, at Arlington and Boylston, they lined up in military-style formation [in front of] protesters who were acting peacefully and

surrounded them so that they were pushed into the BlueBikes structure and trapped. This aggressive posture set the tone for the hostile interactions that followed.”

- “Officers gave protesters no egress route and just started moving people seemingly with no organization.”
- “I saw an SPD officer and, from what I saw, he didn't perform any action I found objectionable. But I did see him witness other officers do questionable behaviors.”
- “The police in bike uniforms were the most violent people at the protest.”
- “While BPD officers stood on an unarmed person’s head, SPD officers stood by and watched.”
- “We don't necessarily know whether SPD cops did [violent actions] or not, but it doesn't matter. I saw cops there with no badges, or their badge numbers taped over. I don't know what department they’re with.”
- “A well-known white supremacist was throwing hard candy and it hit me. But I knew that if I threw it back and hit them, I would’ve been smashed to the ground and put in the back of a cop car and taken to jail.”
- “When the Boston Police got off their bikes is when this s\*\*t started to happen. The police picked on the smallest person and beat the s\*\*t out of them.”
- “The Straight Pride people were dangerous but all the [police] aggression was towards the counter-protesters. I even heard some of the [Straight Pride] marchers state they didn’t have to do any bashing because the police were doing it for them.”
- “When a far-right person from the Straight Pride Parade tried to infiltrate us, [the Police] would block us from pointing that person out and protect that person, not us.”

### *Post-parade impact*

Some participants reported feeling fearful or traumatized in the aftermath of the parade. “I walk by that site every day, and I see the image of the line of pepper spray, motorcycles, and a scattered crowd,” one said. “Every day I walk through that and am reminded that they were not keeping us safe.” Another recounted, “I see uniforms around town and images flash of violence towards people protesting homophobic hate.”

Another added that as a queer person, they had just started to feel safe, “and then the Straight Pride [Parade] changed everything again.” They continued:

Those that I thought are here to protect us were against us. At the counter protest, I provided street medicine to help those hurt and had pepper spray [used against me]. I felt traumatized by what was happening and how I was treated for helping the injured. I now suffer from anxiety and am getting treatment.

Another participant noted that people who were arrested were subsequently treated poorly by the criminal justice system, for example their attorney was held in contempt.

### *Second-hand accounts*

Some participants reported on things they had heard from others or pieced together through looking at images or video footage. One said they had heard that SPD officers hid or obscured their badge numbers. Another suggested they believed there were instances in which SPD officers were the only ones carrying out arrests, even though the after-action report suggested SPD had only assisted in arrests. Another expressed concern that they saw a photo of an officer putting a protester in a choke hold. A number of participants commented that they had seen videos of police actions online and were “disgusted.”

### *Intelligence, planning, and other issues*

A number of participant reflections focused on intelligence, planning, and other issues related to the lead-up to the parade. Some suggested that the police should have been more attuned to the danger of violence coming from the “Straight Pride” protesters, rather than the counter-protesters. “There wasn’t any secret about who the organizers were and their previous history,” one argued. Others noted that the groups running the Straight Pride Parade are known for disseminating misinformation about counter-protesters. “Did [the SPD and City government] not know this information? If so, I have real concerns about their intelligence,” said one. “There’s a lot of noise coming out of internet,” said another, referring to online postings in advance of the protest, “but there should be someone [at SPD] to say ‘this is incorrect.’”

Other participants were specifically critical of intelligence coming from the Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC). According to one, the Boston Police “believed the propaganda that was being projected” about the counter-protesters via BRIC, even though it should have been clear that the “Straight Pride” marchers were the true instigators to violence. This participant questioned why the police appeared to be “spying on us.” Another participant said they provided intelligence that the “Straight Pride” protesters were distributing instructions for making pipe bombs, which the police ignored.

A number of participants questioned the City of Boston’s permitting process that allowed the “Straight Pride Parade” to go forward in the first place, and suggested that more consideration should be paid to a group’s violent intentions. “Fear of being sued is no reason for these permits,” one argued.

Other participants expressed frustration that SPD officers had freely chosen to volunteer for this particular assignment, that they appear to have been paid well, and that the Civil Asset Forfeiture fund had been used to pay their overtime. One participant added, “Maybe the officers felt like they were doing the right thing but it sure doesn’t seem like it.” Still others questioned why there was such a large contingent of police assigned to the protest, and why it was deemed necessary to deploy the COBRA unit in the first place.

