

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**

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 is the increasing unaffordability of our housing market, the gentrification caused partially by large developers, and the displacement that this causes within our community, particularly for BIPOC residents. I'd add that illegal discrimination against residents who utilize Section 8 vouchers worsens these dynamics for our low-income renters. As a lifelong renter that has already once been displaced from Somerville, I know the anxiety and stress that housing insecurity can produce. With the Green Line Extension, major commercial development, and large corporate property owners coming to Somerville, I believe that we are at a critical point in the history of our community where we could see the economic diversity of our community be devastated due to the rising rents that these projects may cause. In my opinion, this is why we need to have more renters on our City Council - we currently have almost none - who have faced these issues directly and have worked to put an end to the suffering that they cause in order to help put guardrails in place to ensure we have development without displacement. This election will help set the tone for the next decade of 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.

I deeply believe that housing is a human right, that every human being deserves to live with dignified conditions, and that we need to move beyond allowing manmade markets to deny human beings what they need to survive and thrive. A large part of that is about access, both physical and fiscal. Somerville is currently not ADA compliant and severely lacks accessible housing. As a city councilor, I will work to implement universal design either through a change to our zoning or continued advocacy and will push for more accessible housing to be built in our community for people with disabilities. As I said, there is also fiscal inaccessibility or the general unaffordability of our community.

As a resident, I've advocated to the Union Square Neighborhood Council for an equity agenda in

their Community Benefits Agreements that includes developers increasing procurement rates among BIPOC-owned small businesses in our community so that those people of color can afford to stay in our community rather than be priced out by rising rents. Our City must do the same, in regards to procurement, and I will push the new mayor on this exact point. As a former intern at the Equal Rights Center, a civil rights non-profit that worked primarily on housing discrimination and ADA compliance, and as a queer Black person, I know very well that housing discrimination is pervasive in our system against members of marginalized community and even our city. I believe our City should partner with organizations that do fair housing checks, track, publicize, and punish patterns of discrimination that emerge.

Finally, there are many state-level tenant protections that I believe are necessary to give renters a fighting chance in our city, including right to counsel, eviction sealing, and rent regulation. As an organizer, I will use my position on the council to create a statewide coalition strong enough to bring that relief to our residents.

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.

This is unfortunately all too true. Many of our residents are struggling to stay in the community they love due to the economic fallout of this pandemic. Firstly, we must extend our local moratorium as much as we can, including up to a year beyond this pandemic. I was proud to organize alongside CAAS and other renters a rally in January against evictions where we advocated for just that. As a councilor, I will push to make this policy. Additionally, we need to work with these individuals and families to provide rent relief from the federal funds that are being distributed to help people behind on their rent and utility payments. This must include working with SomerVIVA, the Office of Housing Stability, and the Workers Center to reach vulnerable populations, including undocumented folks, that may not be able to access these resources through traditional channels or may be concerned about doing so.

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.

It's an uncomfortable truth of our housing market that even our affordable housing is often too unaffordable for those that need it most. I believe that we can do better. We should alter our zoning to increase density in our city, particularly along the Green Line. Where developers are involved, we should incentivize this upzoning for any that build affordable units for 30% AMI.

By coupling the millions we'll receive from the GLX with funds from the American Jobs Act, which is meant to help create innovative infrastructure, we must invest in mixed social housing that can accommodate folks making at or below 30% AMI along with those in the "missing middle." Through my work with the Somerville Community Land Trust (SCLT), I know that there are dozens of vacant or underutilized lots in our community where we could build. As a councilor, I will look to pass ordinances that increase penalties for long-standing vacant properties that incentivize their sale to the City. With these assets, Somerville can partner with the SCLT, allow a CBA, or simply use the federal funding we will receive to build upon our promise to our residents that we will do all that we reasonably can to keep them housed with dignity in this community, if that's what they want.

