

March 3, 2023

Dear Mayor Ballantyne and members of the Somerville City Council,

We are the coordinators of Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville ("MAMAS"), and we write you today to express our emphatic support of the Somerville Renters Committee ("SRC") demand for 30% of this year's \$39M of Free Cash – at least \$12M – to be invested in affordable housing in our City. As the SRC states, if we are expected to allocate 30% of our income to paying rents in Somerville, the City should do the same. We say, this is the minimum that the City should be investing in affordable housing projects, and we urge the City to invest further.

## Everyone has something to offer, and everyone has something they need.1

MAMAS is a mutual aid group established during the initial onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Massachusetts. Mutual aid is a people-led method of responding to crises through building networks of mutual support. We believe that everyone deserves an affordable home, regardless of their immigration status, ability to work, interactions with the "justice" system, or any other factor. All flourishing is mutual; individual well-being is collective well-being.

Since March of 2020, we have been responding to underlying crises in Somerville that were laid bare during the pandemic – including the shortage of affordable housing. We write in solidarity with the Somerville Renters Committee and the thousands of renters who live and work in Somerville and who struggle to afford the high cost of living here.

## We know that wealth and safety nets have been systematically taken apart for people of color over generations, leaving people more vulnerable in crises.

Since a group of Medford and Somerville neighbors initially formed MAMAS, we have collected and redistributed over \$700k directly to neighbors, mostly in Somerville. Much of this redistribution of wealth has been used to offset the cost of rent. Many callers to the MAMAS hotline have exhausted their other options, having been found ineligible for means-tested programs, leaving them vulnerable to eviction and displacement. Former Somerville neighbors who call us, largely immigrants and people of color, have been forced to move away from Somerville to Medford, Chelsea, and other cities and towns in the last three years because they were no longer able to afford rent here.

Our neighbors want to stay in their homes, but skyrocketing expenses keep them in a constant state of instability. The \$300 money transfers and \$200-300 grocery cards we provide may

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Throughout this letter, you'll find principles from our MAMAS Visions and Agreements document in bold.

partially offset the cost of one month's rent, but we have always been a last resort, a short-term solution to a large-scale, systemic problem: Somerville's housing crisis.

## Mutual aid will only get us so far.

MAMAS, as a collective, is a group of neighbors contributing to each others' lives, often via financial support to meet emergent needs and fill the gap between what the city and state can provide, and what is left of our neighbors bills. Staff from the City and SPS frequently refer their clients to MAMAS for rent assistance because they know that MAMAS, unlike traditional means-tested aid programs, will not turn anyone in Somerville away. In 2022, we redistributed \$120k in the form of groceries assistance and direct cash, and we are proud of the neighborly solidarity this fact demonstrates. However, mutual aid projects like MAMAS are not a replacement for increased sustainable and significant rental assistance in Somerville. That goal must be met by the city's government, using the city's much vaster resources.

With this year's Free Cash, Somerville has an opportunity to provide assistance that would make a consistent difference in people's lives. The SRC has even provided a suggested budget for how to allocate these funds. Of the minimum \$12M in their demand (30% of the available Free Cash), the SRC wants to see 50% invested into short-term housing solutions, and 50% into long-term solutions.

Short-term solutions include \$3M to flexible rental assistance, for continued support of low-income and immigrant tenants facing eviction and displacement, as well as being able to support newcomers. The SRC proposes \$3M to be invested in the new Municipal Voucher Program (MVP), potentially adding 20 more vouchers to the current 30-35 vouchers estimated to be funded by the program, for a total of 50-55 vouchers. We believe the City could do even more to support more families; we suggest that the city provide funds for 35 additional vouchers, to support a total of 65-70 vouchers in the MVP program. Investing in long-term solutions requires allocating at least \$6M million to the Affordable Housing Acquisition Trust Fund to increase the supply of permanently affordable housing and land in Somerville.

We care deeply for our neighbors in Somerville. We want to make sure our neighbors can afford to stay in their homes. We ask that our City's elected officials take advantage of this moment to support the SRC's Free Cash Campaign and implement the suggestions provided here.

Should you have any questions, please contact us at <a href="mailto:askyourmamas@gmail.com">askyourmamas@gmail.com</a>.

In Solidarity.

The Coordinators of Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville ("MAMAS")