

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.

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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 constant anxiety of not knowing whether your rent is going to be increased arbitrarily by your landlord or if your unit will be sold to a developer who will convert it into a condo. It is difficult to live as a renter in this city when there is such uncertainty in your everyday life. I know this personally because until last month, I was a renter and had to move roughly a half a dozen times over a ten year period because of rising 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.

My proudest accomplishment on the City Council is leading the effort to create the Office of Housing Stability. This office helps people who are at risk of being displaced by providing them with the assistance they need to find stable housing or stay in their current residence. But we need to do more to help renters in this city and make housing affordable. That's why I'm committed to expanding the Office of Housing Stability, working with and increasing funding for the Somerville Community Land Trust so it can acquire more property that can be developed into affordable housing, and increasing the affordable housing requirement for large developments.

I will work to eliminate housing discrimination against protected classes by increasing the power and funding of the Fair Housing Commission so that it actually has the authority to enforce penalties and issue fines against property owners that are discriminating against protected classes. We can also decrease discrimination through a rental licensure program and the creation of a citywide database that allows prospective renters to view complaints or lawsuits that have been filed against property managers and landlords. Prospective tenants should be able to easily view complaints, lawsuits, and the history of a landlord or property manager they are considering renting from. This will incentivize property managers and landlords to follow the law when renting and treat prospective tenants and current tenants with respect.

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 will extend the eviction moratorium that is currently in place and ensure that it does not lapse and I have advocated for this on the City Council. We also need to work with community organizations and mutual aid groups to ensure that those who might not qualify for traditional types of rental assistance have the resources they need to remain in their home.

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.

Developers that do business in our city need to understand that the needs of the people will always come first. That's why I'm committed to increasing the affordable housing requirement for large developments. I am also committed to making community benefits agreements the law of the land, so any large development would have to meet the demands of the neighbors and small businesses of where it is being built. These community benefits agreements can include requirements that large developments require a certain amount of affordable housing, more than the 20 percent that is currently required, and ensure that rents for these units are affordable for the people struggling the most.

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.

The Office of Housing Stability was created to help renters who are at risk due to rising rents and gentrification. As Mayor, I will fully fund and expand this office so that it can continue to help those who are at risk of displacement. As I previously stated, I am committed to increasing the affordable housing requirement from 20 percent for large developments. I will ensure this will happen because I will make community benefits agreements the law of the land. Community benefits agreements can require large developers to agree to allocate more than 20 percent of their developments housing stock to affordable housing. In addition, I will make community impact reports the law of the land. Community impact reports will hold developers accountable and require them to provide updates on the progress they are making

to meet the requirements of the community benefits agreement they agreed to.

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.

We need to create programs that incentivize homeowners and property owners to retrofit their homes. A city program pilot program that provides residents who cannot afford to retrofit their homes with a free HEPA indoor filter will go a long way towards ensuring everyone has an adequate air filtration system in their home. We also must upgrade homes by removing toxic paints and lead pipes. This is something the city can fund for low-income residents and I believe the city can put together bold programs that incentivize this work for property managers and landlords.

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 need to hold landlords and property managers that discriminate against protected classes accountable. That's why I am committed to expanding the purview of the Somerville Fair Housing Commission and ensuring it has the resource it necessary to hold landlords and property managers accountable for acts of discrimination. A rental licensure program would require landlords to meet certain standards before they are allowed to rent their apartments. And a citywide accessible database of complaints and the legal history for all property managers renting units would incentivize property managers to act ethically and to not discriminate.

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.

Somerville has contributed money to develop affordable units through community organizations like SCC that develop homes for low income and first-time home owners. One example of this is the property 163 Glenn Street, which is all affordable condos and is only available for first time homeowners. The funding for this property was mostly subsidized with city funds. As Mayor, I will increase city funding for organizations like SCC that develop homes for first-time and low income residents. Another organization our city can work with to develop

home ownership opportunities for first-time and low income residents in Somerville is the Somerville Community Land Trust. We can ensure that some of the properties this organization acquires are only available to low income and first-time home buyers.

I am also in support of increasing the affordable housing requirement for large developments beyond the current requirement of 20 percent. The inclusionary housing law has created a lot of affordable home ownership units in private condominium developments. By increasing the percentage of inclusionary units in new developments we can make home ownership a reality for more low income and first-time home owners.

Finally, as a city we can continue to provide and expand programs that provide low income and first-time home owners with closing cost assistance and downpayment assistance.

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.

Many of the policies we need to enact to address our housing crisis will require our city to get authority from the state. As mayor, I am committed to working in a unified manner with our city council to urge the state to give more authority to enact just housing policies like an improved version of rent control, a just cause eviction law, and changes to the condo conversion ordinance.

Additionally, I will ensure that the budget the city council approves contains funding for just housing policies and programs outside of the state's purview, like increased funding for the Somerville Community Land Trust and the Office of Housing Stability.

Finally, I will work with the city council to ensure new development in Somerville is serving the working class of the city and not just the wealthy. We need to ensure development is not solely focused on high-paying jobs, but also living wage jobs that can serve the existing population.

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 3 renter protections I would include in a Tenants' Bill of Rights are as follows:

- Right to Counsel if facing eviction**
- Right to purchase**
- Housing/Community Stability measures that limit rent increases and better protect tenants- rent control**

The work I have done on the City Council that I am most proud of is the creation of the office of Housing Stability. This office works to prevent the involuntary displacement of Somerville residents who are in the process of eviction or at other risk of losing their housing, rehouses the homeless and those needing to relocate, and enacts policies to combat displacement and enhance tenants' rights. As Mayor, I plan on expanding this office and increasing its funding so it can help a greater number of people who are impacted by Somerville's housing crisis.