



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

**MEETING: SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON SPECIAL PERMITS
AND LICENSING**

DATE: MARCH 19, 2026

TIME: 6:35 P.M.

PLACE: CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER, ROOM 214

**PRESENT: COUNCILLORS IAN ABREU, CHAIR; LEO
CHOQUETTE, BRIAN K. GOMES, SHAWN OLIVER;
SCOTT PEMBERTON**

**ABSENT: COUNCILLORS NAOMI R.A. CARNEY; JOSEPH P.
LOPES**

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Councillor Abreu called the Special Committee on Special Permits and Licensing meeting to order, took attendance, and explained that the meeting was being recorded and live-streamed. The Clerk read Communications into the record from Councillors Carney and Lopes explaining their absence. The Communications were received and placed on file by Councillor Choquette and seconded by Councillor Pemberton. Councillor Abreu explained that, although Councillors Gomes and Oliver are not members of the Committee, they are permitted to ask questions but are not allowed to vote on any agenda items.

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PUBLIC HEARING on AN APPLICATION, Moses N. Kisembo, d/b/a Knd Auto Rentals, LLC, for a SPECIAL PERMIT for Motor Vehicle Sales and/or Rentals, at 297 Belleville Avenue, New Bedford, MA 02746. (Application Received – February 19, 2026.) (Duly advertised in The Standard-Times on Thursday, March 05, 2026, and Thursday, March 12, 2026.)

On motion by Councillor Choquette and seconded by Councillor Pemberton, the Committee VOTED: To open the Public Hearing.

The Chair recognized the applicant Mr. Moses Kisembo. Mr. Kisembo stated that he has worked for other companies for five years and now he wants to start his own business. Mr. Kisembo is leasing the building at 297 Belleville Avenue.

Councillor Pemberton asked how many cars he plans to have on the lot and the hours of operation. Mr. Kisembo stated that he will start with nine vehicles and see how it progresses and he will be open from 8am – 5pm.

Councillor Choquette asked Mr. Kisembo whether this was his first business. Mr. Kisembo explained that he has previously operated online businesses and is now interested in opening a physical location. Councillor Choquette then inquired about the business structure, specifically whether it would be a partnership or a sole proprietorship. Mr. Kisembo responded that his brother would be involved in helping him run the business. Mr. Kisembo said back in Boston he was running Truro car rental.

The Chair recognized DIS Commissioner Romanowicz to give an overview of the permit. Commissioner Romanowicz stated it was one of the better cars lots on Belleville, the lot is always kept clean. Mr. Romanowicz did hopefully state that Mr. Kisembo can only have nine cars on the lot because the lot is land-locked and he cannot increase.

Councillor Pemberton asked for confirmation that the total was limited to nine cars, and Commissioner Romanowicz confirmed that only nine cars are permitted.

The Chair asked if there was anyone present who wished to speak and/or be recorded in favor of the item. There were none. The Chair asked if there was anyone present who wished to speak and/or be recorded in opposition of the item. There were none.

On motion by Councillor Pemberton and seconded by Councillor Choquette, the Committee VOTED: To close the Public Hearing.

On motion by Councillor Pemberton and seconded by Councillor Choquette, the Committee VOTED: To recommend to the City Council APPROVAL of the APPLICATION, Moses N. Kisembo d/b/a Knd Auto Rentals, LLC, for a SPECIAL PERMIT for Motor Vehicle Sales and/or Rentals at 297 Belleville Avenue, New Bedford, MA 02746.

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WRITTEN MOTION, Councillors Abreu and Oliver, requesting that the City Council engage the appropriate City department heads to explore the feasibility of permitting Host Community Agreements (HCAs) for onsite cannabis consumption establishments, commonly referred to as cannabis consumption lounges or social consumption establishments, in accordance with Massachusetts General Laws and Cannabis Control Commission regulations adopted in 2025; and further, requesting that said departments report back to the City Council with findings, recommendations, and any necessary local actions required to lawfully implement such establishments within the City of New Bedford. (To be Referred to the Special Committee on Special Permits and Licensing, Health Department Director Stephanie Sloan, Police Chief Jason Thody, Planning Department Director Jennifer Carloni, City Solicitor Eric Jaikes and a Representative from the Mayor's Office.) (Matter ID # 0178) (Referred – February 12, 2026.)

The Chair recognized Health Director Stephanie Sloan. Director Sloan indicated that she has reached out to Public Health professionals to see what other communities think about passing this law and how the regulations are interpreted. She stated it's very early on; we don't have information on how the CCC will regulate this and what type of training will be offered.

