

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 Mayoral candidates forum was held 8/8/21 on Zoom.

Candidate name: **Katjana Ballantyne**

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Position running for: **Mayor of Somerville**

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

The greatest challenge facing low-income Somerville renters in 2021 is the increasingly high cost of renting in Somerville, compounded by the negative impact of COVID-19 on the economic sectors that low-income populations rely upon for work. Somerville low-income sub-populations, such as the elderly and disabled, living on fixed incomes, working families with children, immigrants, people of color and other vulnerable groups are not able to pay market-rate housing costs, that are largely determined by upwardly mobile, unrelated, young professionals and college students.

Demand for housing in Somerville far outstrips supply. Somerville is already densely built-out, resulting in a scarcity of land for the development of new housing and limiting the pace at which more, much needed affordable, inclusionary units can be delivered. The cost of financing and building housing in Somerville continues to escalate, most of which is passed onto renters at all levels, hitting the most vulnerable members of our community the hardest. Even with the ongoing Community Preservation Act, the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund, the Affordable Housing Overlay, the IZ ordinance, Condo Conversion restrictions and various other municipal resources such as the 2000 Homes Initiative (all of which I have enthusiastically supported), Federal and State and regional support for subsidizing low-income housing lags many decades behind the present and profound need for affordable housing in Somerville.

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.

As a private resident, as city councilor and as city council president, I have helped to create, to promote and I have enthusiastically supported the following policies, programs and commissions in support of affordable housing:

- The Community Preservation Act
- The Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund

- **The Affordable Housing Overlay**
- **The IZ ordinance**
- **The Condo Conversion Ordinance**
- **The City's Office of Housing Stability**
- **The 2000 Homes Initiative (originally 100 Homes Initiative)**
- **TOPA- Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act**
- **The Somerville Community Land Trust**
- **Fair Housing Commission**

My work for these successful initiatives demonstrates my commitment for not only affordable housing, but for the types of affordable housing solutions and programs that would ensure that people with marginalized identities are included. I served as a volunteer and as the board president for SCC during the development of several projects that we created to serve those communities in particular. For examples, the units of St. Polycarp Village and Union Sq. Apartments were intentionally designed and financed to accommodate people with disabilities and homeless families, including Federal project-based housing vouchers for vulnerable community members earning at or below 50% and 30% of AMI. Another project that I worked to develop at 75 Cross Street was built and financed exclusively for homeless families and individuals.

The CPA and Affordable Housing Trust Fund are valuable and flexible sources of local subsidy that enable our community to leverage multiple times more State and Federal subsidy but also to help us design housing solutions that are specific to Somerville.

The 2,000 Homes program enables us to purchase existing homes and convert them to permanent affordable housing all throughout Somerville, not just in East Somerville. The program has also allowed us to prevent elderly, undocumented immigrants and other marginalized identities remain in their housing rather than be evicted by speculators and high-end developers who would have otherwise bought these properties.

I am particularly proud of the many years of work and advocacy I have completed on behalf of the residents of Clarendon Hill (State subsidized public housing) to win their struggle for new, healthy, sustainable housing, including open space and community amenities. I also insisted that redesign for a safer and more user-friendly intersection at Powder Housing Blvd and Alewife Brook Pkwy be part of the project. After many years of community and resident work, the project has now obtained zoning approvals and funding for almost six hundred units of which half are affordable.

My priorities going forward will include exploring the following initiatives:

- **As mayor, I'll encourage opportunities for collaboration with non-profit developers or SHA to develop local, affordable housing. Under-utilized local properties could be identified and developed as purpose built affordable housing under the Affordable Housing Overlay District zoning.**
- **Incentivize creation of units that are affordable to households with incomes closer to 30% of AMI (e.g., all the service industry workers earning at or below \$15/hour)**
- **Provide tax reduction or forgiveness to incentivize the creation of deed restricted units priced and targeted for households earning less than 50% of AMI, and for deed restricted units priced and targeted for families earning less than 30% of AMI.**
- **Provide tax reduction or forgiveness to incentivize deed-restricted units offered at the 30% AMI level, for one 80% of AMI unit that is further deed restricted to be targeted to and priced for families earning no more than 60% of AMI.**
- **Consider strengthening the IZ provisions to eliminate 100% (or 110% AMI) rental units from the mix. These units are hard to fill because anyone that can afford them doesn't want to be subject to the intense annual recertification requirements. IZ units should either be set at 50% or 80% AMI.**
- **Consider strengthening the IZ ordinance to ensure that small units (studio, 1BR, 2BR) and family size units (3+ BRs) follow an identical pattern of affordability (so that, for example, 3+ BR units have a mix of subsidy levels, and are not all offered with the shallowest subsidies).**
- **Use ARP funds to help property owners and renters who have been unable to keep up with their mortgages or rent or other financial obligations due to COVID-related loss of income. ARP funding could be used to pay mortgages, property taxes or loans (taken to pay the same) due to COVID-related losses.**
- **Lien property for the amount of ARP funds used to assist the property owner; forgive the lien over time, if the property is not sold or transferred early.**

