

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 Ward candidates forum was held 8/11/21 on Zoom.

Candidate name: **Todd Easton**

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Position running for: **City Council Ward 5**

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

I believe the greatest challenge facing low income Somerville renters is the fear of being evicted from their homes. No one knows for sure what will happen with the rental market once the eviction moratorium is lifted.

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 would focus on making sure the people that are in need of assistance know where to get help. I would assess what funds the City has available to allocate towards helping those in need. Informing the public and streamlining the process to funds is vital to helping as many people as possible.

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.

These vulnerable populations need to be made aware of programs and services designed to help people in these particular situations.

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.

Somerville needs to engage in more private/public inclusive housing developments. The City should move away from lump sum payments for development modifications and look to implement a % annual fee that is attached to future value of the development to fund future housing programs.

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.

Enforcement and fines need to be used to make sure landlords are abiding by the rules Somerville enacts to protect vulnerable populations. Assessment should be made as to whether the appropriate City department that should be monitoring compliance is sufficiently staffed and funded.

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.

The City needs to adequately staff and fund the departments responsible for overseeing housing and rental properties to insure all are being maintained in a safe manner. It is one thing to give lip service to the need for dignified housing and another to actually follow through and hold landlords of all types accountable for the treatment of its residents. We need a more robust inspection and accountability program. Explore establishment of a 311 type of system specifically for the reporting of poorly maintained rental properties.

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.

There are a variety of City departments and commissions that are purportedly tasked with addressing issues of racism, discrimination, and inequity. I would work to ensure such departments are adequately staffed and funded and also engage with the newly appointed Director of Racial and Social Justice and her staff to be sure the various City departments are working together to insure resources are properly directed toward addressing these issues.

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.

The City needs to engage in more public/private inclusionary housing projects that include affordable ownership opportunities to allow the City to have more control in identifying opportunities for home ownership.

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 a Ward councilor I would continue to ask the residents of the Ward and City what their needs are so we can properly address the issues. We are fortunate to have a City filled with residents of diverse backgrounds, experience, education, upbringing and ideas. Our constituents are our greatest resource and through conversation ideas informed by varied life experiences should be shared to help create housing policies that are most impactful to serve the needs to the residents. I would gather ideas and bring these to the larger Council to progress the discussion and try to find solutions.

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. Require Landlords to provide Tenants with a specified amount of advance notice prior to any rent change.**
- 2. Tenant's should have access to fair and equitable treatment regardless of ability to pay-right to legal representation.**
- 3. Tenant right to relocation assistance from the Landlord (or potentially the City) in the event of a forced move like a displacement for uninhabitable conditions, rehabilitation .**