Health Director Sloan expressed several concerns, noting the absence of field sobriety testing standards and normalizing this practice; that while individuals may choose to purchase and consume cannabis, it is a separate issue for the City to provide infrastructure to support gatherings centered around its consumption. She went on to say there are three types of licenses – Supplemental, Hospitality and Event Organizers.

Councillor Abreu stated that public health, safety and wellness are important; but from an economic, tourism, job creation and workforce standpoints, I don't want to, to repeat what happened when the cannabis industry exploded, you had other communities ahead of us and by the time we passed our laws we were late to the game. I don't want to see us behind the eight ball because I see this as an economic driver.

Councillor Abreu went on to ask the intoxication issue, how this is different than the bar and pubs we have in the City. Health Director says there are field sobriety tests for alcohol that make it easier to enforce. We have this risk already when it comes to alcohol and drunk driving, I don't think we need to create another venue for different type of intoxication. I think there are a lot of public health risks and public safety issues with adopting this. I don't think these risks outweigh what the City will receive in economic benefit.

Councillor Oliver thanks the Committee Members for extending the invitation and allowing him to speak.

Councillor Oliver stated he shares the same concerns as Councillor Abreu, that the City will be late to the game, if we don't do something now. He also stated that he gets the feeling that the Board of Health does not have an appetite for this type of establishment in the City. Ms. Sloan stated that is correct.

Councillor Oliver asks Ms. Sloan if there was any appetite from the Administration for having this type of establishment? Director Sloan says that she has not had any discussion with the Administration on this issue.

Councillor Oliver ask Health Director Sloan, how many cannabis dispensaries in the City, Ms. Sloan responded with three. Councillor Abreu also stated that the City has one cultivator.

Councillor Oliver stated we're already providing the product, and the vessels are here already because people are consuming it in the privacy of their own homes. I don't see that just because there are one or two places where it's socially acceptable to smoke or to partake in this, that it will change dramatically because people are still buying the product they're still consuming the product. I don't see the connection that it will have a ripple effect of people driving while intoxicating, most likely doing that right now, because you can purchase those items in the City. What are the major concerns that the Board of Health has regarding this type of an establishment.

Health Director responded, there is public safety risk, the type of establishment closes at a certain time, there are a bunch of people leaving that establishment, the CCC has protocol on a rideshare program, but the establishment has no way to know if people are actually taking a rideshare, so from a public health aspect we to want to reduce injury, my other concern is normalization, because once we normal something, the higher frequency people use and there becomes a perception of less risk. Just because something is legal doesn't mean we need to provide the infrastructure for that type of activity to occur.

Councillor Oliver asked about the guidance from the CCC or the CCC release rules and it's up to the municipality to figure out. Ms. Sloan believes there is more guidance coming out, but it's still early.

Councillor Oliver asked Health Director if there is any networking going on with other municipality regarding this type of establishments and if she can share some of these conversations, Ms. Sloan stated she brought this topic up for at her health related discussion group and the feedback she received was the group want to see what the CCC will further unveiled before jumping into making a decision, the only community has started to think about it and put some language together was Somerville.

Councillor Abreu asked Ms. Sloan that when she has a meeting with her large city group can she provide of synopsis of the discussion that took place on these types of establishments.

Councillor Oliver asked that from Ms. Sloan's conversations the biggest hesitation was the vagueness from CCC rules, she stated yes and the enforcement of it, because it falls under the CCC and not the City, there are things we can do locally for enforcement, but what the regulations state is that the enforcement is under the CCC.

Councillor Oliver asked how far along is Somerville in this process. Health Department stated that Somerville have moved to opt in and have set some parameters. Under their Event Organizers section for being a social consumption site, the State permits up to a certain number of dates per year, and Somerville has set that number, the CCC has not released licenses, so Somerville is not that far along in the process, but they have already begun that sectioning.

Councillor Oliver asked if that Vendor portion is like festivals, a temporary event, a one-day Special Permit and he was told yes.

The Chair recognized Police Chief Thody.

Councillor Abreu asked Chief Thody, how is a cannabis consumption site is any different than having a beer at the bar and how would you enforce any type of intoxication of cannabis?

Police Chief Thody, stated that that the first thing is a responsible establishment with alcohol, we have bars in this City like we do in other cities that don't operate in responsible way and it's a public safety risk and once you give somebody the license or permit to dispense alcohol, it difficult to take that back, even if they're not being responsible, this is the same in that way, you know the risk are similar, where they differ in our ability to enforce, it's legal to consume most people buy it and consumer in their house or somewhere, which not a large gathering when you have it in a remote place people tend to drive there and then consume cannabis, and then they have to get in a car and drive home.