Provide down payment assistance to households seeking to purchase a condo for their own primary residence, or a 2- or 3-family property which would include an owner-occupied unit, subject to deed restrictions to ensure that:

- **Owners live in the property and non-owner-occupied units remain affordable**
- **Sale or transfers shall comply with Fair Housing requirements, and preserve the long-term affordability of the property**
- **Wealth creation is allowed in proportion to the duration of the seller's period of owner occupancy**

Strengthen the Affordable Housing Overlay District zoning to increase the allowed height of projects when:

- **A significant number of units additional, affordable units are achieved by adding an additional**
- **A significant increase in the number of family-sized (3+ BR) units can be achieved by adding an additional floor.**

As mayor, I'll build local and regional coalitions and associations to influence the State and Federal government to advocate together for funding for affordable housing in Somerville.

Explore and advocate for the use of municipal Tax Exempt Bonds to increase financial support for affordable housing.

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.**

During last years quarantine, I started a private food donation program, Somerville #NeighborsHelpingNeighbors. I collected donated groceries and \$25 grocery gift cards, that were delivered to my front porch and with help from neighbors and friends we delivered these groceries and grocery gift cards to residents of affordable housing in Somerville. It is estimated that over \$25,000.00 worth of groceries and gift cards were donated and distributed through this effort.

Also during the quarantine, I wrote a legislative order to create a Guaranteed Income Program (GIP) trial in Somerville. GIPs create a basic, minimum income for qualified residents, similar to a Universal Basic Income (UBI) program. Such income programs are highly regarded for their local, direct administration of assistance and for empowering the aid recipients individually, with responsibility and dignity. As mayor, I'll continue working to establish a GI program that's right for Somerville.

I also co-sponsored the resolution declaring the state of emergency for women, to address the disproportionate losses and harm affecting women and women-lead households in Somerville.

I strongly supported the creation of the Office of Housing Stability as a key line of defense for our residents who have been and continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have and I do strongly support the Eviction Moratorium at all levels of government, and now, most importantly Somerville's Eviction Moratorium. I am sure that the local

moratorium will have to be extended again as the State and Federal government's resolve to do so has or will expire.

I have and I do strongly supported all rent relief payments such as the State's RAFT program (Residential Assistance to Families in Transition). The issue with these relief programs is that staffing and relief delivery infrastructure to get relief payments out has been strained.

I will use the full power of the Mayor's office to "hold the line" against eviction until resources have been fully deployed and more resources are deployed if necessary. This may take time and will require that the Mayor's office and the Office of Housing Stability take leadership on this issue to create public education, outreach, enforcement and to bolster the relief delivery 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.**

I have supported and advocated for housing solutions that benefit the lowest income members of our community. In my responses to questions two and three above, I listed some of my proposed modifications to our existing ordinances, local funding sources and programs that I will explore to help more of our extremely low-income renters.

In addition to the proposals that I've listed, I would like to explore implementing a Pilot Compact Living program that would require amendments to our zoning ordinance. In essence the Compact Living Pilot would be based on the City of Boston's Pilot, which enables the development of smaller units but that are very well designed and, include shared common areas, and transportation options that reduce car use. Smaller units and shared common space, with less parking, can offer less costly housing options to our lowest income populations. The Pilot could include a "limited equity cooperative" financing component that would enable renters to become owners over time and to enable the cooperative to remain affordable. Less subsidy for the Compact Living program would be required, which would enable the local subsidy available to produce more units and/or go deeper.

As I have stated earlier, I would use the full the Mayor's office to advocate for more locally controlled Section 8 vouchers with higher payment standards so that our most vulnerable can successfully compete for willing landlords.

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.

As I have written above, I have helped to create, to promote and I have enthusiastically supported the following policies, programs and commissions in support of affordable housing:

- **The Community Preservation Act**
- **The Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund**
- **The Affordable Housing Overlay**
- **The IZ ordinance**
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- **Fair Housing Commission**

My future priorities include working to strengthen and expand the scope of these important initiatives, ordinances boards and commissions.

