

Somerville Renters Forum 2021 - Housing Questionnaire

All candidates were asked the same questions. Questionnaires were submitted to the Somerville Renters Committee and CAAS on 8/6/21. The Ward candidates forum was held 8/11/21 on Zoom.

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Position running for: **City Council Ward 2**

1. What do you view as the greatest challenge facing low income Somerville renters in 2021, and why?

"Low income renters" is a really broad category that can include people who are rent-burdened due to the local cost of housing outpacing income growth (around 40% of Somerville residents fall below that line) - a fundamental wealth inequality problem - all the way to people who are eligible for Section 8 vouchers due to disability or other issues obtaining enough income to be above the federal poverty level, including our current houseless population. The individual and particular challenges faced by each group of folks in that 40% of our population are different, but the common factor in all of it is that we do not address the need for housing as a human right across the entire income and ability spectrum. We need to elect representatives with the political will to act with urgency to rectify this, and as elected representatives we need to fight in coalition at every level of government to build a broad toolbox to address those individual and particular challenges.

There's no single silver bullet for every tenant beyond building mass social housing and providing it as a right to everyone; until we can get to that point (and I do support building public/social housing locally in the next term) we need to deploy point solutions to address the particular challenges faced by low-income renters including voucher avoidance, fair housing discrimination, unfair rent increases, evictions (including effective evictions via lease non-renewal, rent increases, condo conversions etc) and poor housing unit conditions allowed to persist by a lack of inspections and enforcement.

2. In a city where more than half of the people rent, what housing policies would you focus on to ensure that every resident has safe, stable, and affordable housing? We are particularly concerned that the elderly, people with disabilities, veterans, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+, and other people with marginalized identities do not have enough access to housing in Somerville. If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

When talking about housing quality, enforcement is a key issue. ISD receives over 40,000 complaints each year and currently has 2 enforcement inspectors to address all those issues. Even more issues go unreported because tenants either don't know that they have a legal right to better conditions, don't know how to report the issues and to whom, or simply don't want to risk alienating their landlords due to the incredibly unbalanced power dynamic created by our current system which gives property owners many more rights than tenants. I can and have

written provisions into our current zoning ordinances that require compliance with a variety of provisions that would provide safer and suitable accommodations for people with disabilities and the elderly, for example, but without inspections and enforcement to remedy violations those laws are ineffective.

Now that the payment standards have increased, one of the largest continuing objections landlords harbor to accepting a Section 8 voucher is the requirement that the rental unit be subjected to a basic life safety inspection every year. The federal government requires that local housing authorities conduct these inspections to ensure that units meet the legal standards for safe housing. If we were to institute a citywide rental unit registry and a requirement that EVERY rental unit in Somerville obtained an annual inspection for basic living conditions and compliance with legal requirements, the quality of housing would increase dramatically. (We would also need the staffing levels in ISD to increase dramatically to achieve this - in FY21 I proposed expanding ISD significantly to even meet current demand.) As a knock-on effect, I believe this would also increase the number of people eager to accept Section 8 vouchers, as the annual inspection would not be an additional burden that they can avoid by keeping their unit in the non-subsidized market. I'd like to make this a reality in the next two years.

Beyond inspection and enforcement, I also think it will be essential to bolster the resources offered to the Fair Housing Commission, Human Rights Commission, CAAS, and the Office of Housing Stability. Each of those entities have an important role to play in ensuring compliance with legal standards and helping residents find and retain housing, and each needs more funding which I have demanded and will continue to draw attention to in each budgeting process.

3. Far too many residents are still struggling to pay rent due to income loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who worked in the service sector, gig economy, and undocumented immigrants who might not qualify for traditional types of rental assistance. How would you support the recovery of residents in these situations so that they remain stably housed? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

Of course, step one is to extend the eviction moratorium - which I have advocated for and will continue to do so. In terms of maintaining stable housing going forward, I see five broad categories of action needed.

- 1) We need to continue to educate tenants of their existing rights via "Know Your Rights" campaigns, which I have supported in office and through my personal activism.
- 2) We need to improve tenants' ability to exercise those rights via Right To Counsel programs and legislation providing direct legal assistance to tenants - not just those facing eviction, but also those filing Fair Housing claims or reporting safety violations.
- 3) We need to expand tenant rights to include a Tenant Bill of Rights and, most critically, some form of rent control or rent stabilization to prevent "market displacement".
- 4) We need to build social/public housing locally to address a full income, age, and disability

spectrum need for housing as a human right.

5) We need to continue to increase funding to vehicles such as the Office of Housing Stability's "flex fund" which can provide direct assistance to tenants who customarily cannot access other rental assistance programs and prevent displacement while we work on the larger systemic fixes above.

