

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 At-Large candidates forum was held 8/16/21 on Zoom.

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Position running for: **City Council At-Large**

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

Stability feels like the greatest challenge facing many renters whether we are talking about job instability, housing instability, or economic instability from the rising cost of healthcare, transit, and other financial burdens associated with caring for oneself or one's family. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded issues of economic inequality and instability that many of us had been facing long before this crisis hit. For nearly two years, we've seen frontline workers get praised for taking massive health risks to care for people who had the luxury to stay home and yet women, particularly immigrant women and women of color, have left the workforce or lost part of their employment at staggering rates during the pandemic. COVID-19 has killed more people in poor communities, Black and Brown communities, and indigenous communities than their wealthier, white neighbors. Young people are once again living through an economic recession worse than their parents with recovery far off in the distance.

This type of constant economic instability coupled with the trajectory of the housing market moving deeper into a system where massive corporations, like Blackrock, own more of the available housing stock and can drive up the cost of rent presents the biggest threat to the housing stability for low-income renters. Most renters I know and speak to wake up every day with a fear that they may lose their job, that their landlord may raise the rents, that their internet bills and other essential utilities will increase, or that their ask for improved conditions in their unit can result in them losing their homes. This level of precarity has created a once-in-a-generation housing crisis that we haven't seen in nearly 100 years. These forms of instability are deeply rooted in our economic system and create insurmountable challenges for low-income renters.

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.

Addressing the housing crisis in an intentional and inclusive way requires us to expand the current services we have to offer, transform city policy, and ensure that our elected officials on a state and federal level are doing everything they can to protect our most vulnerable renters.

Public housing facilities are home to many elderly and disabled people; most public housing developments are in desperate need of repairs. We can work to improve our public housing conditions through better resources and increased staffing at SHA, ISD, and OHS. We can work with tenants to pursue expansions and redevelopments where they are necessary. However, expansions and redevelopments must ensure tenants are not displaced from Somerville, that they have the right to return to their homes, and that public housing development land and buildings remain in the public good.

We can increase density in and around public transit by allowing taller buildings to be built, taking vacant lots by eminent domain to build social housing around the GLX, providing neighborhood residents with the opportunity to buy/rent first, and increasing the affordable housing percentages in any new developments by the GLX from the 20% minimum to a higher %. We can work to eliminate the “2 feet elevation” requirement for properties as well as improve the Inclusionary Zoning Law to require that 50% of affordable units built should be ADA compliant. We can incentivize accessible construction by allowing more units to be built and decreasing the square foot per unit requirements if there are a certain number of universally designed units.

Lastly, we have to create a program like our neighbor's in Boston (ONE+Boston) to help grant affordable mortgages to residents and support residents with down payments on homes, particularly for residents who lived through and continue to live through the impacts of redlining.

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.

Due to xenophobic national legislation, many federal funds given to municipalities cannot be used to support undocumented people. However, we can still use state and local dollars to ensure housing stability for immigrants in our community regardless of their immigration status. We can expand the Office of Housing Stability and Office of Immigrant Affairs to provide outreach and resources to immigrant renters in Somerville, as well as ensure there are multilingual staff who are fairly compensated at OHS to remove barriers for undocumented people receiving support.

As a queer person, I know that queer and trans people experience high rates of unemployment or underemployment. We can increase rental assistant programs like the Emergency Housing Fund especially for folks dealing with employment and economic instability. We can expand and extend the Somerville eviction moratorium, as well as push the state and federal government to pass rent/mortgage cancelation. We can work with the state to fund new public housing developments where undocumented people and people on low or fixed incomes can

have stable homes.

We must work with the Somerville Workers Center and the Job Creation and Retention Trust to support gig economy works. The Council must also take a firm stance against any ballot questions comparable to California's Prop 22 which made work stability and working conditions even more difficult for gig economy workers.

