

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Councilor Kristen Strezo, At-Large
TO: Mayor Katjana Ballantyne
RE: FY26 Budget Priorities
DATE: February 24, 2025

Madam Mayor and members of the Executive Branch,

Below you will find my FY26 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 Strezo
City Councilor at-Large

[FY25 for reference](#)



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Housing Stability

RESOLUTION: That the Office of Housing Stability is supported through an FY26 continuation of municipal flex funding, which includes funding for legal services, collaboration with community partners and SomerVIP and municipal voucher program, as the [ARPA funds evaporate](#).

Below is a summary of the technical and professional services budget in [Office of Housing Stability](#).

Description	FY25 Appropriation	ARPA Approp	FY26 Request
Flex/SomerVIP	\$260,000	\$4,400,000	\$260,000
Housing Search	\$72,000		\$72,000
Tenant Outreach	\$75,000		\$75,000
Resident Legal Services	\$100,000	\$620,360	\$100,000
Rental Assistance Advocates		\$404,678	
Data Eviction	\$15,000		\$15,000
<i>NEW: Pilot ADU Financial Assistance Program for OSPCD</i>			\$100,000

Somerville-Centric Housing Solutions

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 Budget includes a new housing budget line to create a Pilot-ADU Financial Assistance Program that incentives owner-occupied homeowners to create an 'ADU' or Accessory Dwelling Unit on their properties.

As a part of new funding requests for FY26 I would like to suggest a new housing budget line to create a Pilot-ADU Financial Assistance Program, a program similar to our neighbor-city,



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 CITY COUNCIL
 KRISTEN STREZO
 CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

Boston. An ‘ADU’ or Accessory Dwelling Unit aka a ‘backyard cottage’ aka an ‘in-law suite’ or ‘tiny home’, is a standalone, smaller home that can be built at the back of a residential property. Somerville already has zoned ADU construction as a ‘by-right’ (NR District).

This proposed ADU program, if accepted, would allow income-eligible and Somerville owner-occupied homeowners to apply to the Pilot-ADU Financial Assistance Program to receive help with costs to design, permit, and build an ADU on their property.

This idea is inspired by the 2024 \$60 million dollar New York state rollout of the ADU Plus One Program, which is designed to help incentivize the construction of smaller, affordable units for owner-occupied homeowners. While I am not advocating anywhere *near* New York state’s budget allocation, I am advocating for the concept and the implementation of creating more resident solutions to address our housing crisis. We can do this in Somerville. I believe this funding should live in OSPCD.

Safe Streets Through Mural Design

RESOLUTION: Expand the Neighborways program for low-cost street mural traffic calming measures and community collaboration.

As a part of new funding requests for FY26, I would like to have \$10k in new appropriations for the funding of street murals within the Arts Council professional & technical services line to run this pilot and pay grants to local artists.

I feel we should expand the Neighborways 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. This would require additional funding for the Arts Council. I would like to have \$10k in new appropriations for the funding of street murals within the Arts Council professional & technical services line to run this pilot and pay grants to local artists.

Description	FY25 Approp	FY26 Request
<u>PROFESSIONL & TECHNCL SVC</u> - community grants payments to artists and community groups. (Arts Council)	\$273,125	\$283,000 (\$10k new funding)



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KRISTEN STREZO
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

Cost-Effective Climate-focused Solutions in Our Own Backyards

RESOLUTION: That \$10,000 in new funding is put towards the purchase and installation of Cigarette Voting Boxes throughout the city with the purpose of eliminating cigarette litter within Somerville.

I am proposing a community-wide pilot Cigarette Voting Box program. I envision that the funding could live in the Arts Council or the Office of Environment and Sustainability.

Cigarette Voting Boxes are empty boxes with two vertical empty compartments that entice smokers to choose a response to a question listed on the box and ‘votes’ with their disposed cigarette butt. Examples of questions can include: “which is better- dogs or cats?” or “Jedi or Stormtrooper?”

