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Monday, March 9th, 2026

Memo: Budget Priorities for the City of Somerville, Fiscal Year 2027

Somerville is facing a projected \$5 million budget shortfall in the coming fiscal year. In this environment, our goal should be to protect the core investments that residents rely on every day, and to seek ways to expand a small number of key areas. Restraint is necessary this year, and we should do everything possible to avoid cuts that would undermine the long-term health of our community. The priorities below focus on maintaining the programs and services that help keep Somerville affordable, safe, and supportive for families.

### 1. Protect and Expand Investments in Housing Affordability

The rising cost of housing remains the most significant financial pressure facing Somerville residents. Even in a tight fiscal year, we should preserve funding and programs that support the creation of housing—both affordable and market-rate—and the preservation of existing housing that is affordable. We should also preserve the planning and staff capacity needed to move housing developments forward. Two programs that support affordability—the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund’s “Flex” program, and the Municipal Voucher Program—should be made permanent.

Non-budgetary changes to our zoning can support expanding our housing supply, helping to ensure that Somerville remains accessible to all. Moving towards flexibility around mixed commercial and residential buildings can provide greater tax income to the city, as well as linkage fees that fund affordable housing.

### 2. Support Families with Afterschool and Preschool Staffing

Programs that support parents in juggling the many demands on us are essential to the social and economic health of our community; and programs that do this while further educating our children are an investment that pays off many times over. We should maintain and, where possible, expand access to preschool and childcare opportunities. Afterschool programming should be expanded, especially where there are inequities in availability and access. Relatively modest investments—such as staffing that allows schools to keep facilities open after hours—can provide safe spaces for children while helping parents balance work and family responsibilities.

### 3. Maintain Strong Schools

Somerville's public schools are one of the city's greatest strengths, and deserve continued investment. Protecting resources that support educator recruitment and retention, including competitive teacher pay, is critical to maintaining high-quality instruction. We should also continue supporting programs that support students with Individualized Education Plans, and which address disparities in student outcomes, helping every student to learn and thrive in a safe environment.

#### 4. Advance a Modern Public Safety Strategy

Public safety requires the right response to each situation. Our budget should sustain effective, accountable policing while continuing to develop co-response models that pair police with trained mental health professionals and other specialists when appropriate. Strengthening these programs can improve outcomes while ensuring that emergency responses are tailored to the needs of the situation. Along with these expansions, we should make sure we are examining the patterns of staffing needs that lead to extensive and expensive overtime. It is vital that we fund our city's policing so as to best enable frequent foot patrols, fast response times, and professional, caring conduct. And, it is no secret that in our municipality and in others, police overtime is a lopsided item in our city's budget. Our teachers are paid zero dollars for their overtime work, preparing lessons and grading papers. Our social workers are paid zero dollars for their overtime work, following up on their caseloads and doing outreach. We can account for emergencies and moments of acute police staffing need, while overall reducing the amount of overtime we demand.

#### 5. Invest in Safer Streets and Better Transportation

Transportation investments can improve safety, affordability, and quality of life across the city. Priority areas include safer street design, enforcement against dangerous driving, protected bike infrastructure, and smart traffic signals that help manage congestion. Working with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority to improve bus reliability—including through tools such as transit signal priority—can also make it easier for residents to move around the city without relying on cars.

#### 6. Staffing for Community Needs

Our Council on Aging does a wonderful job of serving our community's older residents with social programming. In addition, we should work to incorporate a dedicated voice for their policy interests and service needs in City Hall. This could take many forms; one would be to add a Senior Liaison staff role, and another would be to expand or modify a role within the Council on Aging in order to incorporate this mandate to advocate for older residents. Another role that would serve an ongoing need would be a Homeless Services Coordinator, someone who could be the point person for both short-term and long-term needs of our unhoused population.

## Conclusion

In a year with limited resources, our guiding principle should be straightforward: protect the investments that help Somerville be as affordable, safe, and welcoming as possible for all.