If and when residents end up experience housing instability, we have to work with the Somerville Homeless Coalition to ensure there are no-barrier resources available, that the city can start to create non-congregate shelters, and ensure that undocumented people can access these services without fear of family separation, detention, or deportation.

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 have to continue to fight for the transfer fee to be passed at the State House so we can invest in building more units of public housing, social housing, and incentivizing the development of more affordable housing. We have to explore building multi-income social housing where some units are market average cost, some units available are 60% or below AMI, and most units are deeply affordable at 30% or below AMI. We can explore Municipal Lending Facility to access funding to incentivize the development of deeply affordable housing. We can adjust our affordable housing overlay and zoning code to allow for more units to be built if a certain number of units is made available for people making 30% or below and 60% or below, as well as allow for more units to be built if they are both deeply affordable and ADA compliant. We must ensure that new developments are not waived of their responsibility to build more 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.

Often when people talk about setting high standards for developers, people say that if the requirements and the standards are too high then people will not want to develop in Somerville or we will scare off "good developers." I believe that is a fundamental myth. With the expansion of the Green Line and the increased job market in the Greater Boston area, land in Somerville is highly valuable regardless of the standards we set. Developers want to develop in our community and to me, the question is: are we willing to make developers play by our rules?

Union United showed us that we can hold our ground and fight for development without displacement. We have to use the Green Line Extension refund to help fight the displacement we are seeing around the GLX route. We can use this money to expand OHS so they have enough staff to provide the right to counsel services beyond eviction support. We can expand the Emergency Housing Fund to help provide residents around the GLX with support people with backlogged rent, moving costs, or new rental lease deposits to help keep people in their neighborhoods. We can expand outreach to our immigrant community through OHS and SomerViva to make sure residents understand their rights to access rental assistance.

We should provide financial support to local businesses to ensure they are not gentrified out of our community, and offer financial incentives for the creation of worker-owned cooperatives in any vacant business spaces.

We have to expand the kind of oversight and accountability that our residents have on all big developments. We can evaluate how the Zoning Board, the Affordable Housing Trust, and the Somerville Redevelopment Authority collaborate on ensuring transparency and inclusion when it comes to overseeing projects.

We have to start by passing a citywide Community Benefits Agreement ordinance that will provide a strong framework for residents, neighborhood councils, workers, and organizations to negotiate with developers. In addition, we should pass a citywide Project Labor Agreement ordinance that addresses local hiring on developments to ensure that Somerville residents reap the benefits of good-paying jobs as development increases across the city.

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.

Every person in Somerville deserves to live life with dignity and that must include our homes. As an organizer with tenants in public housing developments around the greater Boston area, I hear horrifying stories about the conditions that public housing residents face. From lights and appliances not working for months to rainwater or snow pouring into people's homes to trash, rats, and bugs in developments, the conditions that poor and working-class people are forced to live in must be addressed with a deep sense of urgency. Far too many tenants in privately owned homes live in awful conditions here in Somerville and are too afraid, anxious, or confused about what help they can ask for. Navigating complicated bureaucratic systems can make asking for help around health and safety code violations even more difficult.

We have to work directly with tenant associations at public housing developments to ensure that Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) and the development management are completing work orders swiftly and to understand why there are barriers to completing work orders in a timely fashion. We should complete an audit of SHAs resources, staff, and services to

understand what progress needs to be made to ensure public housing tenants can live in safe and dignified homes.

For tenants living in privately owned or subsidized homes, we work to expand OHS to provide more outreach to the renter community to ensure tenants understand their rights and understand how to reach out for help when looking to address a health or safety code violation. We have to audit the staff and resources available at Inspectional Service Division (ISD) to ensure they have the resources to provide meaningful enforcement of health and safety codes, as well as ensuring the universal enforcement of the health and safety code. Lastly, we should add those instances of health and safety code violations to a public registry of landlords who have been found to not maintain their properties as well as landlords who have discriminated against tenants or broken similar laws.

