

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?

Most of the residents in Somerville rent and face the risk of being displaced: this is even more challenging for lower income renters. The greatest challenges that every renter faces are finding rental property that is both affordable and well-maintained, maintaining residency at a single address, and unexpected, dramatic increases in rent that make rental housing unaffordable and force a renter to move on short notice. The pandemic has made finding affordable rental property even more difficult given the threat to public health and displacement of workers which the pandemic has created. Lower income renters, e.g. those supported by Section 8 vouchers, and members of other protected classes may even face unlawful discrimination in housing.

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.

It is critical that our City Council continue to prioritize construction of affordable housing units and low-income, subsidized housing to meet this unmet housing need and fund the efforts of the Somerville Fair Housing Commission to make sure renters know their rights and can find legal support. We should also fully fund the efforts of the Somerville Fair Housing Commission to combat unlawful housing discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, military status, age (except minors), sexual orientation, family status (e.g. have children), source of income (e.g. Section 8), disability, marital status, genetic information, and ancestry.

We also need to make sure our new housing units meet and exceed ADA accessibility standards, noting accessible housing units are in short supply, and to improve the accessibility of existing housing whenever possible. Safe housing is more important than ever given our current public health environment; Somerville has a Housing Rehabilitation Program that provides property owners 0% interest, deferred payment loans to help maintain their properties in livable condition: programs such as this and the right of tenants to live in well-maintained units should be included in the educational materials provided by the Somerville Fair Housing

Commission.

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.

The pandemic not only continues to threaten our public health, it has created widespread economic disruption and increased housing insecurity. We should follow the guidance of our public health experts including the Centers for Disease Control to extend the eviction moratorium, so people are not displaced from their homes in the middle of the pandemic. We should also fully fund the Somerville Office of Housing Stability which provides assistance to renters and homeowners to help pay their rent and mortgages leveraging a variety of funding sources available through our city, state, and federal governments.

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.

Affordable housing is oftentimes not affordable to our lowest income residents: this is why we also need to include low-income, subsidized housing in our housing stock. The City Council has the legal authority to determine zoning which regulates the quantity and density of housing that can be built on different sites throughout Somerville. We need a combination of approaches that leverages zoning allowing construction of higher density housing as well as housing subsidies to help meet the needs of lower income residents. We also need to attract businesses in life science and green tech to Somerville to grow our business tax base to fund our schools, City services, and infrastructure associated with new housing construction: without new sources of revenue from the business community, Somerville will not be able to afford new housing construction, so housing and commercial lab space need to be scaled together.

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 support caps on the amount rent can be increased in a single year, and I am committed to working with our State Legislators to grant our City the legal authority to prevent excessive rent

increases. In the course of negotiating new development projects, our City should require linkage fees to help residents, workers, and businesses displaced by new development to find new housing and employment opportunities. I participated in a rally in Union Square organized by Union United, which has been a highly effective organization negotiating funds to support workers displaced by development: this is a good model for Somerville to use citywide to ensure that our new development is considerate of the interests of both abutters and those impacted by displacement and that our City obtain the greatest financial resources from developers to support all impacted segments of our community. In the course of new housing development, our City should follow the law requiring new housing construction including 20% affordable units as well as low-income, subsidized housing and adopt an expansive definition of affordability that also extends to middle class families that are increasingly priced out of Somerville.

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.

Everyone has a right to live in safe, healthful living conditions; Somerville has a Housing Rehabilitation Program that provides property owners 0% interest, deferred payment loans to help maintain their properties in livable condition: programs such as this and the right of tenants to live in well-maintained units should be included in the educational materials provided by the Somerville Fair Housing Commission.

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.

It is critical that our City Council continue to fund the efforts of the Somerville Fair Housing Commission to make sure renters know their rights and can find legal support in the event of housing discrimination. We should fully fund the efforts of the Somerville Fair Housing Commission to combat unlawful housing discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, military status, age (except minors), sexual orientation, family status (e.g. have children), source of income (e.g. Section 8), disability, marital status, genetic information, and ancestry.

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.

Beyond construction of new housing including affordable units and low-income, subsidized housing, there are a variety of housing programs such as FHA home loans to help first-time homebuyers get mortgages as well as similar home loan programs through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and homeownership vouchers designed to help low-income residents buy a home. We should fund the educational outreach efforts of our City departments and commissions managing housing to increase the visibility of these programs to Somerville residents.

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 in an inclusive approach that not only enlists ideas and feedback from potential colleagues on the City Council and the new Mayor, but also from diverse segments of our community and technical experts, in the course of making policy and development decisions. This would entail organizing and participating in community meetings as well as subcommittee meetings, and carefully considering the views of others before making decisions. Somerville needs policies that support fairness and lawfulness in our housing practices as well as zoning that allows us to scale our efforts in housing construction including affordable units and low-income, subsidized housing. I look forward to serving with like-minded colleagues with the professional experience, expert-level knowledge, and values necessary to help our City build a healthier, greener economy of the future.

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)

All renters should have adequate notice for rent changes, eviction only for just cause, and legal assistance and references. Many tenants throughout the City are displaced by abrupt increases in rent that force them to move on short notice: every tenant deserves advance notice of upcoming rent changes so that they have adequate time to find a new rental. No one should ever be evicted unlawfully and the City should provide renters legal assistance and references so that they know their rights and have the full protection of the law. These three elements would help create greater stability for our renter population in addition to our current law that requires fair housing practices and safe living environments.