### *Interactions with SPD outside of the parade*

Some participants recounted experiences with the SPD or other police forces that were not directly related to the “Straight Pride Parade.” Overall, these experiences were mixed. For example, one participant recounted their experience interacting with various police officers while working for the City of Somerville in the 311 department “years ago.” The participant recalled officers using openly racist and homophobic language when they didn’t think anyone could hear them, but also recounted a more recent interaction where an SPD officer told them the culture had changed and become “much more inclusive.” Another participant shared that they “have had pleasant experiences with the police,” who are “generally nice,” and another recounted how the SPD was effective in de-escalating a situation with a mentally ill colleague.

However, other stories were less positive. One participant shared a story about a friend who recently left the SPD due to racism, homophobia, and a commitment to social injustice, and suggested much of the problem lies with the police union. A different participant reported that officers’ interactions with community members tended to be “brusque and curt,” and suggested they have “a smug satisfaction with the power dynamic between the police and citizens.” Another reported on an incident where the police responded to a call at their residence and broke a window without leaving a note. And still another reported seeing Somerville officers at Dunkin Donuts wearing “blue lives matter” hats. To the participant, this suggested the SPD “see anti-fascists as disorder and think violence against them is justified.”

### *The City’s response*

There were a variety of comments critical of the City’s response in the aftermath of the “Straight Pride Parade.” Some participants focused on the perceived inadequacy of the after-action report. “The report said, ‘We did nothing wrong,’ but I saw attacks,” one participant said. “Where is the condemnation from the SPD for this action?” Other participants expressed confusion at perceived discrepancies between what the report says and what they experienced or heard about from friends.

Others focused on the rhetoric coming from City Hall. “I’m tired of politicians using the excuse of Charlottesville,” said one. “We keep hearing ‘Sorry you experienced this’ but there is no recognition of what happened,” said another. “This was a police riot.” Another suggested that the mayoral administration had not been proactive enough in the immediate aftermath of the parade. “When the [September 2019] hearing was coming up, first the mayor wasn’t going to be there,” this participant said. “Organizers had to hold the city accountable; they were otherwise not interested in investigating the events.”

A number of comments were critical of the amount of time it took to host the community forum. “It’s laughable that it’s taken so long for something like this meeting to happen,” said one. Others were critical of the nature and degree of outreach to members of the community. One participant suggested the City had tried to “hide” this event and didn’t really want anyone to come. Another reported that the event was not on the City calendar as of eleven days before

the meeting. A third reported that they had signed up to a City distribution list after the September 2019 hearing, but had yet to receive any emails from it.

One participant expressed some appreciation for the City's efforts but wanted more regular communication. "Honestly, I prefer this [meeting] to nothing, but I want and would be delighted to receive a weekly update from the Mayor's office, even if the content of the update is just, 'We received a draft of this idea and are considering [it].'"

On the other hand, more than one participant expressed appreciation that SPD Chief Fallon had attended the forum out of uniform. One of them said they liked Chief Fallon's remarks at the beginning of the forum, in particular his statement that he wanted the SPD to be "better and more progressive than other police departments," and his acknowledgement that "there is still more that can be done to improve the department."

A few participants addressed their comments to FOIA requests and the BPD, rather than the City of Somerville. One participant expressed frustration about the fact that the BPD doesn't answer FOIA requests except those from certain organizations, which means that it's extremely difficult to get information from the BPD or the state police about their budget or other actions. Another noted that a friend had submitted a request for BPD bodycam footage and received a response that the officers were not wearing bodycams because they were working overtime.

### **Ideas and Suggestions**

The final round of conversation involved participants sharing their ideas for change. They were asked to share ideas, suggestions and opportunities for action to help ensure that all Somerville residents feel safe, and to help rebuild trust and relationships between the community and police. Their responses, organized by theme, are summarized below. As noted, some of these responses came from other portions of the meeting, but they addressed specific ideas for change and are therefore reported below.

Overall, there was significant consistency of ideas across the small group conversations, as well as diversity of ideas within the groups. All or nearly all of the groups touched on key issues like civil asset forfeiture reform; changes to the mutual aid system; police oversight, accountability and training; and the need for the City to be responsive to questions and issues identified by the community.

#### *Civil asset forfeiture reform and police budgets*

There were numerous comments, across the small groups, about reforming the system of civil asset forfeiture. A number of participants characterized civil asset forfeiture funds as money taken from poor people and people of color to supplement police budgets and argued that this creates problematic incentives for the police. Some participants argued that civil asset forfeiture should be abolished. Others argued that civil asset forfeiture should be spent on things other than the police budget.