The goal of these boxes is to intercept the smoker from tossing their butt to the curb or onto the street. Because if that cigarette butt is flicked onto the curb, it is most likely absorbed into our water runoff when it rains or after the snow melts. From there, that cigarette butt enters our oceans, where it stays.

The importance of water, a nonrenewable resource, should never be dismissed. According to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([NOAA](#)), cigarette butt litter is one of the biggest marine pollutants of our oceans. NOAA states, “the fibers in cigarette filters behave just like plastics in our oceans, the UV rays from our sun may break the fibers down into smaller pieces, but they don’t disappear. One solid filter ends up being thousands of tiny microplastics.”

Cigarette voting boxes are a low-cost solution to tackle this, one that could have a deep, positive impact. Similar to ideas like ‘Adopt a Tree’ or ‘Adopt a Drain’, we can encourage citywide participation, and by doing so, we can bring attention to a minimally discussed topic such as cigarette litter AND encourage collaborative resident community stewardship.

Additionally, our school children can get involved with the creation of the cigarette box questions. Each neighborhood school can be presented with a cigarette voting box and every month, certain grades can lead the questions to be voted on, in which smokers can drop their butts. This invites Somerville school children to learn about cigarette litter and perhaps consider the large impact a tiny cigarette butt has upon our broader world. This would be a purchase and install of boxes throughout the city with \$10k in new funding.



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Examples of Cigarette Boxes (Left) Ballot Bin, UK and (Right) from the [City of Boston](#), 2016.

Description	FY25 Approp	FY26 Request
Professional & Tech (Arts Council)	\$0	\$15,000

Equity through Municipal Broadband

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 budget include a budget line to explore the creation of a regional municipal broadband coalition and explore what it would cost to fund Municipal Broadband alongside regional experts and nonprofits that have successfully implemented this community-wide.

It's time. Let's do it.

Rodent Mitigation Strategy

RESOLUTION: Additional funding to Inspectional Services for their Extermination line.

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



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 KRISTEN STREZO
 CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

ongoing rat control. As a part of new funding requests for FY26, I would like to have \$10k in new appropriations for the educational materials for residents on best practices for rat mitigation and deterrence.

Whether it is rat abatement, mitigation, Smart Boxes, increasing resident education, falcons, eagles or simply increasing city staff, let’s continue the work. I trust our city’s rat control experts on the *how*. I’m simply asking that our progress on rat control is amply funded into FY26 and that the work does not ebb.

Description	FY25 Approp	FY26 Request
EXTERMINATION - contracts with Modern Pest and B&B pest control	\$180,000	\$200,000 (\$20k new in education funding)

A Safer Somerville Porch Fest

RESOLUTION: that a FY26 Budget line is created to establish a community-wide volunteer neighborhood pedestrian safety program for the hours Porchfest is happening in Somerville.

Our Porchfest tradition has grown to be a day where thousands upon thousands come to Somerville to hear bands play. Last year, the band Guster attracted its own flock of music fans to Aberdeen Road...and they proclaimed they’d be back in 2025, playfully [teasing](#) that they would not disclose where.

Cool. But, will Somerville be prepared to handle the additional visitors in 2025? I don’t believe we are there yet. While a safety plan is established regularly throughout the departments, street closures are not consistent throughout the city. Yes, some neighborhoods create block parties and close off roads. Other neighborhoods are not synchronized and do not.

When I raised this issue last year in the hope to get ahead of Porchfest, I suggested resident volunteer recruitment for safe pedestrian paths in areas that were without street closures or neighborways. I also suggested volunteer neighborhood block captains who, throughout the city, are stationed in certain areas to make sure pedestrians are safe.

Because we have to enhance our Porchfest safety plan. Some Porchfest streets rest on hills and do not have street closures. Some have very low visibility up and down the hills. Too often have I seen near misses; cars almost hitting pedestrians. I have too frequently seen cars recklessly speeding through our community, despite the fact that pedestrians are everywhere.