4. Affordable housing funding is critical, but limited. Public subsidy often builds homes that are still too expensive for the people struggling the most, with 1-bedroom rents over \$1500. How would you use zoning and other city-controlled tools for less expensive homes so that affordable housing funding can support the lowest-income residents of Somerville (at or below 30% of Area Median Income)? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

Solutions like our inclusionary zoning programs can help a great many people who are rent-burdened but do miss the needs of the lowest-income residents of Somerville. As stated above, a citywide inspection and enforcement program is a local program that WOULD expand placement opportunities for Section 8 voucher holders (all of whom are at or below 30% of AMI), which has been a chronic problem even as payment standards and voucher availability have increased in recent years. But to really address the needs of our lowest income renters, we need to build public housing locally and bypass the entire Faircloth Amendment bind that prevents federal public housing expansion.

I'm already working with partners in organized labor who have proven success in building mixed-income, multi-generational, family-oriented public housing projects in the region. I'm exploring strategies for securing both the land and the funding to make this dream of stable, affordable housing a reality for more of our residents, including leveraging the federal ARPA funds and GLX reimbursements with private investment from pension funds seeking stable returns. We can create hundreds of new affordable, community-owned housing units in the city - built by Somerville residents earning a truly living wage, trained in trades, and keeping our tax dollars at home in our community.

5. How would you protect Somerville residents, particularly renters, from displacement due to rising rents, gentrification, and increased development? And how would you ensure that new developments give the allocated number of units to low income residents, as the oversight seems to be currently lacking? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

This requires a multi-pronged approach that includes multiple departments. It means expanding and reforming ISD and Planning to be capable of performing needed inspections on new construction and enforcing the existing conditions placed during their approval processes. It also means expanding the Housing Department which currently manages the affordable housing stock created through our Inclusionary Zoning requirements to ensure that units are marketed and filled effectively, and that we don't "lose" units through illegal sales that return public-controlled deed-restricted units to the private market, as has happened in Somerville

(and other municipalities) due to lack of sufficient oversight.

Finally, a point on adding supply to combat rent-increase displacements: no amount of supply that Somerville can add would remedy our regional housing supply limitation given that the regional demand is 400k and we currently have 34k housing units in the most densely populated city in New England. We could build 2 more Somervilles ON TOP OF Somerville today and still not crack 20% of the regional demand. While we can (and will) build more, we must work with a regional coalition to build supply in neighboring towns, increase public transit access to that new housing, build public housing locally to address the most critical needs, and urgently create a pathway to rent stabilization to prevent rent-increase displacements while we work long term on stabilizing supply and demand.

6. The housing in Somerville that is available for low income residents – including publicly owned, inclusionary and other types of subsidized, and privately owned – is often full of bad conditions, and health and safety code violations. What would you do to ensure that all renters can live in safe and dignified housing in our city? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

As stated above, we need to institute a citywide rental unit registry and a requirement that EVERY rental unit in Somerville obtains an annual inspection for basic living conditions and compliance with legal requirements, and expand and reform ISD to be able to execute on this goal. We also need to dramatically reform the Somerville Housing Authority, which operates with very limited oversight into their facility maintenance and spending, and increase city capacity to require compliance with affordable housing non-profits like SCC - where I receive regular complaints from residents about the unsatisfactory conditions in their living units. One recent conversation I had with an SCC tenant, I was told "I don't know how I can put up with this; the conditions here are terrible. I might rather go back to being homeless than deal with this." That's unacceptable; we need our inspection and enforcement mechanisms to be greatly strengthened, and we need tenant education and protection to ensure that they can and will access those inspections and enforcement even on non-profit/public housing providers.

In addition, we need to work through the Community Land Trust and in conjunction with the Jobs Training and Retention Trust to build and maintain new public housing by Somerville residents for Somerville residents - as outlined above - and build a trade-trained working class in which Somerville residents can do the work of building a city that provides affordable housing, addresses the climate crisis, reduces wealth inequality, and works for all of us. I have supported these efforts and am leading new initiatives to expand locally constructed public housing.

7. Low income residents often face unresponsive or hostile landlords and property management. Some tenants who are people of color or immigrants have experienced racism and other forms of discrimination. This means that even if residents can afford to live in Somerville, they do not feel welcome or embraced here. What would you do to ensure that all residents feel like they belong in our city, are empowered to uphold their rights as renters, and are protected from

retaliation? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

With regard to outright discrimination, we need more resources in the Office of Housing Stability, Fair Housing Commission, and Human Rights Commission to help address the whole spectrum of observable and enforceable complaints. I've fought for this and will continue to elevate these budget needs in every budgeting season - and voted to approve and expand funding for OHS in particular.

