



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
CITY COUNCIL

KRISTEN STREZO
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Councilor Kristen Strez, At-Large
TO: Mayor Katjana Ballantyne
RE: FY25 Budget Priorities
DATE: MARCH 11, 2024

Madam Mayor and members of the Executive Branch,

Below you will find my FY25 Budget requests. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on what I believe should be included in the budget, as a collaborative budget process, which is not required in your role in any way. I am grateful that the Administration created a bridge for conversation on the future of our city. There are some Resolutions that I have resubmitted from last year in the hope they will be accepted this year. Please reach out to me if you wish to discuss any of these Resolutions further. I welcome the conversation.

My Very Best,
Councilor Kristen Strez
City Councilor at-Large

Housing Stability

RESOLUTION: Continuation of municipal flex funding, which includes funding for legal services, collaboration with community partners and SomerVIP program, as the ARPA funds evaporate.

I am so proud that Somerville has indisputably led the way on affordable housing solutions. That leadership has resonated throughout the Commonwealth. Just as important as vision is the support to bring viable ideas into reality. We have to be bold and intentional—and we also want to take on challenges that we can bring to fruition.



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While we talk solutions on the housing crisis, we need to be having a deeper conversation about Section 8 expansion. Another Budget Request I am advocating for is expanding our municipal Section 8 stock through the SomerVIP program. The little-known SomerVIP program incentivizes realtors to show Section 8 units and encourage small owner-occupied landlords to convert their rental properties to a Section 8 rental.

Expanding the Section 8 stock ensures that everyone truly can stay in the community, and the turnaround time to convert a unit can be a little as three weeks, whereas building additional Affordable Housing units takes years. Many of our poorest residents are completely locked out of adequate Section 8 Housing Stock due to such a small supply. And as we have so many residents desperate to stay in our community. I wish to emphasize that expanding the SomerVIP program would be considered an additional strategy alongside the municipal voucher program. I believe the SomerVIP program to be a simple, immediate (albeit small) fix to our Somerville housing crisis. It is one of many tools to implement in our toolbox.

Another way to prevent housing instability is through eviction prevention and legal representation. Statistics continuously show that very few renters facing eviction have legal representation as Defendants, however most Plaintiffs representing corporations or larger landlords, do. This includes most No-Fault Eviction cases. This unjust system plays out as a clear inequity for our Somerville residents.

I am kindly requesting that legal services and legal representation funding, through the joint effort of OHS and community partners like De Novo Legal Services, be replenished through municipal budget funding once the ARPA funds fully evaporate.

RESOLUTION: for the FY25 budget to include funding towards a study on how Somerville could introduce a low-income or first generational path to homeownership that is specifically tailored to Somerville with the goal of implementation within five years.

A recent report by ATTOM stated that the average price of most single family homes and condos are considered *unaffordable* throughout 99 percent of counties across the nation based on the average wage of U.S. earners. Back in Somerville, we know that this is nothing new for many low income (and now moderate income) residents who one day dream to own their own Somerville home. This puts our lowest income residents at risk of being able to stay in our community.



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As I have stated in the past, the true path to housing stability is to expand low income and underrepresented homeownership opportunities. Expanding low income homeownership opportunities will ensure a healthy mix of socioeconomic classes and backgrounds within our community: diversity.

And it can help right the wrongs of many past decades of systemic racism, for the effects of redlining, exclusionary lending practices and segregation within our city can still be felt today. For many decades the systemically racist locking-out of homeownership has intentionally penalized anyone who was not white and/or of moderate or well-off means. And as homeownership has the potential of building wealth, this has led to devastating gap, including here in Somerville.

In Massachusetts, recent Census Data found a Black homeownership gap of 33.8% and Hispanic homeownership gap of 28.4% when compared to White homeownership which is 69.7% and Asian homeownership at 56.2%. We have to change these lopsided statistics both nationally and locally. We can be bold in Somerville.

I propose for FY25 budget funds to research and build a homeownership program designed to expand Somerville low income, first-time, demographically underrepresented and/or first generational homeowners. We must stabilize our community through homeownership and not the tightrope walk of renting at the behest of a landlord, whether small landlord, corporation or global interest landlord.

While I know we have some homeownership programs, I am imploring the Administration to create a completely unique and Somerville-centric first time, low income and/or first generational homeownership program based on the Somerville housing environment. We need the research to figure out what this could reasonably look like.

For instance, could a Somerville-centric buydown of the 100 Homes Program through a rent-to-own system be plausible? Or, could we collaborate and/or incentivize owner-occupied homeowners to expand Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) within some of the larger owner-occupied properties throughout our city? Let's see if our city has some unique, unidentified paths to homeownership within Somerville by leaning into our environment, our community partners and the landscape in which we all operate.



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Community Development Through Promoting Safe Streets

RESOLUTION: that the FY25 Budget includes \$15,000 towards expanding the Neighborways program for low-cost street mural traffic calming measures and community collaboration.

The city is making consistent progress to ensure that all can travel around Somerville safely, whether on foot, bike or car. While I field many requests for safer side streets and residential areas which I wish to make as available as possible, many neighborhoods and streets are often on a project wait list for increased street design safety measures.

