

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.

Candidate name: **Eve Seitchik**

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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?

The high and rising cost of housing. Even in 2013, nearly 40% of Somerville renters were cost-burdened or severely cost-burdened, with some neighborhoods of the city having over half of renters cost-burdened. The huge waitlists for subsidized housing, and a rapid pace of development that routinely leads to new or existing landlords sharply increasing rent (including doubling it practically overnight in the case of a neighbor of mine in 2015) have combined to create a perfect storm of displacement and suffering for Somerville renters. With the Green Line Extension (GLX) and accompanying luxury development underway, this challenge for low-income renters in our city is not going to simply go away on its own--we need to act.

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.

We need to use every legal means available to tax or otherwise capture the profits of big developers and use those funds to build thousands of units of genuinely affordable housing. There are a few key ways to do this, including standardizing the Community Benefit Agreement process and using our leverage to make developers pay into our community land trust. We should use our bond capacity to directly build green, accessible social housing outside of the market (which has failed to deliver quality housing to the most marginalized in our community). We can ensure that inclusionary zoning units include accessible units and that people with disabilities have priority access to these units. Crucially, we need to fight and organize to pressure the state to allow us to implement tenant protections like rent control and just-cause eviction. Ultimately, we need to take an approach to housing that puts the needs of the most vulnerable people in our community first, not the needs of the wealthy, the well-connected, and big money developers.

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.

We need to organize and fight for rent debt cancellation at the state level, which won't be easy--although there is a bill pending on this by Rep Mike Connolly. We need to keep our eviction moratorium in place. Nobody should lose their housing because of trouble paying rent during a global pandemic. We should make sure these families are getting all the help they need, including by setting up additional assistance programs at the city level that don't discriminate by documentation status. We can tap GLX funds returned to us by the federal government, cuts to the police budget, bonds, and other sources of funding that are available to do this.

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.

Using our bond capacity and taxes, fees, and negotiated payments from developers to build genuinely affordable social housing, including for people at or below 30% AMI, is an urgent priority. We need to explore all means of funding our community land trust, and ensure that nobody is being left out of our overall affordable housing strategy.

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.

It will take a movement to win direly needed tenant protections like rent control and just cause eviction from the corporate democratic establishment on Beacon Hill, but the movement for housing justice in Somerville is strong and growing, and up to the task. In the meantime, we should reform and empower ISD to make sure developers are meeting the small commitments that are currently required of them, while fighting to force them to cut into their profits and build more units of affordable housing through the CBA negotiation process and by all other means at our disposal.

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.

Renters deserve to live in safe and dignified conditions. I have rented an apartment in Somerville that had serious, illegal problems like holes in the bathroom floor that the landlord (a large property management company) refused to fix. It should be illegal to raise the rent on a unit with outstanding code violations (a regulation we will have to fight the state to allow us to implement). We need to ensure that renters living in apartments with code violations find that ISD and city hall are eager, willing and able to fight for them and ensure that their needs are met.

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.

Tenant unions have an important role to play in empowering renters to fight back against mistreatment by their landlords. We should make renters aware of their right to organize in a tenant union and the resources that are available to them. As I mentioned above, it's crucial that renters feel they can count on city hall and inspectional services to fight for them and their rights, not just look out for the needs of wealthy property owners. This would go a long way to making it clear that renters belong in Somerville and they deserve a dignified life and a political voice.

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 should start a program similar to the ONE+Boston program in the City of Boston that makes homeownership more affordable and accessible to working people. We should further regulate, tax, and pressure the developers and condo flippers who are buying up homes from residents who wish to sell, making low downpayment offers from first-time homebuyers more competitive. The community land trust can help establish permanently affordable housing including through shared-equity homeownership. I don't believe that on the whole, these programs will have a decisive impact on solving the overall housing crisis for working people in Somerville but they are an important complement to tenant protections and building more affordable rental 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.

An important priority for me as a City Councilor will be to use the oversight powers that are granted to the council to take a hard look at the Inspectional Services Department and its role in enforcing accessibility and building codes for rental units across the city. Whoever the mayor is in 2022, they will have an important role to play in enacting reforms to ISD, and we will hold them accountable to do that. The council also has an important role to play in shaping the budget, and we will work to ensure that the Mayor's budget includes funding for the important housing policies that renters in Somerville need to live a dignified life.

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, the Right to Quality and Accessible Housing, and Just Cause Eviction would probably be my top 3, but we should also include the right to counsel when facing eviction, limitations on broker fees, and eviction record sealing.