

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Councilor Kristen Strezo, At-Large
TO: Mayor Katjana Ballantyne
RE: FY24 Budget Priorities
DATE: MARCH 18, 2023

Madam Mayor and members of the Executive Branch,

Below you will find my FY24 Budget requests. I wish to state that I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on what should go into 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. Please reach out to me if you wish to discuss any of these Resolutions further. I welcome the conversation.

My Very Best,

Councilor Kristen Strezo

City Councilor at-Large

Housing Stability

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. Because we have to be bold and intentional—and we also want to take on challenges that we can bring to fruition. Office support can help be the key to that.

We all know that the Office of Housing Stability (OHS) is swamped with immediate outreach and cannot plan mid-and-long term while on the ground supporting residents. Requests for data persist. How do they compile the data? How do they report longer housing trends to other departments and the City Council? A **full-time Data Analyst within the Office of Housing Stability** will help.

RESOLUTION: That the FY 2024 Budget include a Data Manager position within the Office of Housing Stability.

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Additionally, with the influx of data and questions and needs, outward communication is a necessity. I am proposing a new position that could outward face the work of OHS as a **full time Communications and Program Director**. This position would ensure that vital housing-related information is getting out there to our community, via social media, events, tabling, etc.

RESOLUTION: that the FY24 budget includes a full time Communications and Program Director position within the Office of Housing Stability.

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 an 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 upcoming 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.

RESOLUTION: That funds from the FY2024 Budget include expanding incentive funds for the SomerVIP program including funds for targeted resident communication informational biannual campaigns.

Thinking longer-term housing solutions, I believe the true path of housing stability is to expand low-income and underrepresented homeowner homeownership opportunities. In the many conversations I've had, I still don't know what this could look like, and I think it would take more research to access a completely unique and Somerville-centric first time, low income and/or first generational homeownership program and I asking for funds to be utilized to do so.

Expanding low income homeownership opportunities will ensure a healthy mix of socioeconomic classes and backgrounds within our community: diversity. And it can also help right the wrongs of many past decades of

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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. National census data from 2019 states that almost 72% of White families owned homes in comparison to Black families at 42%. 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 FY24 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. The FY24 budget can create the path to build low-income homeownership opportunities. We need to be having this conversation acting now.

RESOLUTION: for the FY24 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.

Senior Issues: Planning for What it Looks Like to Grow Older in Place

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

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could age in place has been ended and replaced with a different non age-specific program. We need to make a greater investment in determining what seniors' needs are, and be sure they are clearly represented in all aspects of planning and policy within the City. I propose two positions to revise how we approach growing older in Somerville.

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 the FY24 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.

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.

RESOLUTION: That a Full Time Ombudsman position is created in the FY24 budget to advocate for all senior related issues and communication within Somerville departments.

Gender Equity

Women and all who menstruate account for a majority of our Somerville population. Despite this, menstrual products are not considered worthy of a budget line item and are still not freely available in 2023. But we can normalize menstruation through the budget process. Free menstrual products should be *as available in public*

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restrooms as hand towels are to dry our hands. Everywhere. **Menstrual supplies would be a very minimum FY24 budget line. The cost to fund menstrual products is a little bit more than what the city pays for stationary or flowers in some departments.**

I wish to make very clear that I am requesting regularly stocked menstrual products in all women's and gender-neutral city owned bathrooms, not only bathrooms within the school system (and menstrual products should be freely available in teacher and staff bathrooms, as well). Creating this budget line item is a simple yet, bold statement to normalize menstruation within Somerville city borders.

RESOLUTION: for \$15 thousand to be added as a FY24 budget line item for menstrual products to be supplied in all city-owned women's and gender-neutral bathrooms.

The second request I am proposing is to fund a pilot program of city-owned 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.

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-choice agenda that affects us locally. And, 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.

RESOLUTION: that \$11 thousand is put in as a FY24 budget line item for the purchase and maintenance of 1 to 2 emergency contraception vending machines stored and operated in two city-owned buildings available to the public during business hours.