Yet, I am certain we can take small steps for safer roads while we wait for larger scales of street modification to happen, such as expanding the Neighborways program. According to Neighborways, one of its goals is to connect key streets and neighborhoods by combining public art painted on the pavement as a traffic calming feature. Aside from beautifying the city through art (which is *so Somerville*), the Neighborways program can strengthen community and neighbor relationships through the collaborative process of painted street design.

Neighborways-guided artwork helps remind drivers that they are traveling in a community actively used by everyone: where children play, pedestrians run and dogs are walked. While Neighborways has already been utilized in several neighborhoods in Somerville, we can expand the work.

I believe in the effectiveness of Neighborways. And in the past, I put forward Council Orders to work with Neighborways to create safer streets on highly frequented side streets while we wait for a Neighborhood Plan--such as on Edgar Street, which is a direct route to the Healey School and a street sometimes utilized as a cut-through street by traffic apps. I've asked for a Neighborways approach as an interim. Because studies prove that this unsung approach to traffic calming works: the Somerville Neighborways pilot proved that after painting, average vehicular speed dropped from 21 mph to 17.2 mph.

Furthermore, I love the community connection element of Neighborways; Neighborways prompts neighbors to collaborate with each other through the painting and design planning process and the subsequent painting party day. These simple gestures nurture relationships. We need to lean on community now more than ever.

I ask, if accepted, that the proposed amount expands the grant program through the Somerville Arts Council where neighborhoods apply for the grant to have the money dispersed. The amount awarded will cover paint, entertainment (day-of) and any supplies or necessities of the project.



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Rats.

RESOLUTION: that the FY25 Budget increases its rat control.

The city is seeing a positive effect on our ongoing rat control efforts. There's still a lot of work to do. Neighborhood by neighborhood, let's continue on the work and increase rat control where we can. I am calling for a continuation of these efforts, and an increase of funding to ensure ongoing rat control. Whether its rat abatement, mitigation, Smart Boxes, increasing

resident education, falcons, eagles or simply increasing city staff, let's continue on the work. I trust our city's rat control experts on the *how*. I'm simply asking that our progress on rat control in amply funded into FY25 and that the work does not ebb.

Senior Issues: Planning for Growing Older in Place

RESOLUTION: that the FY25 Budget includes a Full Time Senior Advocate Liaison position within the Executive Office that is present in planning and advocates on behalf of residents 65 and older to ensure aging-in-place-friendly city design is happening.

Seniors are 11% of the population in Somerville, and in 7 years will be more than a quarter (26%) of the Massachusetts population. Currently, the Council on Aging is the only senior-focused department in the City, providing a range of social services. However, this may leave a large gap in forward-thinking advocacy. I feel we need to think differently about aging as seniors represent a vital, varied part of the city. I feel that seniors are often forgotten.

For example, over 90% of the people who died in the COVID pandemic in Somerville were seniors over 60, many of whom are still struggling. Yet, how much of the ARPA funds planning – intended to respond to the impacts of the pandemic – considers this statistic? Another example: communication with the city relies almost exclusively on the internet. This continues to exclude many seniors. Another example: the program that helped seniors adapt their living spaces so that they could age in place has been ended and replaced with a different non age-specific program. I propose two positions to revise how we approach growing older in Somerville.



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The first is a Director of Senior Affairs, a forward-thinking community advocate housed within the Executive Branch, whose role is to be present in every room where community decisions and plans are being made, to represent and speak up for seniors on everything from street design and mobility, to parks, to housing and zoning, to health, to communication, to policy, and beyond. The Director of Senior Affairs would also oversee research and collect data on the growing senior population to ensure we know more about who they are and what they need.

RESOLUTION: That a Full Time Ombudsman position is created in the FY25 budget to advocate for all senior related issues and communication within Somerville departments.

The second proposed position, a Full Time Senior Ombudsperson, would expand outreach to seniors and would act as a direct link for older citizens to the various departments of the city. The Ombudsperson would have knowledge of the most current programs, grants, and mobility options, could ensure that Somerville is in compliance as an AARP Livable Community, as examples.

This person would act as a mediator, lending direct assistance for aging in place. If Somerville strives for optimal inclusivity and parity, it is imperative that we expand our adaptive structures and services to reach senior residents. These new positions would help ensure that the city includes and responds to seniors needs as our city molds to the decades ahead.

Bold Municipal Steps to Ensure Body Autonomy

RESOLUTION: that the FY25 Budget include a pilot program for the purchase and maintenance of an emergency contraception vending machine stored and operated in a city-owned building available to the public during business hours and in collaboration with community partners.

Our constituents are facing a crisis where their rights to basic body autonomy is at risk as seen through the rollout of a decades-long national anti-abortion and anti-body autonomy agenda that affects us all locally. I am proposing funding a pilot program of city-owned



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Emergency Contraception vending machines in which the City purchases vending machines to fund and stock the set up for the first year(s). Then, in the years to come, our community partners and hospital systems can support our efforts through funding.

We as a municipality must be vigilant when it comes to protecting our constituents. Access to safe and accurate medical information, medicine and supporting basic healthcare--which includes sexual health--should not suffer because of a lack of policy prioritization; supporting basic healthcare should be a standard funded practice. I feel that when reproductive health and body autonomy is concerned, there is no fence-sitting. Words and good intentions do not stop unintended pregnancies; equitable actions do.