Participants suggested civil asset forfeiture funds should be used on the following non-police-related functions:

- They should be made available to or for those hurt or arrested at the parade, to cover their expenses
- They should go into the general fund
- They should be used to support FOIA requests

A number of participants focused on oversight and transparency over the funds. One suggested that there should at least be clarity on what the police are spending this money on. Another suggested that if civil asset forfeiture funds cannot immediately be taken away from the police, then the city should decrease the police budget by that amount.

Some participants spoke more generally about decreasing, freezing, or reforming police funding without directing their suggestions specifically to civil asset forfeiture. Some suggested that police funds could be better spent on other budget priorities, such as housing, transportation, and climate change. Other participants suggested that a reduction in police funding overall could be used to incentivize the police to change their behavior, so that they are better aligned with the values of the community. One comment focused on changing the way individual police officers are paid to incentivize better behavior.

#### *Changes to mutual aid*

A number of comments suggested withdrawing from or dramatically changing the SPD's mutual aid agreements, either generally or with the City of Boston. Multiple participants suggested SPD should refuse to work with the BPD in the future, or back out of mutual aid generally. Other suggestions included the following:

- SPD should be able to deny a mutual aid request or decline an assignment if it disagrees with the other department's approach, or if there are too many police involved.
- SPD should not be permitted to use civil asset forfeiture funds for mutual aid assignments.
- SPD should deny mutual aid requests involving protests.
- SPD should issue a warning to the BPD that it will withdraw from the mutual aid agreement if the BPD engages in similar actions in the future.
- Requests for mutual aid for pre-planned events should go through Somerville's City government and/or the Mayor should sign off on them.
- The City should insist that NEMLEC's actions and budget be made public.
- SPD should reform mutual aid rather than backing out entirely, in case there is a natural disaster and the City needs support.
- SPD needs a way to ensure bad actors from other police departments like "Captain Pepperjack" don't wind up coming to Somerville via mutual aid.

A handful of participants reflected positively on the use of mutual aid agreements. One commented that they are very common in general, and it is typical for police to accept mutual aid assignments. Another suggested that mutual aid had worked well in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, and in that instance was a “demonstration of good community values.”

### *Accountability of officers*

There were a variety of suggestions related to accountability of police officers. Multiple participants suggested that one or more police officers should be fired based on their actions at the parade. A handful of participants identified a specific BPD officer alleged to have been at the center of much of the violence and suggested that Somerville should “demand” or “formally request” his firing.

Some participants focused less on the specifics of accountability and commented more on the general need for consequences if an officer breaks protocol. For example, one suggested that a system should be in place to ensure that a police officer who commits an unprovoked, violent act against a civilian is not in a position to do so again. Others pointed to specific acts that should not be permitted, and that should result in consequences like being fired or a pay freeze. Participants noted the following such acts:

- Aiding and abetting a crime, like police assault
- Pepper-spraying a medic
- Picking up a bike and hitting someone with it
- Covering one’s badge number
- Expressing support for Nazis on social media

### *Civilian review, oversight, or control*

Nearly every small group discussed the issue of increasing civilian review, oversight, or control over the SPD. The most frequent suggestion was the idea of a civilian oversight panel/board for the police. Participants suggested the following characteristics, authorities, and responsibilities for the panel:

- The panel should have “enforcement authority,” including power over police funding, policy, and disciplinary actions
- The panel should have authority to review interactions within the police department, such as the culture of the department or interactions between officers of different hierarchies
- There should be a fair democratic process for who gets to sit on the panel
- The panel should operate with transparency
- At a minimum, there should be one member of the panel who is not part of the SPD or the executive structure of the city, who speaks for the community
- The panel should have authority to manage the SPD budget

- The panel should have disciplinary authority that extends beyond paid leave or working a desk job
- The panel should have authority to set overall strategy without micromanaging police activities

Participants offered additional comments focused on other elements of civilian oversight. One suggested that police chiefs, deputies, and even officers be elected instead of appointed. Another suggested that there should be an external body where individuals can submit complaints against officers, which can then hold these officers accountable. And another suggested that power for managing the police should shift from the Mayor's office to the City Council.

### *Police training and reform*

Every small group discussed ways to better the SPD through improved training or other mechanisms. Nearly every group suggested the need to improve specific forms of training like de-escalation, crowd control, and crowd dispersal. Participants asked for details about the SPD's existing de-escalation training — such as the materials used, the number of hours, and the trainers utilized — and suggested the department should find new trainers and expand the number of hours. A number of participants also suggested people would feel more safe if the SPD was unarmed, like British police, and argued that they at a minimum should not be using military-grade equipment (riot gear, shields, etc.), much of which come from external state and federal grants that are approved by the City Council.