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 alluded to, ending the terror of displacement in this community is one of my highest priorities as a prospective city councilor. As someone who has experienced the psychological backlash of not knowing how my bills would be paid or where I would live, I do not wish that kind of stress on anyone in our community. This is why I have organized with the Somerville Community Land Trust around strategies to acquire permanently affordable and accessible housing and have advocated internally for anti-displacement housing to be the initial goal of the land trust, before diversifying its portfolio of properties. We need to extend the eviction moratorium, incentivize Community Benefits Agreements in our city to fight gentrification and displacement, and organize so that our community has the right to regulate our housing market rather than having extreme power be concentrated in the hands of the few.

In terms of oversight, this is part of the reason I am such an advocate of CBAs and allowing residents the chance to shape their community. Because I believe when you have the people lead this process in a legally-binding way, and a city council made up of renters backing them, the end result will be far more advantageous for our community than leaving it simply to the mayor. Having said that, I will share my concerns about development with whoever the new mayor will be.

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.

Somerville is a historic city. Unfortunately, that means there are some of our buildings that are falling apart. We must use some of the funds we'll receive from the American Jobs Act to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure, including our housing, and ensure that our buildings are

up to code. In order to achieve the latter goal, we must better fund and reform ISD. I think that our homes should receive annual inspections, that both the landlord and tenants must sign off on, to ensure that our buildings are up to code. We must also make it easier for tenants to report terrible conditions and deal appropriate disincentivizes to property owners who violate their tenants rights to dignified and safe housing.

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.

Under current law, landlords are responsible for giving tenants documents regarding their rights and resources when they send them an eviction notice. Although this is an improvement, I believe that all landlords should be mandated to supply their tenants with tenants rights documents and fair housing resources upon a lease's signage. These documents should include information about how to report housing discrimination to the Fair Housing Commission because, according to Somerville's own studies, many - perhaps a majority - of residents do not know how to report housing discrimination. We need to be able to identify these patterns of discrimination and retaliation and create a expedient system to hold negligent or malicious landlords accountable. Beyond housing, we also need to reframe the story of Somerville so that it includes more of us, BIPOC folks, LGBTQ+ folks. In celebrating our diverse history, and decolonializing it, we can be a more inclusive community. I've spoken to one councilor who is open to creating a committee to working on this.

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.

In 2017, 350 white Somerville residents received loans to buy a home as compared to 13 Latino/a/x residents and only 3 Black residents. This incredible lending discrepancy is consistent throughout the past few years and is one of many driving factors of the racial wealth gap. As a councilor, I will work to see how our City can intervene in this process and address racism in lending practices that ultimately lead to a lack of homeownership for BIPOC residents. Additionally, I will explore implementing a program similar to Boston's One Plus Boston program that "funds with the affordable features of ONE Mortgage to increase the buying power for income-eligible, first-time Boston homebuyers purchasing a home within the City." I know that the SCLT has plans to also have homeownership opportunities and I look forward to partnering with them on this and the production of social housing.

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 City Councilor, I would work with my colleagues to live up to the goals of our campaign - to create more affordable housing, to expedite environmental justice, to transform public safety - and I would work to help build the outside pressure and expertise necessary for our movements to help us reach those goals. We must have a City run by the members of our community and not only a handful of people, elected as they may be on their good intentions. We must make it easier for our residents to be at the helm. In terms of my relationship with the new mayor, I will be very honest with them that we must have co-equal branches of government in our city and the respect that that entails. I am hopeful that charter reform helps balance our governmental system. Regardless, I will organize on the council and outside of it to ensure that a justice and equity agenda prevails over the profit-over-people decisions that we know all too well.

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)

If I could institute a Tenants' Bill of Rights, I'd institute the right to counsel, the right to first refusal on all properties, and lastly I'd say eviction sealing. The right to counsel and the right to first refusal are both initiatives that I believe are incredibly important to creating more housing stability in our community. The right to counsel, in particular, can be an incredibly effective tool to stop evictions and I believe that right should apply for all disputes leading up to eviction attempts as well. I personally believe that evictions are a compounding form of violence and that we should make it as difficult as possible to evict someone.

Having said that, as long as we have evictions, we should ensure that the lasting damage that they produce naturally in individuals and families is not extended unnecessarily. Eviction sealing and not allowing landlords to know whether a person has previously been evicted, and hold that against them, I think can allow our residents a second chance if they've been down on their luck before. I believe in an economy of human rights and second chances.