

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.

Candidate name: **Ben Ewen-Campen**

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Position running for: **City Council Ward 3**

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

The greatest challenge facing low income renters is that the cost of housing is skyrocketing, and has been doing so for years. For the vast majority of renters, if they were to lose their current housing, they'd be unable to find another affordable place to live in Somerville. Without strong tenant protections such as "Just Cause" Eviction, a tenants right to purchase, and rent control, there is ultimately very little that tenants can do to protect themselves if a landlord wants to replace them with higher-income tenants.

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.

Housing policy has been my absolute top priority since my election in 2017. A full list of the housing policies that I have helped to pass is here:

<https://www.benforward3.com/accomplishments> - and, when I say "helped to pass," I really mean it, as these were all collaborative efforts between City Councilors, housing justice advocates in the community, and staff in our Housing Division & Office of Housing Stability.

To highlight a few of the policies we have created at the municipal level: creating the Office of Housing Stability to directly assist tenants and to guide us in policy decisions, re-writing the Condo Conversion Ordinance to prevent tenants from eviction loopholes, passing the State's strongest short-term rental (aka AirBNB) regulations to protect our existing housing stock, passing the Affordable Housing Overlay District zoning amendment to make it easier to create new affordable housing, passing the Tenant Notification Act to ensure that tenants are informed of their rights and support systems, and supporting the administration of multiple large COVID-19 relief systems to provide direct assistance to tenants.

In addition to these municipal policies, I have helped to pass multiple home rule petitions to grant us new powers: these include a Real Estate Transfer Fee to fund affordable housing, support for just cause eviction, tenants right to purchase, rent control, HOMES Act [eviction sealing], and more.

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 have publicly advocated for using a portion of our Federal and State funds to ensure that all Somerville tenants are made whole on lost rent payments during the pandemic. In addition, I have continuously stood with housing advocates demanding an extension of the State and Federal Eviction Moratorium, and maintaining Somerville's eviction moratorium for the entire duration of the pandemic.

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.

I led the passage of the Affordable Housing Overlay District in late 2020, which uses our zoning authority to incentivize affordable housing creation and removes much of the red tape that slows these projects down. By driving costs down, this increases the subsidy that can be used to lower the income thresholds for such projects. I fully support a comprehensive review of our inclusionary zoning policy, to understand how we can further support the creation of more deeply affordable units, and I also strongly support using public land and public funding to maximize the creation of new deeply affordable units, in particular on publicly-owned parcels near new GLX stations, which in my district means Union Square D blocks, the Homan's building site in Gilman Square.

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.

First: I would like to hear more about the lack of oversight on new developments, and would appreciate anyone who has experienced issues with this to reach out to me directly. Currently, as part of the permitting process, our Housing Division negotiates with each developer a legally binding "Affordable Housing Implementation Plan" that specifies exactly which units will be set aside for Inclusionary Zoning. If anyone reading this has witnessed this process not being followed, please reach out and we will take appropriate legal action.

More broadly: please see above for the policies that I have supported over the past two terms to increase renters rights, and create new affordable housing, and to fight for state-wide change. Going forward, my top priority for this term is to work with a community-led Task Force to pass a Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing zoning amendment that will find new ways to use our zoning authority to address fair housing concerns, both past and future.

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.

One of the greatest challenges about safe and dignified housing is that tenants are often (very understandably) afraid to file complaints about unsafe or unsanitary conditions, because they fear retaliation from their landlords. This is why I strongly support the Rental Registry legislation that was recently introduced by Councilor Mbah and the Administration, which will establish an oversight structure for basic safety, utility costs, and building efficiency standards, to help take some of the pressure off tenants from self-reporting. I also regularly work directly with tenants to help raise their concerns anonymously with the relevant authorities. In addition, I have actively supported the creation of new tenants unions', which help build collective support amongst tenants so that individual tenants are able to raise concerns about the condition of their 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.

I am 100% committed to doing everything in my power to create an anti-racist Somerville that is welcome to all, and I will continue to support our amazing community's perpetual efforts for equality and against hate. Specifically on the topic of housing discrimination: since winning my first election, I have advocated for a far more proactive approach to enforcing Fair Housing law. In particular, today we only send out Fair Housing "testers" (i.e. undercover volunteers from different backgrounds who apply for a given apartment and document unfair treatment) in response to complaints - I believe we should be doing so at a far higher volume, so that landlords and real estate agents become less likely to flagrantly violate Fair Housing law.

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.

In addition to expanding our Affordable Home-Ownership opportunities through inclusionary zoning, I helped to found (and currently serve on the Board of) Somerville's first Community Land Trust, which will create permanently affordable home ownership opportunities. I also have been working closely with local non-profits to create a proposal similar to Boston's very successful One+ Mortgage Assistance Program, which essentially leverages public funds to make mortgages more affordable - I believe Community Preservation Act funding and/or ARPA funding would be an appropriate source for such funds.

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 won election in 2017 alongside an incredible group of new Councilors, and all of us had run on unambiguous platforms focused primarily on housing affordability and housing justice. When we all won by large margins, it very clearly demonstrated that these were the issues Somerville voters want us to focus on. And in response, the Mayor's Inaugural Address focused explicitly on a 10-point housing agenda, much of it inspired by the issues we raised during the election - and, I'm proud to say, we've accomplished nearly all of them, and I can't think of a single part of this platform that was not unanimously supported. In Somerville, the will of the voters is clear: they want us to do every single thing in our power to address our housing crisis, and I take it as my responsibility to get things done by whatever means are necessary to advance a housing justice agenda.

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) Just cause eviction; (2) Rent control; (3) Tenants Right to Purchase.

In Massachusetts today, there are literally no limits on rent increases - it is fully legal for a landlord to double the rent on an elderly tenant or a working class family, and simply evict them if they cannot pay - I hear such stories regularly. As long as this remains the case, we will never have true housing justice. One of the enormous benefits of home-ownership is that mortgage payments are predictable and stable over time, allowing people and families to put down roots in their community, plan for their futures.

The same should be true of rent payments – tenants should be able to expect a predictable and reasonable rental payments that allow them to plan for their future, support their children and families, and remain stable in their communities. All three of these protections are currently illegal under Massachusetts State Law. However, I am incredibly inspired by the fact that several states around the country have begun to pass such laws, and that the movement for housing justice is continuing to grow in Massachusetts.