

## **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**

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

**There are numerous challenges. I live in affordable housing and have found that one of the greatest challenges facing low-income Somerville residents is a lack of realistic housing stock that addresses the needs of families (like 3 and 4 bedroom housing and ADA accessible housing stock).**

**Caring for two small children and my elderly grandmother, I learned that finding an affordable first floor apartment or an apartment with elevator access was virtually impossible to accommodate my Grandmother's ADA needs. My Grandmother relied on a walker. My family had to literally win an affordable housing lottery to get a unit that was affordable, large enough for a family, and ADA accessible. From this experience, I learned first-hand the struggles that families face in affordable housing; how hard it is to find an affordable unit that fits the needs of children, families, and residents with disabilities; how stressful and long the process of securing affordable housing can be; and the difficult decisions that many families make in our community to avoid displacement.**

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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 City Councilor and Chair of the Housing and Community Development Committee, I have kept the eviction moratorium on the agenda every single month in the HCD committee so that the Council could have the most immediate updates on information when the COVID shutdown happened, when we knew there would be a flood of evictions.**

**I also work consistently with the Office of Housing Stability. In the most recent budget, I have**

**fought to increase the OHS staff to help prepare for the potential displacement that we were going to see with the diverse needs of the pandemic.**

**We know that 67 percent of Somerville residents facing displacement and eviction during COVID had children in the home. And as City Councilor, I fight to mitigate displacement in my work everyday. I continuously spoke to the council to update my colleagues on the numbers the city was facing to best fight against displacement. I continue to keep the dialogue going about more immediate solutions. I put forward numerous board orders protecting residents from displacement and creating more housing solutions immediately. I speak regularly to our seniors to discuss how we can expand senior housing in Somerville because the waitlists are way too long for the need. I called some of the landlords with the most properties in Somerville to encourage them not to evict residents during the pandemic. I worked with our low income housing management offices to encourage them not to evict their tenants due to bills that were not paid, including one as small as \$250.**

**Even before I became a City Councilor, I have been a lifelong advocate for affordable housing. My personal experience has led me to testify at the MA State House in support of more affordable housing options, over 3 times in the past years, calling on state legislators to do more for affordable housing policies now.**

- 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.**

**I have been continuously working closely with the Immigrant Services Unit, community partners like CAAS and SHC, the Office of Housing Stability, all of which have the most updated information on displacement on the numbers were seeing about our undocumented immigrants.**

**In light of the pandemic, I have advocated for Rent Stabilization measures in Somerville and the Commonwealth as well as supported the Eviction Moratorium. Many of the policies such as Rent Stabilization and other Fair Housing protections, like the Right to Counsel are currently in progress at the State House, and I want to ensure that the Somerville City Council is guiding them to victory. I will continue to advocate for Rent Stabilization measures and help guide Somerville through a post-pandemic recovery, fighting for safe and stable housing.**

**Rental assistance is not enough. We need debt forgiveness because, even with rental assistance and the eviction moratorium in place, there are still many low-income residents that will emerge from this pandemic in debt. We must do everything that we can to support our lowest-income earners out of this debt. I have put forward board orders so that the economic**

**development office would specifically address women and minority owned businesses and hire staff to support them. The administration responded, and that position has been created.**

**Many of the residents who are facing displacement due to their inability to pay rent or lost their jobs during the pandemic were in retail, restaurant, or hospitality industries -- which were decimated by the COVID-19 shutdown. At a municipal level, when I introduced the Women's Proclamation, I incorporated workforce development into my 3-tiered post-pandemic economic plan to specifically create mentorship opportunities for women and minorities, and business support.**

**And one of my goals is to expand that into municipal jobs and apprenticeship programs to ultimately enhance job recruitment and retention. I am currently in the process of researching and enacting this plan, and this work will carry on into a second term until it becomes a reality."**

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.

**As City Councilor, affordable housing and cost of living has been a priority for me. I plan to increase affordable housing and make sure zoning policies mandate a certain amount of affordable housing infrastructure. Somerville adopted a new zoning code in 2019 and the changes made were critical to expanding affordable housing, ensuring that buildings are environmentally-friendly, promoting safe streets for pedestrians, and enhancing the accessibility of our city. Enough time has passed since the 2019 zoning amendments to hear feedback from homeowners and small businesses on how they are working, and I am interested in discussing their impact and potential changes requested by residents. I think the updates on the zoning code should focus on equity. Since 2019, the new mid-rise and high-rise zoned areas are concentrated in East Somerville, with very little additional density in West Somerville. Future amendments must update the zoning map and consider increasing density and affordable housing in West Somerville. Our zoning code is a great source of potential for expanding affordable housing, and I am eager to explore how we can increase the proportion of affordable housing through inclusionary zoning.**

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 am a City Councilor who lives in affordable housing, so I understand the struggles that lower-income residents face very personally. Many families are getting priced out of our city as**

**there are insufficient affordable and accessible housing opportunities. As City Councilor, I am fighting for (and will continue to fight for) Somerville's Transfer Fee. The City Council recently reintroduced it into the Statehouse in 2021, and I am at the forefront of the fight. I am also a proud member of a statewide coalition committed to expanding affordable housing options throughout the Commonwealth. We advocate for policy change and the introduction of more Affordable Housing options not just in larger cities, but for smaller towns and communities. I am not slowing down until I know that every resident of the Commonwealth is safe.**

