

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 7**

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

People living on low incomes bear a disproportionate burden of the challenges related to housing affordability and access to/experience with/and outcomes from goods and services across all systems. The pandemic has amplified these challenges and the impacts experienced by individuals and families living on low incomes.

I believe the greatest challenge facing people living on low incomes in 2021 is housing stability. Somerville is increasingly expensive in all aspects of life. Low paying jobs are not sufficient on their own to provide a stable living situation in Somerville. Low paying jobs typically do not afford needed flexibility for life needs that arise for all people (needing flexibility for personal health needs, caring for a family member, etc.). Throughout the pandemic, workers in low paying jobs were often faced with the impossible task of putting their individual and family health at stake to work in-person or lose their employment. Even in normal times, low paying jobs do not support workers with stable enough income to afford living in Somerville with out additional assistance. Paying rent or mortgage can be impossible because of this instability.

The eviction moratorium was a necessary and helpful intervention to add some stability during the uncertainty of the pandemic. However, the timeline to return to "normal" (or, at least a state of affairs where covid is not a primary concern that shapes how we can live, play, and work in our communities) is unclear. Having short-term, 90-day extensions on the mortarium adds to the instability. As soon as policy-driven protections for renters and mortgage holders living on low incomes are ended, the level of instability in the daily lives of people living on low incomes will increase.

Finally, in the big picture/long term, the supply of truly affordable housing - whether it is publicly supported housing or private housing that is affordable to people on low and middle incomes - continues to decrease. We don't have enough housing for people who qualify for publicly supported housing. We don't have enough housing for people who do not qualify for publicly supported housing who still rely on low/middle incomes. Our housing supply is increasingly purchased at above-market rates by individuals or developers who do not currently live in Somerville. The stability of knowing you will likely be in your home for one, three, five, ten+ years if you want to be is less certain for folks living on lower incomes. Equally important is the stability associated with maintaining and upgrading existing housing. Old houses pose

great risks in terms of lead and other environmental toxins. Health hazards and quality of life inhibitors are too common across our aging housing stock.

We must do better as a community to increase the stability of living in our community for everyone - especially people and families living on low incomes.

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.

The City must improve access to information about existing rights and available services designed to protect historically marginalized communities regarding their housing needs. This means ensuring that people have access to information when and where they need it in a format that is accessible to their individual language needs. We must do a better job reaching out to marginalized communities at large - especially building on all of the incredible community organizations currently supporting people - as well as individual outreach to people.

We must do a better job tracking utilization of existing goods and services and evaluating what is working and what is not working based on direct feedback from the people using the services. And, we must do intentional outreach to people who are not using the services - but, who would benefit from their services - to understand what's not working for them.

As it relates to housing needs, the city should provide standard documents (ie. standard lease agreements) that can be used by any one in the city. The city should encourage landlords to use these standard leases - which must be available in every major language spoken in our community. And, for landlords of a certain size (more than 5 properties), standard documents should be required to increase the likelihood of fair treatment across their properties.

The city should proactively conduct quality-of-housing evaluations for all houses - but, especially units lived-in by members of historically marginalized communities - to ensure that all homes meet an appropriate standard of living.

The city must also establish a better system of accountability for problematic landlords. A city-run database of credible complaints against landlords should be available to the community. And, repeat offenders should be held accountable in the form of fees or more severe punishment if appropriate. This also applies to landlords who have perpetually vacant properties (residential or commercial).

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.

I fully support extending the eviction moratorium indefinitely and the removal of the moratorium should be revisited when the threat of a covid spike is minimized or eliminated. I believe the city should find ways to provide relief in the form of direct rent payments and other relief for landlords who decrease or forgive rent payments. The city should also provide a centralized resource center connecting Somerville residents to all of the federal, state, and local resources and support services.

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.

