



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
CITY COUNCIL

BEN EWEN-CAMPEN
WARD 3 CITY COUNCILOR

March 20, 2023

Dear Mayor Ballantyne:

Thank you for this opportunity to identify my top priorities for the FY2024 budget. I have included rationales for many of these recommendations, while others are self-explanatory or have been discussed at length in many prior City Council meetings.

I respectfully encourage you to provide budgetary allocations for the following items, in no particular order:

- **Additional funding for after school programming, to ensure that every family in need of after school programming has access to it.** My colleagues and I regularly hear from families who were unable to obtain affordable after-school spots for their children, due to our limited resources. As the City Council's representative on the School Committee this term, I also wish to emphasize that I believe there is clear agreement from the School Committee that these badly-needed funds should *not* come from their existing School District budget, but rather from new investments. If we truly want to be a city where people can "live, work, and raise a family," we need to provide universally-accessible programs to support working families.
- **Funding to create and staff a dedicated Art Space Stabilization Fund.** The City should establish a dedicated fund to purchase and operate affordable art spaces, in order to help stabilize and support our local artist community which is facing existential displacement threats. This fund should be capitalized via payments-in-lieu of new Arts & Creative Economy (ACE) requirements in large new developments. I have consistently heard from the local arts community that on-site ACE spaces are often not succeeding in meeting the real needs of the arts community, and that a payment-in-lieu system would be preferable, so that the City can acquire and manage affordable artist buildings. I fully support such a zoning amendment, and believe successful implementation will require dedicated staffing.

- **Funding to support planning efforts to implement the full implementation of the Bike Network Plan within 10-15 years.** Based on estimates derived from status-quo building rates, it would take up to 30 years to implement the Bike Network Plan. This timeline is plainly unacceptable, and the City should fund efforts to plan and execute the safe bicycle network in Somerville within 10-15 years.
- **A minimum of \$12M investment in affordable housing initiatives, including a mortgage assistance program similar to the “One+Boston” program.** I support and applaud recent community advocacy for a minimum of \$12M to be invested in affordable housing initiatives. Among the programs that I think would be most impactful would be the establishment of a mortgage assistance program similar to the One+Boston program that has provided affordable mortgages to many Boston families, of which over two-thirds have gone to people of color¹. Racial disparities in home-ownership have been, and remain, unacceptably stark in Somerville and nearly every other Massachusetts Community. A modernized mortgage assistance program would combine local resources and banking partnerships to provide below-market mortgages to “first generation” home-buyers.
- **Funding to initiate planning work for a major improvement of the Central Hill Library.** I am overall supportive of the recently released 5-year Capital Improvement Plan, yet I strongly believe that planning for a major renovation of Central Hill Library should be included. The Central Hill Library is one of Somerville’s greatest public resources, and deserves a major expansion and modernization so that it can continue to serve future generations.
- **Sufficient funding to prioritize the community-led redevelopment of the Homan’s Building site.** I applaud the city’s efforts to date in convening a Gilman Square Community Advisory Committee, working with the Gilman Square Neighborhood Association, and laying the groundwork for a redevelopment of this site. However, the reality is that we still have a large vacant lot next to a new Green Line stop, with no concrete plan for its future. We should prioritize these efforts, focusing on maximizing affordable housing, space for a vibrant small business community, and outdoor civic space. This will require dedicated staffing efforts, and I encourage you to ensure these efforts are fully supported.
- **Funding for staff capacity to create a bicycle donation program.** It is my understanding that the Administration supports the Council’s ongoing efforts to create a policy of donating those bicycles that come into city position when they are abandoned in a public way, rather than auctioning them off to the highest bidder. However, to my knowledge no outwardly-visible progress has been made. I encourage you to get this over the finish line by dedicating whatever staff efforts are necessary.

¹ *“Boston Uses \$5 Million in CPA Funds for Creative First-Time Homebuyer Program”*

<https://www.communitypreservation.org/cpa-success-stories/news/boston-uses-5-million-cpa-funds-creative-first-time-homebuyer-program>

- **Funding to establish transparent, public equity goals for city contracting.** Over the past several years, the City Council and Mayor’s office have agreed on the importance of a “disparity study” to establish whether or not there have been racial and/or gender disparities in how the City spends money via contracted goods and services. However, those efforts appear to remain tied up in legal and practical uncertainty. I therefore continue to strongly encourage the Mayor’s office to set clear and transparent, if not strictly legally binding, goals for contracting with WMB (women and minority-owned businesses), which I do not believe requires a formal disparity study.
- **Funding to establish an Overdose Prevention Center in calendar year 2023 (aka Safe Injection Site, aka Safe Consumption Site.)**
- **Funding to establish a non-police first response force that could respond to non-violent, non-criminal 911 calls.**
- **Funding to increase the scope of municipal sidewalk clearing efforts beyond the current pilot.**
- **Funding to increase free access to MBTA public transit.**

Thank you again for considering these budget priorities, and I look forward to working with your Administration and my City Council colleagues during this year’s budget season.