But to address the larger question of belonging and empowerment requires us to address the more pernicious effects of gentrification, construction disruption, and cultural displacement. Do we need more supply? Sure. Do 6-story buildings inherently "destroy neighborhood character"? No. But HOW and WHERE and BY WHOM and AT WHAT COST - including the unintended consequences and knock-on effects in cultural displacement among others - means that the solution deserves a more serious approach than "just build more housing"; anti-displacement and anti-gentrification activists have been trying to say this for years, and we need to listen to that. As I've said before, housing is a segmented market and you can't solve a shortage of Toyota Corollas by just building a million Lamborghinis.

Cultural displacement is a real factor: fundamentally, people look around and say "this isn't my neighborhood anymore, why would I want to stay here?" The feeling that this city isn't a welcoming place for you any more, that you aren't cared for and supported, can be a cascading consequence of development - one of the visceral experiences of gentrification - and a direct result not only of the buildings that result from those developments but the new residents within (when they are majority higher-income) and the protracted impacts of construction that are borne by the existing residents. "Development without displacement" also means preserving a sense that the people who live here now still belong here in the future, and having neighborhood processes that shape development to include tangible benefits to the existing residents. It's a lot easier to endure construction and greet new neighbors with a warm welcome when the project is going to result in something you're pleased to live nearby, whether that's a project with expanded affordable housing, community space, green space, or any other amenity advocated for by the current residents of the neighborhood.

A final note on preventing cultural displacement is that we should also be focusing on enabling (through zoning entitlements) and supporting the creation and maintenance of (through economic development investments) locally and minority owned small businesses in residential districts, not just the squares. Neighborhood establishments serve as cultural touchstones and anchors that invite inclusion and give us a moment to celebrate the diversity of our community; we need to ensure that there is room for those businesses where residents congregate, interact, and form the social backbone of a healthy, locally interconnected community.

8. How would you expand homeownership opportunities for first-time and low income residents in Somerville, especially for people of color, single parents, immigrants, veterans, and people with

disabilities? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

We can supplement FHA, DHCD, and MHP programs with local funding to create more purchasing power for first time homebuyers including low-income residents; a version of this can be seen in Boston's ONE+Boston program, and we can do a similar thing here focused on particular communities of interest.

But even more impactful would be directing city funding resources to the Community Land Trust, to remove properties from the private market and turn control of the land and housing development directly to the community, the people who live here - not private speculators and absentee landlords that are increasingly coming from out-of-town investment capital firms. By separating the land cost from the cost of the building itself, the Somerville CLT can reduce the cost of a 2-family home from \$1M to two units of housing each costing a low-income family only \$300k-\$350k. That, in partnership with a ONE+Boston style program, creates a total monthly payment of only \$1300 with a \$6k down payment (less than many first/last/security/fee rental arrangements) that could put homeownership within reach of a staggering number of residents.

I campaigned on creating the CLT in 2017, served on a task force to create it in 2018 and 2019, and continue to work collaboratively to identify parcels which we can transfer into the CLT to enable just this sort of transformative change in our housing market.

9. As a City Councilor, how would you collaborate with your colleagues on Council and the new Mayoral administration to enact more housing justice policies?

If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done to collaborate between both municipal branches and what you intend to prioritize next.

My time on the City Council has demonstrated success in this regard, particularly with the creation of the Somerville Community Land Trust as part of a partnership with staff from the Mayor's Office and the Housing Department as well as community advocates and colleagues from the City Council. We need to continue this work to build and use that political will to dramatically expand its resources and scope; the SCLT can be a truly transformative tool for building long-term stability, permanent affordability, and at a fundamental level returning control of development in our community to the residents (instead of whatever developer shows up with the biggest suitcase of cash). The creation of the Office of Housing Stability and the continual expansion of its funding and staffing is another example of an incredibly effective collaboration between the Council, Mayor, and city staff which is directly improving residents lives and preventing displacement - and I absolutely plan to continue that work as well.

It is clear after 3+ years of this work in office that no amount of legislation can be effective without executive support due to the structure of our current city government. Policy must be driven in collaboration with the Executive branch, which currently controls hiring and spending in great detail and with only very coarse-grained oversight capability from the City Council. In

addition to supporting charter change to more equitably share power and resources between the executive and legislative branches, I look forward to working with whoever our next Mayor is to ensure that the action of individual departments within the city (including Housing, OHS, ISD, OSPCD including EconDev, and others) more closely aligns with the policy aims of the City Council and the residents we represent.

10. What are the top 3 renter protections you would include in a Tenants' Bill of Rights and why? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done to enhance renter/tenant protections and what you intend to prioritize next.

(This question was inspired by Our Revolution Somerville's endorsement questionnaire)

Rent Control, Right to Organize, Relocation Assistance, Just Cause Evictions, Right of First Refusal/TOPA, Right to Counsel. I have put forward legislation on, voted for HRPs granting, or advocated publicly for all of the above. Here in Somerville we actually obtained a limited Right of First Refusal and Relocation Assistance in our Condo Conversion Ordinance, which is now being legally challenged by a local landlord coalition.