

Massachusetts House of Representatives Bill Summary

Bill #: H.4153

Title: An Act establishing a charter for the city of Somerville

Sponsor: Rep. Christine Barber

Committee: Municipalities and Regional Government

Hearing Date: June 24, 2025

Current Law: The current Somerville Charter was adopted in 1871 as a special act, Chapter 182 of 1871. Since a substantial revision in 1899 it has undergone minor changes through the use of special legislation.

Executive Summary: According to the City's charter review description, key changes in the updated charter include:

- **Preamble and Values:** A new preamble explicitly states the charter's guiding values, such as justice, empowerment, ethical leadership, and equitable opportunity.
- **City Council Procedures:** More detailed procedures for City Council operations enhance transparency and access to information.
- **Mayoral and Council Powers Regarding Appointments:** The charter codifies the Mayor's role to appoint and the City Council's role to confirm appointments.
- **Financial Transparency and Inclusion:** A more structured budget process includes requirements for community input opportunities, public access to budget information, and a public hearing on and Council approval of the city's Capital Investment Plan.
- **Expanded Council Provisions:** Permits the City Council to hire its own advisory legal Counsel and also to hire Council staff.

Details: Section 1 of the bill contains the text of the revised city charter, which includes:

- Powers of the city, separation of powers, definitions of terms used in the charter, intergovernmental relations clause;
- Composition, term of office, powers and duties, compensation, prohibitions and eligibility to hold office in the legislative branch. City

council has 11 members serving 2-year terms. Four members serve at-large, while seven members would be elected from each of the city's 7 wards. City council president and vice-president chosen by city council from among its members.

- City council appoints city clerk; confirms certain appointments made by mayor, including multiple-member bodies.

- Article 3 of the charter concerns the executive branch and the election of a mayor, who currently serves a 2-year term of office. The section also governs the mayor's powers and duties, appointments, compensation, temporary appointments, process for approving measures and the veto power, communications, special meetings of the city council, procedures in the event of the mayor's absence and method for filling a vacancy in the office of mayor.

- Article 4 deals with the school committee, its composition, term of office, eligibility, prohibitions, compensation, rules and procedures, powers and duties, and method for filling vacancies on the board.

- Article 5 concerns the administrative organization of the city.

- Article 6 concerns financial procedures, submission of budget, etc.

- Article 7 governs elections, nominations, signature requirements, position of candidates on the ballot, division of city into 7 wards, and the application of state laws to municipal elections.

- Article 8 of the charter contains general provisions relating to the periodic review of the charter and ordinances, and changes, as well as rules and procedures governing other city boards, etc.

- Article 9 contains transitional provisions, ensures continuation of existing laws and the government and administration, keeping records, disposition of certain special acts, time of taking effect, creation of a Public Financing of Campaigns Committee, and creation of a Ranked Choice Voting Implementation Committee, and review of multiple member bodies to assess their functions and effectiveness.

Section 2 provides for the city clerk to place a ballot question on November 4, 2025 or the next regular municipal election at which the city can comply with the applicable Commonwealth ballot requirements, asking if the voters of the city of Somerville shall adopt the special act charter. A summary of the proposed special act charter would be prepared by the city attorney, which shall appear on the ballot along with the question.

Section 3 states that the revised charter shall take effect if a majority of the voters of the city approve of the language.

Section 4 states that the language calling for a question to be placed before the voters at the municipal election shall take effect upon passage.

Section 5 provides for the city clerk shall cause the following question to be placed on the official ballot at the next regular municipal election, asking whether the voters approve of changing the term of office for mayor from 2 to 4 years.

If passed, this provision would take effect no earlier than the 2028 term. The charter also states that a committee will be created to develop a plan to implement ranked choice voting, allowing voters to rank multiple candidates rather than vote for only one.

Section 6 states that Section 5 shall take effect upon acceptance by the majority of the voters of the city voting in the affirmative and the term of office of the mayor shall be for 4 years for the term commencing in January 2028, but not otherwise. If the majority of the voters of the city vote in the affirmative, the charter shall be amended in the sections relating to or referencing the term of the office of mayor.

Notes: This home-rule language was approved by the Somerville City Council on May 5, 2025; Approved by Mayor Ballantyne May 8, 2025.