There are efforts to have establishments work with us on a transportation plan, but it doesn't indicate what that means or how much involvement that the law enforcement public agency will have, but the Police Department doesn't currently have a way to detect roadside cannabis intoxication.

There is DRE (Drug Recognition Expert) training, but it is much more difficult for us to enforce operating under the influence of cannabis, then it is alcohol, the technology out there that allows it to happen with alcohol but not when you're dealing with cannabis

Councillor Abreu stated that we can add language, to have full time security to these establishments like security at dispensaries

The Chief responded that the CCC has some language in the rules, that there is training for the individuals that are dispensing cannabis like the TIPS training that bartenders must go through.

Councillor Abreu added that, at a certain point, the City must take a leap of faith. If a developer presents a professional plan, demonstrates financing, and shows the necessary infrastructure is in place, then the Council is willing to take them at their word at least until proven otherwise. He emphasized that, out of respect for applicants who come forward and meet all required standards, including health department and other regulatory parameters, the expectation is that they will follow through and act responsibly and if they don't, we'll call him back in and we'll revoke the license or permit. We talked about its responsibility

Councillor Oliver asked Chief Thody, is there any other way, than a blood test to detect someone cannabis intoxications. Chief Thody responded that there no roadside field sobriety test for cannabis, but there are companies working diligently to create field sobriety test for cannabis.

Councillor Oliver asked the Chief how many D.R.E. officers the City had. The Chief responded that he would need to investigate it and follow up with an answer.

Councillor Oliver asked the Police Chief whether he believed a location like this would exacerbate the issue. The Chief responded that the concern is it could draw individuals out of their homes into a setting where consumption occurs, without giving Police an effective way to test for intoxication. Councillor Oliver asked how many accidents a year happen that upon testing that we found out that they were under the influence of something other than alcohol, Chief Thody responded that he would need to investigate it and follow up with an answer.

The Chair recognized City Planner Carloni, the Chair asked what the zoning would be for this type of establishment, Ms. Carloni responded that she has some concerns related to zoning, is the CCC going to require us to put new zoning in place or use zoning that has already be permitted.

The Chair recognized City Solicitor Jaikes.

Councillor Oliver asked the City Solicitor if there has been any discussion with the Administration regarding permitting or licensing these establishments. City Solicitor said that his office and Administration are waiting to see what the CCC does with the licenses for these establishments, and what the rollout will look like, there are many unanswered questions and concerns.

On a motion by Councillor Choquette and seconded by Councillor Pemberton, the Committee VOTED: to TABLE the item.

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RELATED MOTION, Councillor Lopes, requesting that the City Council engage the appropriate City department heads to explore the feasibility of permitting onsite tobacco consumption, commonly referred to as Cigar Lounges. (To be Referred to the Special Committee on Special Permits and Licensing, Health Department Director Stephanie Sloan, Police Chief Jason Thody, Planning Department Director Jennifer Carloni, City Solicitor Eric Jaikes and a Representative from the Mayor's Office.) (Matter ID #0179) (Referred – February 12, 2026.)

The Chair recognized Health Director Stephanie Sloan. Councillor Choquette asked the Health Director what the biggest hurdle of locating a cigar lounge in the City of New Bedford, Ms. Sloan responded, that back in 2019 the Board put a descending cap on tobacco retailers, because New Bedford had one of the highest smoking rates in Massachusetts, and in putting this cap our numbers of retailers have come down, we updated our regulations, specifically smoke free workplace regulations, so cigar bars would be in complete conflict, and our Board in the regulations specifically called out cigar bars, or lounges as not being allowed.

Councillor Abreu asked if you are going to a cigar lounge and you don't smoke, you know you are going to inhale secondhand smoke, you are going to these lounges as an adult, 21+. Health Director Sloan responded that she feels the Boards have an opportunity to protect these people as well.

Councillor Oliver asked Ms. Sloan, with the measures put in place by the Board of Health, was the goal was to make New Bedford 100% smoke free. Ms. Sloan responded that at the time the board was going to reevaluate when New Bedford was at a state average, and we're not there yet, and talking about making New Bedford a smoke free generation has not been had. The Board is having difficulty in getting their retailers to come into compliance. In the 2025, we have had 17 sales to minors, 7 cigars and cigarillos in various locations.

On a motion by Councillor Choquette and seconded by Councillor Pemberton, the Committee VOTED: to TABLE the item.

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Councillor Pemberton made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Councillor Choquette.

This meeting adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

ATTEST:

Susan M. Henriques,
Assistant City Council Clerk