

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?

Low-income renters in Somerville are caught up in a battle for the soul of our city. Housing costs have outpaced real incomes nationally for nearly 50 years now, with the past two decades being particularly galling in the greater Boston area. And Somerville in particular has seen property values and rents skyrocket since the recovery from the 2008 housing bubble burst.

Now we're left to decide as city what kind of community we're going to be. While there are market forces at work here much bigger than our city, state, and region, we aren't helpless. It might be too late for all the families already displaced from Somerville, but we can't give in to despair and declare the battle lost. Anything we're able to do is going to matter both to our city and to those families who are able to keep their homes here as a result.

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.

Repealing the state-wide prohibition on rent control is a must, but we can't just sit around waiting for that to happen. There's a lot we can do in the meantime.

Every lease signed in Somerville should have a document clearly explaining tenants' and landlords' rights and responsibilities, translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole at bare minimum. In many cases, knowledge is power, and empowerment is needed.

Ultimately, I believe the single biggest thing we can do is build more housing. Specifically non-luxury housing that will allow non-wealthy Somerville residents to stay in our city. We should be making sure that large-scale developers are building this sort of housing, particularly at transit hubs. With the redevelopment going on in this city, there is no excuse for ending up with a bunch of new luxury housing units.

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.

A sensible society would've provided relief to renters on rent, landlords on mortgage and property tax payments, rental property mortgage-holders on lost mortgage payment receipts, and municipalities on lost property tax revenues. Sadly, we don't live in one of those societies.

The eviction moratorium was and continues to be necessary as renters have seen their incomes decimated in some cases by the pandemic. But it can't last forever, and I'm pretty terrified of what's going to happen when this eventually is allowed to lapse. I hope I'm wrong, but I'm mentally preparing for my family to see friends and neighbors move away when this happens.

We've seen a lot of "kicking the can down the road" references to the recent extensions of the eviction moratorium, but it doesn't have to be that way. In the meantime, the biggest thing we can do is make sure renters are aware of their rights and any rental assistance programs available to them. This outreach should be multilingual to ensure that renters are able to understand these things in their native language. And getting landlords to pledge to not seek eviction as a first course of action is a good step by the city. I'd like to see many more landlords sign on to this.

I understand that the clock is ticking and where this isn't enough and eviction proceedings are put in motion, I believe the City of Somerville should provide free legal representation to Somerville residents facing eviction to make sure they get a fair shake in the legal system.

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.

Inclusionary zoning is great for those fortunate enough to win these literal lotteries, but in the big picture this isn't going to move the needle. The reality is that we need to build large-scale low-income housing here in Somerville. If developers aren't going to do it, then our city should do this through a community land trust that creates enough low-income housing units to make a real difference.

We also need to make sure that subsidized housing truly works. Section 8 vouchers are great in theory, but we all know landlords find reasons to reject Section 8 applicants. And the high rents

in Somerville increase the odds that that housing agency isn't able to pay the required rental amount. There needs to be a property tax credit for rental properties occupied by recipients of Section 8 vouchers.

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'd like to try to incentivize landlords to resist the temptation to raise rents by introducing a formula for assessed values of rental properties that is based on the rent being charged for that property. Landlords who keep rents low won't see their assessments jump, while landlords who dramatically increase the rent they're charging tenants will see their assessments -- and property taxes -- go up accordingly.

If developers are shirking their responsibilities, there needs to be accountability and oversight. If the administration isn't doing this, then there needs to be a body created to ensure that this is followed.

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.

Poor conditions with health and safety code violations are unacceptable in any rental unit -- regardless of the cost. There needs to be a mechanism for renters to report these conditions free from retaliation from landlords. And there needs to be a process for investigating these reports and ensuring that landlords address these issues quickly and properly. Landlords who fail to do so should be fined by the city and eventually prohibited from offering rental units in Somerville.

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.

Any report of discrimination or a failure to uphold landlord responsibilities should be investigated quickly and thoroughly -- and addressed rapidly. We have a Fair Housing Commission, but it needs teeth. Violating the Fair Housing Act is a serious offense that should

have serious consequences -- fines or possibly even a sanction involving a prohibition on offering rental units in Somerville after repeated violations.

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.

Market rate housing is going to be unattainable for most low-income -- and even many middle class -- homebuyers, but that doesn't mean that homeownership is an unrealistic goal for them. The current affordable housing obligations for developers are a small part of the solution. The real difference will be made when we're seeing large developments of affordable, middle-class and low-income housing in this city. We should be incentivizing developers to build this housing and potentially doing this publicly through community land trusts if that's what it takes.

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.

Charter reform is a must to achieve a better balance of powers between the mayor's office and the City Council. But even in a world where we have an improved city charter, we're going to need to see cooperation between the administration and the council. It can't just be calling members of the administration before the Council to explain themselves and their policies. There should be a proactive working relationship between the City Council and these public employees, with a shared goal of improving equitable and just housing in Somerville.

I'll work with any colleague on the City Council who has a workable idea to improve this situation, and I'd hope they'd take the same view of any proposals I introduce in this area.

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. Right to organize

3. Limitations on fees and deposits

A just-cause eviction policy would ensure that evictions are happening only where they are absolutely justifiable due to very specific actions by tenants. The tenants' right to organize would help keep landlords accountable and level the playing field by bringing together tenants to address systemic problems with the property or the landlord's conduct. And a reasonable

limit on the fees and deposits required by landlords and rental agents would prevent a form of discrimination while also making the lives of renters much easier.