We need more housing supply across all of Somerville. We especially need high density housing in larger buildings (6 stories or more where appropriate) near our new GLX train stations. The city should incentivize the renovation of existing properties into more affordable properties. Recently analysis by local resident Jeff Kauffman (<https://www.jefftk.com/p/come-build-affordable-housing>) documents the profitability of building affordable housing based on ordinances that were changed in 2019.

The potential to greatly increase the supply of affordable units in Somerville already exists in existing zoning codes and policy. However, I do not think existing landlords or developers are aware of the benefits of developing affordable units.

The city should improve outreach to encourage more affordable development. And, the city should provide expedited services (ie. process permits, inspections, etc.) for projects that increase the availability of affordable housing.

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.

I believe the only long term solution to the affordability crisis is to drastically increase the supply of housing - as I've mentioned. While I believe in the goals of rent control and other forcing-function policies aimed at protecting people living on low incomes, the data suggests that these efforts tend to have the reverse effect in the long term. The demand to live in

Somerville tends to outpace the supply of housing - certainly the growth in demand for housing. We must drastically increase the number of housing units in Somerville while ensuring long term affordable units within all new developments.

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.

The city must provide proactive evaluation of living conditions for homes that are available to low income residents. Relying on a reactive approach - waiting for residents to become frustrated enough to reach out to the city - is not an effective method for improving the quality of life and quality of homes for people living on low incomes. The City must work directly with renters, owners, and local/state agencies tasked with ensuring healthy living conditions for all. And, as issues arise, the city must enforce accountability with owners/landlords to improve the conditions.

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.

The city should establish and maintain a database of complaints of this nature against landlords. And, the city should establish a system of accountability directed towards landlords who abuse their tenants and our community. Accountability can come in the form of fees levied against landlords for specific infractions as well as more drastic measures where legally permissible.

The city should also set up a transparent and equitable system for understanding the representation of people of color, immigrants, and other historically marginalized communities across our neighborhoods. We should understand the representation/underrepresentation of people from different backgrounds across our communities and work to improve representation in our community. And, we should work to more intently understand the degree to which our neighborhoods are de facto segregated and come together as a community to co-develop goals for more authentic integration across our entire 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.

I believe the city should establish a fund - similar to an endowment - utilizing the \$30-50million that will be returned to the City from the GLX - that can be used exclusively for the purpose of providing low interest/0% loans to first time home buyers from underrepresented communities and to any renovation, re builds, or new construction that increases long term affordable unit supply in the community. This fund can be financed long term by increasing fees on parking meters, annual parking permits, gas taxes, and property taxes for properties that do not contain any affordable units.

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.

I believe all effective change management efforts starts with effective relationship building and intentional efforts to understand shared values, share interests, and available assets to work together in service of our shared goals. It is likley that our next Mayor will be someone with strong alignment to my values and big picture interests. And, I believe the it is likely that the next Mayor will align with the values and interests of majority of the next city council.

I believe the on-going charter review process will provide an opportunity to set ourselves up for success for the next generation of city goverance in Somerville. If the Charter is finalized before the next government is sworn in, the new government will be able to set the example of how the Mayor's office and the City Council will work together going forward. If the Charter still needs completion, the next government will be able to finalize the Charter together to set the expectation on how we'll work together going forward.

All of the serious candidates for Mayor have espoused commitments to equity and affordability in Somerville - building the will will not be a challenge. The challenge will be bring the whole community along. The city council and the mayor's office must work together with proactive communication and outreach to stakeholders so community members are genuinely part of the problem identification and solution creation process so improvement projects are real to everyone - and do not feel like a top-down decree from the government without real listening and collaboration with the community.

I believe all of the serious candidates for Mayor and our next City Council will be able to do that together effectively.

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)

1) Right to a safe home. (ie. Doors and windows that function as designed; a home free of

environmental harms like lead and other toxins; a home that meets codes in terms of accessibility; access to hot water, refrigeration, and ability to cook with a stove)

2) Right to stability (ie. Unexpected turmoil like major economic downturns and short term financial instability will not result in eviction)

3) Right to timely repairs and maintenance