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.**

Housing is a human right and as city councilors, we must do everything in our power to ensure people feel safe in their homes. Organizations like Community Action Agency of Somerville and Mutual Aid Medford And Somerville have done amazing work outreaching to residents across Somerville about their rights as tenants. The Greater Boston Tenant Union has done amazing work to identify predatory landlords and build collective power with tenants. It's important to acknowledge that not every tenant who experiences a violation of their right knows that has happened, nor will every person who does know that their rights were violated will feel safe disclosing. We have to build a culture within the City Council, commissions, departments, and in the city in general that ensures residents know their rights, where people can feel safe to disclose violations, and where they will be met with the necessary support in those situations.

We have to expand the Office of Housing Stability to have the necessary resources and staff to provide know your rights training, as well as work with CAAS and tenant rights groups to understand the needs of tenants when it comes to understanding their rights. The City must bring these resources directly to the people who may be impacted by displacement, discrimination, and predatory landlords. I would work with the Office of Housing Stability to ensure that resources are not just accessible but actively disseminated to working-class renters, non-English speaking renters, and renters who live in properties owned by predatory landlords. We must use all the information collected on discriminatory landlords through a public registry to ensure tenants understand their rights and are given all the protection necessary to feel safe in their homes.

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.

The Somerville Community Land Trust is a great resource to support when thinking critically about long-term, permanent, affordable housing. Their work is centered around ensuring low- and moderate-income people across Somerville have access to rental and homeownership. We should work with the SCLT to understand the needs of low- and moderate-income people, and continue to financially expand resources for the SCLT so they can acquire land, buildings, homes, and even purchase regular market properties to make social housing.

We have to expand the 100 homes program to ensure more working-class residents can own homes in the city! Here in Somerville, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) folks face racism when it comes to accessing mortgages. In 2017, 350 white residents received loans to buy homes while only 3 Black residents received loans and 13 Latinx residents received loans.

We have to create a program like our neighbor's in Boston (ONE+Boston) to help grant affordable mortgages to residents and support residents with down payments on homes. We must be able to pair creating and building new affordable units with financially supporting people who want to purchase 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.

As the former Executive Director of a coalition, I understand that bringing people together around shared problems can produce impressive results. While collaboration is a critical part of governing, if elected I will be unwavering in my commitment to justice and dignity for all residents here in Somerville. I am not willing to put people before profit and to sacrifice our neighbors for the sake of compromise. I am excited to work with the new City Council and new councilors who share my same commitment to addressing the housing crisis with the deep sense of urgency it requires.

As a former advocate, I have watched how different branches of government can work together to expedite important legislation and I understand how the different branches can leverage their power to hold co-existing branches accountable. I am excited to work with a new mayor to forge a bold path forward when it comes to building more social and public housing, making developers play by our rules, and addressing gentrification's impacts on families, businesses, and renters. I am excited to ensure the Charter Review process produces a city government that has an equal distribution of power between the city council and the mayor's office.

As an organizer, I am excited to bring more people into the political process and deeply work with movements to build policy that has legitimate support from our community. Whether we are working with the Eviction Response Network or anti-displacement groups like Union United, our movements are most deeply connected to people and understand their needs so working to ensure folks have a seat at the table and the ability to truly shape policy that is passed by the council is something I am committed to.

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)

The protections I would want in a Tenant Bill of Rights are: Right to Organize, Right of First Refusal, and Right to Counsel. While tenants currently have the right to form tenant associations or unions, we can codify the right to organize and provide the proper resources for tenants to understand their rights to organize their buildings. While I would push for a right of first refusal program, we have to ensure that people have the actual resources to support tenants if they want to purchase a home from their landlord. With skyrocketing home costs in Somerville, most tenants are already cost-burdened by their rent and are left with little savings. We have to create a program like our neighbor's in Boston (ONE+Boston) to help grant affordable mortgages to residents and support residents with down payments on homes, so if tenants do want to purchase their home they have the support to do so. Lastly, I would work to expand OHS and ensure the proper resources necessary to provide the right to counsel beyond just evictions.