Additional suggestions on police training or tactics consisted of the following:

- The SPD should learn more about how to validate intelligence gained via social media
- The SPD should learn more about recognizing known white nationalist tactics, which involve agitating the community and utilizing the police as a tool of violence against protesters
- The SPD should improve its knowledge of “swatting”
- Training should involve approaches for de-escalation when officers from other departments, such as the BPD, are actively escalating a situation
- SPD tactics should include getting people medical care before moving them to a holding cell
- The SPD should not use bikes as a weapon
- Police should have financial incentives to engage in the kinds of training being demanded by the community
- The SPD should rename the COBRA unit because it is a threatening name, which does not reflect the unit's goal of de-escalation

Participants shared conflicting opinions on the use of body cameras. Some participants agreed with the use of body cams to increase transparency and accountability. One suggested, for example, that any time an officer is on duty, any action should be recorded and available as a

matter of public record. Others expressed concerns that body cameras, in particular if they are not regulated appropriately, could cause more harm than good. Specific concerns and suggestions about body cameras included the following:

- Body cameras have historically not provided transparency or accountability
- Body cameras represent a kind of surveillance technology, and are a threat to privacy and safety
- Body cameras should be deployed with civilian oversight
- Audio recording should require two-way consent
- Bodycam reports may be unreliable and body cameras seem to conveniently not work at critical moments
- Body camera footage isn't always made public to the wider community, essentially defeating the purpose
- Body cameras are an unregulated technology

A number of comments focused on the demographic makeup and overall composition of the SPD. Some suggested it is a problem that many police officers aren't from or don't live in the community. Others noted the high cost of living in Somerville makes this challenging and points to the inter-connectedness of issues like policing, housing costs, and inequality. Additional suggestions included the following:

- The SPD should have diversity quotas for hiring and promotion, taking into account gender, race, sexuality, etc.
- There should be an increase in employment opportunities for individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups.
- There should be more women in the SPD
- The SPD should re-think its hiring practices that allow for the hiring of aggressive officers
- There should be more social workers in the police department overall
- Social workers should more readily be deployed at events like the parade in place of armed police, and they should focus on verbal de-escalation

Participants also offered some general requests around police behavior. One suggested that the police should welcome witness recordings of their interactions with the public. Another suggested that the police should increase transparency around their rules of behavior/tactics, so that people can hold them accountable. Lastly, a number of participants commented that Somerville's commitment to being a progressive police force, if it is to be truly meaningful, needs to extend beyond its own local policies and inform its interactions with other departments.

#### *Improved reporting and review of events at the parade*

Another topic of suggestions revolved around the reporting and review of events at the parade. A number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the after-action report, and requested additional actions to clarify more specifically what happened and why. Participants offered the following suggestions:

- The City should explain more about what intelligence was gathered
- Factual inaccuracies in the report should be corrected and the report should include more detailed factual information, like the fact that people were hospitalized with broken bones and other injuries but did not go the police for help, or that that the BPD used bikes as weapons
- Someone other than the police should investigate and draft a report, to better ensure impartiality
- The City should not just try to move on and talk about changes and next steps without providing clear, satisfactory answers to key questions about what happened at the event
- The community and the police should jointly review videos of the event so that the community can better understand the SPD perspective on what constitutes a reasonable police response

One participant outlined four specific questions that they want the City to address. These questions mirror issues identified by other participants as well, and consisted of the following:

- Which videos did the SPD review for the after-action report? Can they be made available to the public?
- There is no reference in the report that any eyewitnesses were interviewed besides SPD officers. Did they ever talk to any other attendees of the event?
- The white nationalists who held the “Straight Pride Parade” used a known strategy that involves inciting violence at events and turning police officers against their own communities. What is the SPD doing to protect itself from being used like this during future events?
- Was there a way for SPD to say no to the mutual aid request from Boston to assist with this event? If not, is there a way to change the policy so that SPD could refuse to assist at future events?

Another participant from the same small group added a fifth question: What are the criteria used to determine whether or not sending SPD officers to respond to a mutual aid request would endanger public safety in Somerville?

#### *City transparency and communications*

A number of comments expressed dissatisfaction with the City’s overall level of transparency and the nature of its communications after the parade, and made suggestions for improvement moving forward. In particular, participants expressed an interest in more consistent and robust communication around the City’s efforts to understand what led to the SPD’s participation at the event, what happened at the event itself, what the City is doing about it now, and what is the specific path forward after this meeting.