My work for these successful initiatives demonstrates my commitment for not only affordable housing, but for the types of affordable housing solutions and programs that would ensure that people with marginalized identities are included.

My priorities going forward will include action on the items that I listed in reply to questions two and three above, and they will include other creative, practicable initiatives for affordability as demanded by our need and as created by our active, creative and resourceful community. As I have written above, specifically in my reply to questions two and three, I will work to advance those ideas and I will continue to develop and to use all of the tool available to create and maintain affordability.

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.

I have always been transparent, deliberative, considerate and responsive to housing complaints around bad conditions, health and safety issues, and code violations or any other matter. I have never dismissed these types of complaints and I have always given the residents or tenants my full respect. I will continue to do so as Mayor and will convene City of Somerville interdepartmental teams on a routine basis to make improvements in this area and to ensure rapid enforcement response. I am also aware that many public and private affordable housing developments sometimes struggle financially as increased maintenance and repair costs outstrip the restricted income they receive for the development. In these cases, such as Clarendon Hill, I will use the powers Mayors' office to seek local, state and federal resources to close these funding gaps.

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.

As I have written in reply to question six, above I have always been transparent, deliberative, considerate and responsive to housing complaints and particularly to racism and forms of discrimination. I will use the full force of the Mayor's office to increase the scope of our Fair Housing Commission as well as our Office of Housing Stability. I will also call on Legal Assistance and State Commissions for help on these matters. I will use all forms of media and outreach and to provide clear and firm public education about tenant/landlord responsibilities and rights

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.

SCC has provided CHAPA and HUD certified first time home-buyer training to residents for years. Many graduates have been successful in buying a home, but, unfortunately, not in Somerville because home-buyers can't compete against cash-rich speculators. One possible intervention is already available through the 2000 homes program. As mayor, I'll ask to consider allocating some of the 2,000 homes program properties to be transferred to an intermediary and then, in turn, sold to home buyers in the context of affordability incentives.

I would also use the position of mayor and use the mayor's office to advocate at the State level to reinstate and increase the funding of Homeownership Programs. I would increase down-payment assistance funds for homebuyers.

9. As Mayor of Somerville, how would your administration collaborate with members of City Council to enact more housing justice policies?

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.

In my seven years on the city council and in two terms as council president, I've earned a reputation for inclusive leadership that creates buy-in, shared purpose and enthusiasm. As mayor, I will continue to lead by including all stake-holders, by collaboration.

The crisis of affordability that we face together in Somerville has inspired us to take action in the past by designing and implementing many effective initiatives together. We must continue to work together in the future, to innovate and to implement additional solutions this problem.

As an example of my leadership style, and as a model for the leadership style that I will employ as mayor, I point to the process that I enabled in advocating for the Clarendon Hill Public Housing Project. This renovation and new-construction project, is a joint public and private development project involving many stakeholders and the community, at the city and state level and the private development team. I began by listing to stakeholders, residents, developers and local and state agencies and politicians. I structured a calendar of public meetings to allow early proposals to be shaped by feed-back received through open communication, and I hosted a union labor forum.

The results of that two year process with eleven community meetings included an uncontested zoning approval. The zoning vote was taken at a meeting during which no person came to voice any complaint. We had created consensus between public and private development groups, between developers and the community residents and we have started a project that will create 596 new housing units, 51% of which will be affordable units.

As mayor, I will ask for and listen to proposals from councilors and I will advance my own present and future proposals to strengthen existing, and to create new measures for affordability. I will include every interested party and we will make progress on affordability together.

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)

There are many renter-protections that I would consider supporting in a Tenants' Bill of Rights. I will list three that should have a high priority.

- **First right of refusal.** I supported the Condominium Conversion Ordinance, which includes a right of refusal for tenants. I would support a similar right for tenants for non-condominium property sales.
- **Relocation assistance.** Stipulating that a landlord must pay a certain amount towards moving costs for tenants who are displaced by housing rehabilitation, demolition, or other breaks in the lease agreement.
- **Right-to-counsel.** Guaranteeing that all renters should have publicly subsidized legal representation in housing court. The communication of tenants' rights to tenants is crucial, and that often requires translation and/or translators. I would support making city resources available to residents and landlords, who require translations and/or translators.

I have listed several initiatives that I have supported and which I will support as mayor, particularly in response to questions two and three above. I will continue to support our Tenants' First Right of Refusal, home rule petition.