

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: **Mary Cassesso**

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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 is the increasing rent prices. The Somerville market is competitive and favors folks who can pay the premium amount for housing, which tends to be highly-educated young professionals. The premium housing costs are out of reach for families and individuals that may not have well-paying jobs with benefits. Property owners have no lack of prospective renters so they are less likely to accept Section 8 and vouchers. In addition, the high market demand can create situations where families may be evicted so owners can collect higher rents.

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.

I have worked at the State's Housing Office and in safety-net services for decades and have heard countless stories of discrimination from people of color and people with disabilities. I want to help ensure that there is equity, inclusiveness, and fairness, as well as support services from nonprofit agencies and the City so that anyone who lives in Somerville will have access to affordable housing. This is why I have served on the Affordable Housing Trust Fund for several decades. We created programs that can assist on issues of mediation and wrap-around housing services. The City's Housing Stability office has enriched resources available as has nonprofit agencies like CAAS and the Homeless Coalition to provide assistance and support to low-income and diverse families seeking housing assistance.

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.

Fair housing policies were created to protect housing rights but the outcomes have not been

sufficient to address the needs in communities, especially Somerville, where we have witnessed a tremendous increase in home equity. Even though Fair Housing laws are on the books, the critical component often lacking is enforcement, which can keep families with portable subsidies from being able to rent in Somerville. Providing equal access to the amenities and resources in Somerville to households from diverse backgrounds is a critical goal, and in many ways a lack of affordable options can act as a de facto Fair Housing barrier. While this is an issue in Somerville, it is also an issue regionally. We must work together with Boston, Cambridge, and other neighboring cities to stabilize affordable rental and buying opportunities.

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 would create new affordable housing stock across all neighborhoods, creating new affordable housing through 20% Inclusionary Zoning and new publicly subsidized affordable housing utilizing existing resources - Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), Section 8, the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP). I also will support city and non-profits' programs that allow existing housing to be removed from the speculative real estate market and have permanent affordability restrictions (100 Homes (and beyond), Community Land Trust). Second, I also want to consider tax breaks for landlords who rent to households at below-market rents so that affordable housing isn't just in new buildings but also mixed into the existing neighborhood. Third, I will fund programs coordinated by the Office of Housing Stability - education for tenants and landlords, enforcement for landlords who violate fair housing, and incentives for landlords to fix up units so that they are suitable for families.

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 Mayor, I will explore the opportunity to provide property tax incentives to neighborhood homeowners of multi-family homes who provide their units at below market rate rents. This is sustainable and it is a win/win for small property owners and renters. I will fight to create affordable housing, explore rent stabilization, provide housing for the unhoused, control parking, and address displacement from evictions and market forces with the ultimate goal of ensuring housing stability for all Somerville residents. I would also explore rent stabilization.

In addition, I plan to Preserve long-standing "naturally occurring affordable housing" (NOAH)

stock that is losing its historic affordability as homes get sold and converted to condos. Our goal: 1,000 affordable units preserved in 10 years.

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.

Bringing together our offices of Sustainability and Housing Stability, I would promote funding for energy-efficient building systems that use cleaner sources of energy, are more efficient, ensure better air quality and health outcomes, and lower utility bills for residents. I would work with ISD to make sure older units are meeting health and safety standards. In addition to health and safety, I would work to avoid displacement from older housing stock at risk of condo conversion through non-profit acquisition, resident-led right of first refusal acquisition, or other strategies to support Somerville community members in remaining here. Upon acquisition by a non-profit or other group, buildings can be rehabbed funded by affordable housing resources to ensure long-term quality homes and affordability.

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.

I will work to increase the accountability of property owners, coordinated through the Office of Housing Stability, and continue to advocate and educate renters to know their rights. Folks who report discrimination need to be supported throughout the process with resources that allow them to fully exercise their right, for example providing translation services, legal guidance, and housing search assistance when needed.

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.

I encourage homeownership since it is one of the keys to wealth creation, particularly for families of color, given the existing wealth disparities. I would explore programs to assist homebuyers with down payments and other home purchasing options.

9. As Mayor of Somerville, how would your administration collaborate with members of City Council 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 would continue to enforce condominium conversion restrictions and tenant “right of first refusal” rights, which the current administration and City Council have done a great job strengthening. I would explore rent stabilization legislation. I would actively protect all existing "community-owned" housing: public housing, publicly subsidized housing, non-profit owned housing, affordable housing with deed restrictions that are expiring. I would ensure that new residential construction includes family-size units with 2- and 3-bedrooms, especially in the inclusionary and affordable units.

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 is already a Tenants’ Bill of Rights, see <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/tenant-rights>.

- 1. Right to Counsel - I believe is essential to correcting imbalances that exist in the justice system that disadvantages tenants.**
- 2. Nobody should be able to be evicted for nonpayment – the landlord should be required to work with the tenant to apply for ERA and wait until the state pays.**
- 3. Education and enforcement are probably more important than adding new rights – people have rights but may not know what they are or know how to get help enforcing them.**