Some participants expressed concern that the City is “slow walking” its reforms following the event in order to prevent them from gaining momentum and suggested the City should set

more clear deadlines around the process. Others suggested that a more regular “cadence” of communication from the City would do a lot to help to build trust.

Some participants expressed concerns about the community forum itself, and how the ideas discussed during the forum would be distributed after-the-fact. At least one participant expressed distrust that an external entity would be able to sort through all the comments, and suggested that the City should release all the notes and comments in their raw form. Another suggested that the City probably would not take any action in response to the feedback, regardless.

Other suggestions related to this issue included the following:

- The City should do a better job with electronic communication, like Twitter for example. If it is hard for the City to communicate through these means, we should figure out why that’s the case and work to address the barriers.
- All City staff should be required to take trainings on de-escalation and tell the community that this is being done.
- The City should make FOIA requests free.
- The Mayor should take a stronger stance against white nationalism.
- If it does not have one already, the City should establish a questions/suggestions box.

#### *Acknowledgement of mistakes*

A number of participants suggested that it would be beneficial to hear an apology and/or acknowledgment of wrongdoing directly from Chief Fallon, and not just the Mayor. For example, one participant expressed that a statement from the SPD that “we didn’t do it” is just not sufficient. Multiple others suggested that the SPD should be more vocal in standing apart from the BPD, in order to clarify and demonstrate leadership around the kind of policing that it — and the Somerville community — stand for.

Another participant simply requested “straight answers, ...with no reference to feelings, experiences, perceptions or messages” to the following questions related to acknowledgement of wrongdoing:

- Does the City of Somerville believe the actions of the SPD were wrong?
- Does the SPD believe the actions of the SPD were wrong?
- Does the City of Somerville believe the actions of the Boston Police Department were wrong?
- Does the SPD believe the actions of the BPD were wrong?

#### *Addressing harms to activists*

Some comments suggested the City should consider ways to financially compensate or otherwise address the harms done to activists, in particular the 36 individuals who were arrested. There were suggestions that civil asset forfeiture funds should be used to compensate

them for their losses, that they should each receive an apology and other forms of follow up, and that the City should start a bail fund.

### *Permitting*

A handful of comments addressed changes to the permitting process; for example, suggestions that Somerville should commit itself to denying permits to future “Straight Pride Parades” and other events sponsored by known hate groups, or require them to pay for their own security.

### *Future dialogue and relationship-building*

There were a number of comments around the ideas of community dialogue, dialogue with the SPD, and other forms of relationship-building. Some participants noted that they generally interact with the police only when something bad happens, and these kinds of interactions are not always conducive to building trust. In general, these participants suggested that the City should sponsor more events that focus on fostering conversation and relationships between the community and the police. They suggested that while they may feel “pie in the sky,” such events could improve relationships and help the City weather future crises more easily.

One specific set of ideas involved a quarterly check-in, or periodic luncheon, pizza, or barbecue, which would provide community members a chance to meet the police working in their neighborhoods and potentially other City staff, as well. A participant suggested that the meeting should be broader than just LGBTQ people plus the police, because a “cops and queers” luncheon would feel strange. Another participant suggested it would be helpful to hear from officers, as part of these conversations or otherwise, about whether and how they are assigned to events like the “Straight Pride Parade,” how much they are told about the events beforehand, what their experience was like at the parade, and whether any members of the SPD are LGBTQ. The overall goal would be to learn about officers as individuals — to be able to put a face to them that goes beyond “an abstract idea of violence.”

Other participants supported the idea of relationship-building, but felt it would be premature to just have a “community meeting or picnic, or coffee with a cop” before addressing the real harm done to the community and deeper questions around policing and community values. Participants suggested the City should first host one or more foundational conversations with just the community, like a “Police and Protests” summit run by a neutral entity, or a community dialogue on larger issues like “what does policing look like?” Another participant suggested the conversation should address pertinent issues like the growth of the far right, and the part the police play in that growth.

Lastly, a participant suggested that protesters should have specific opportunities to engage in “pre-protest conversations” with the police before an event, to address their fears and concerns.

## **Closing**

After the final round of small group conversations, the facilitators heard comments and questions from the larger group. Participants shared a number of ideas and suggestions for reform, which have been reported above. In addition, participants asked questions about the meeting summary, how it would be distributed, and how its accuracy would be ensured. The facilitators clarified that a draft summary would be distributed on the City's website and by email to those who had signed up for the City's contact list (available at the meeting welcome table). After receiving and addressing comments from members of the community, the City would release a final version of the summary.

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