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CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

Some roads, like Highland Avenue, oftentimes have bands playing off porches while cars speed by. Still,

And for some houses where a band is

And sometimes when a Porchfest band is playing on a house located on a main street, like Highland Avenue, patrons who cannot find space to squeeze on the sidewalk stand on the street to watch. However, the situation is vulnerable, as Highland Avenue is a main road with cars speeding back and forth while music fans stand in the street engrossed in a performing band. This is a bad situation waiting to happen.

We need a visible safety plan and FY26 funds allocated to help make this plan as defined as possible. We absolutely must do something to address the swelling crowds of Porchfest. And, I'm asking the Administration to allocate funds to reflect that.

I know we can figure out a plan and do this because we've done this. Refer to Honk! or Art Beat.

Parent & Guardian Happiness Survey

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 Budget funds a unique anonymous survey—not based solely online—inquiring about the satisfaction of Somerville families, parents and guardians of children under 18. This survey would be similar to the Happiness Survey but addressing, specifically, quality of life for Somerville parents.

I envision this survey, if initiated, would aim to understand through an anonymous process how the City can best serve the needs of families, parents, guardians in our city. Do Somerville families feel supported by their city? What are our wins? What are the gaps? What can we do better?

Staffing & Space Support for City Councilors

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 budget includes funding for hiring support staff for City Councilors to help with emails, newsletters, outreach to the community.

We are blessed as Elected Officials to have an engaged and informed constituency. However, every resident has their preferred method of engagement: phone call, email, social media, etc. I propose the City create a budget line to help City Councilors serve our residents better and faster.



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CITY COUNCIL
KRISTEN STREZO
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

I imagine this would look like part-time staff that is allocated to Councilors to help them with their Council agendas. I'm proposing this allocation of part-time staff as shared staff that is through a \$200,000 staffing appropriation.

RESOLUTION: That a budget line in the FY26 budget is created for the 11 City Councilors to purchase meeting space memberships estimated in the amount of \$26,400 for up-to 11 Councilors to individually opt-in.

As office space in City buildings are sparse, I am proposing a stipend so that City Councilors can become members of work spaces to hold constituent meetings or just for internet access, while we patiently wait for the 1895 Building's renovation. Each Councilor has a different set of circumstances, therefore the stipend could be elective; each Councilor can choose to reject the stipend if they do not have a need for an outside office location.

Currently, Councilors have no place to meet constituents inside City Hall during day time hours. This lack of space has councilors competing for quiet areas with other departments, and sometimes, scheduled City Hall events. This shuffling of space creates many issues.

Supporting our Veterans

RESOLUTION: In FY26 funding the Office of Veteran affairs an additional \$2k for veteran programs and events.

Our veterans deserve to be celebrated and honored. We can show further commitment to them with celebration funding. I propose increasing funding for events related to outside public engagement including Memorial Day and Veterans Day and our September 11th memorial.

Pilot Older Adult Property Tax Workoff

RESOLUTION: that the City of Somerville creates and funds an Older Adult Property Tax Workoff program pilot for qualified homeowners who can work-off up to \$2,000 on their property tax bill by offering volunteer services to the City of Somerville.



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CITY COUNCIL
KRISTEN STREZO
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

This program is established in [other cities](#). We can and should do this here. We would need to fund the education materials and outreach of mailers which is likely \$60,000 for Somerville residents who are 60 or older.

Resubmission of previous Fiscal Year Investment Asks

Senior Issues: Planning for Growing Older in Place

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 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 6 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.

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.



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CITY COUNCIL
KRISTEN STREZO
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

RESOLUTION: That a Full Time Ombudsman position is created in the FY26 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 senior needs as our city molds to the decades ahead.

Bold Municipal Steps to Ensure Body Autonomy

RESOLUTION: that the FY26 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 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.