**Additionally, as City Councilor, I am doing my part to guide the Somerville Community Land Trust (SCLT) into reality. I have been a big supporter (and fan!) of the SCLT. I have worked for quarterly check-ins with the SCLT and HCD Committee, asking how the Council and the City can best support its efforts. I see this to include continued funding through the City so that the SCLT can begin its next phase.**

**One of my focuses as City Councilor is not only pushing to expand affordable housing but specifically working to create more 3 and 4 bedroom affordable housing stock for families and increasing the number of ADA accessible and senior units. I have also, in light of the pandemic, supported the Eviction Moratorium and continually discussed the need for Rent Stabilization measures to protect residents and their families from being priced-out of our community.**

**I am a proud supporter of the SomerVIP program which creates incentives for small landlords and realtors to rent to Somerville residents with a Section 8 voucher. SomerVIP expands our city's very limited Section 8 stock, reduces the potential biases of Section 8, keeps long-term Somerville residents in our community, and secures the option for small landlords to have reliable and invested tenants (many of the tenants are households with children).**

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.

**My goal as City Councilor is to ensure that every Somerville resident has the dignity and security of safe housing. As an activist and as City Councilor, I continue on the work to make this a reality in the community and Commonwealth. As City Councilor, I am a fierce advocate of the 100 Homes Project which was expanded in the 2021 proposal to 2,000 Homes. This project works to combat the displacement of specifically low-income residents. I am working with the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) to discuss what maintenance could look like in the 100 Homes Program in the years ahead. Additionally, in the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and the Housing and Community Development Committee (HCD), we have been discussing how to best support the SCC and 100 Homes Program in the future. Going forward, I am very interested in exploring apprenticeship programs to create jobs while urgently making home repairs for SCC residents who need assistance.**

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.

**We have a lot of work to do to address racism within housing. The American housing system is structurally racist, with a history of discriminating against people of color. Our immigrant population and undocumented immigrant population has faced intense displacement during COVID. Some undocumented residents are afraid to speak up against discrimination. There are deeply unfair housing laws that residents must navigate, and discrimination on the basis of race within the housing system is prevalent. I am committed to doing all I can to end this structural racism and discrimination NOW.**

**Additionally, one prominent link that I see between affordability and Fair Housing in Somerville is destigmatizing the need for affordable housing in the community. If we work to destigmatize affordability and instead, support lower-income residents, we are able to enact policy that expands access to affordable and accessible units including increasing the number of large units for families, units for families with small children, Section 8 stock, and ADA accessible and senior-friendly units.**

**We have to destigmatize low-income renters and affordable housing by fighting for tenants' rights and encouraging more landlords to rent to low-income residents. One of my main goals as a City Councilor is to expand affordable housing options in the community and to emphasize that many members of our community are housing insecure -- through no fault of their own. I am working to destigmatize and expand affordable housing through supporting programs--and amplifying the significance of programs like SomerVIP -- which incentivizes landlords and realtors to rent to residents with Section 8 housing vouchers -- and inclusionary zoning policies to achieve a more equitable city.**

**We need to humanize the housing instability crisis because it affects the entirety of our community. Ignoring the human right of Fair Housing distances us from the fact that Somerville, and the Commonwealth, is in the middle of an underfunded moral crisis.**

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.

**One of my top priorities as a City Councilor is not only continuing to expand affordable housing, but also expanding affordable homeownership opportunities. I have been working in my current term to expand affordable homeownership opportunities and will continue to do so next term**

as well.

**The first and most well-positioned project is the Somerville Community Land Trust, which I have supported since the first rollout party at the Kennedy School. The SCLT, as I mentioned above, is now almost 3 and a half years into the process. As a City Councilor, I have supported the work of the SCLT by fighting for future funding in the budgets, and I will continue to do so. I have quarterly check-ins on it in the HCD Committee, which I chair.**

**As a City Councilor, I have kept the Boston One Plus program on the HCD agenda, which is Boston's lower income homeownership program that we're trying to start here in Somerville. In my committee, we're talking about how we can adjust the AMI qualification so that more lower income residents may qualify for homeownership. This is very important if we talk about making sure all residents can stay in Somerville.**

**With lower-income homeownership opportunities, it is crucial that we increase the stock to three and four bedroom units. Many affordable homeownership opportunities that come up on the market are only studio, one or two bedroom units. That does not address the needs of our community.**

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 City Councilor and strong housing advocate, I have built relationships with members and activists in the community regarding housing issues. As the only incumbent running, these resources and connections I have built will be invaluable as a new administration is sworn in next year.**

**Additionally, I have worked side-by-side with numerous city departments addressing housing issues from OSPCD, OHS, Housing, Economic Development, etc. Over the year (and years) I have cultivated strong, working relationships with many departments and department heads and I enjoy working side-by-side with them and getting things done.**

**I have worked closely on housing legislation both in the city and at a statewide level to expand affordable housing as well as advocate for the Transfer Fee and tenants rights across the Commonwealth. I have prioritized expanding affordable housing and affordable homeownership opportunities and will continue to do so with the new administration.**

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 top three renter protections I would included in a Tenant's Bill of Rights is as follows:**

**Right to Purchase**

**Right to (Free) Counsel**

**Eviction Prevention options and mediation**

**I believe that these are the most relevant areas that we must consider in a Tenant's Bill of Rights to protect tenants and end structural racism and discrimination in the housing system.**