



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
CITY COUNCIL
JAKE WILSON
CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

20 March, 2023

Mayor Katjana Ballantyne
City of Somerville
93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143

Re: FY 2024 Budget Priorities

Dear Honorable Mayor Ballantyne:

Thank you for once again requesting budget priorities from the Somerville City Council as part of this year's budget process. I appreciate your administration's willingness to engage with the council on this, and I welcome the opportunity to collaborate by sharing my individual budget priorities.

As we experience the good problem of determining what worthy things to fund with our growing municipal budget here in Somerville, I want to highlight the following budget priorities that I feel are particularly deserving as you and your team prepare the proposed FY 2024 budget. Whether funding them up front in the General Fund Operating Budget or subsequently with an appropriation from Free Cash, I would urge you to consider the following areas for new or increased funding:

Housing

- **Funding for a feasibility study of social housing:** Rep. Mike Connolly is leading a coalition of legislators calling for a return to investing in public housing at the state level. I would love to see Somerville get the ball rolling on this in our city by looking for potential sites and funding streams for a social housing project here. This way, if and when the state government gets back in the public housing game, we will be prepared to seize on the opportunity and bring social housing to our city.
- **Increased funding for housing stability programs:** ARPA funding is going away by the end of next year, but our displacement crisis isn't going anywhere any time soon. Therefore, it behooves us to find an alternative funding source for flexible rental assistance, and I like the idea of making it a policy to fund this every year with municipal funds. Our Office of Housing Stability has shown a penchant for effective problem solving and I support increasing their Personal Services and Ordinary Maintenance budget lines.
- **Increased funding for affordable housing programs:** The \$8.3 million redirected to the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund for affordable housing acquisition last year was an amazing start. Given the urgent need for more affordable housing in our city and the high costs involved, it would be great to make similar investments an annual tradition. The creation of a rental registry also will offer the opportunity to explore property tax abatement options for owners of rental properties with below-market rents.

Mobility

- **Additional funding to increase City capacity for traffic calming projects:** The latest round of speed humps installed around the city were extremely popular with the constituents who reached out to me. Many of these folks asked how they could get those installed on their streets. Given that demand exceeds our current capacity, I believe it makes sense to increase funding for staff and/or contractors to ramp up the number of these installations taking place in our city.
- **Additional funding to increase capacity for bicycle infrastructure:** The draft of the Bicycle Network Plan made the point that at the current rate of implementation the full network would be implemented in 30 years. Therefore, the logical course of action here is to speed up that rate of implementation to shorten that timeline. Funding this additional work in the budget would provide that needed acceleration.
- **Funding to expand employee T pass benefit to all City employees:** Currently Somerville Public Schools employees receive free T passes as an employee benefit. Between the parking crunch on Central Hill and the recent opening of the Gilman Square station right at City Hall, I believe it makes sense to broaden the reach of this program to include all City of Somerville employees.
- **Funding for a fare-free bus pilot:** I appreciate the Administration's work on providing T passes to folks in our community who need them. I'd also love to see us follow other communities' lead and pursue a pilot of a fare-free bus route. These fare-free bus programs have generated increased ridership at a time when we're hearing talk of accepting low ridership numbers as "the new normal" and would allow buses to move through our city more efficiently.

Rodents

- **Funding for expansion of the SMART Box pilot program:** The War on Rats has been a tough one, but it's safe to say the SMART Boxes generally are considered one of the success stories. In fact, residents have taken it upon themselves to look into getting private SMART Boxes to help in the fight against rodents on their property. So it makes sense to expand that pilot program and deploy significantly more of these devices throughout the city, using 311 data to determine where additional SMART Boxes should be placed.
- **Establishment of a fund to reimburse residents for property damage and private expenditures on approved rodent mitigation:** I hear all too frequently from constituents who have been forced to pay four-digit sums out of their own pockets due to our city's rodent infestations that transcend property lines. Whether it's chewed wires in their vehicles or needing to fill holes dug by burrowing rats, these neighborhood issues are impacting individuals. I believe we should look into how we might soften this blow on residents by offsetting some of these costs incurred due to a regional issue.
- **Funding for increased enforcement staffing and a public education campaign on rodent mitigation:** Changing human behavior is key to turning the tide in this War on Rats, so educating the public and giving everyone an incentive to follow these best practices – and not contribute to the problem – are essential. The data shows that calls to 311 dramatically spike every year following the mailing of informational materials about rodents. So I would suggest we would get even more data and better compliance if we were to embrace a year-round information campaign with more resources and attention to enforcement.

Waste

- **Funding for a curbside municipal composting pilot:** Composting reduces food waste in our waste stream, mitigating our trash crisis and eliminating a common food supply for rodents, while reducing our replacement costs for chewed-through City trash receptacles. I would recommend identifying – with the help of a partner vendor – a neighborhood of the city with lower commercial compost subscriber numbers and a high incidence of rodent activity and conducting a curbside municipal composting pilot there.

- **Funding for the return of the composting program in Somerville Public Schools:** In addition to reducing food waste in our municipal waste stream and a rodent food source in municipal trash receptacles, the composting program in Somerville schools taught students good composting habits. I would argue it's high time to bring back this program by partnering with a commercial composting vendor.

Community

- **Funding for an inclusive, representative survey to determine the community's recreational needs and interests:** I hear from community members frequently about a desire to see our Parks and Recreation Department increase their program offerings. In order to do so in an informed and intentional way, I support gathering good data about what the community wants and needs in this area. Surveying the community in a way that results in a representative sample will require outreach and proactive engagement with a number of groups, so this is no small endeavor and worthy of additional budget dollars.
- **Funding for identifying a site and the design process for a community center:** In the past months we've seen a local developer announce plans to build a private community center – likely in partnership in some capacity with the City – as well as the inclusion of a community center with a teen space in the recent Capital Investment Plan update. Our residents need spaces for gathering and recreation, so I strongly support using municipal funds to bring a community center closer to reality.
- **Funding for the establishment of offices and meeting space for community non-profits:** We have so many outstanding community non-profits, and many of them are volunteer-led. With commercial space commanding hefty prices, it's getting harder and harder for these groups to get the office and meeting space they need for their basic operations. Whether it's repurposing City-owned buildings for this or simply paying for the extra staffing expenses required to allow access by community groups outside of normal operating hours, this is a simple thing we can do as a municipality to help Somerville non-profits.
- **Increased funding for additional outdoor standalone public toilets:** I can't wait to see the first three outdoor standalone public toilets open in our city, hopefully by the end of the year. We currently rely on portable toilets to meet the public restroom needs of residents, workers, and visitors. I'd love to see us commit to installing even more of these outdoor standalone public toilets in other locations where they make sense, particularly our parks and athletic fields.

Infrastructure

- **Additional funding to increase City capacity for street resurfacing projects:** During a recent Finance Committee meeting, we heard that increased funding could, in theory, allow the City to accelerate resurfacing work. I understand that contractor availability is a question mark, but I'd be interested in getting more aggressive with our funding of this work in hopes of playing catch-up more rapidly on our street surfaces.
- **Funding to subsidize increasing water and sewer rates for low-income households:** The Finance Committee heard last year that we needed to approve double-digit increases to our water and sewer rates in order to pay for the necessary work on our aging water and sewer infrastructure. My colleagues and I expressed concern about the impact on seniors on fixed incomes and low-income households. If a sliding-scale fee approach isn't workable here, I believe it's only fair for us to subsidize the increased costs for those who can't afford these price hikes.
- **Funding for additional staff in Capital Projects:** The discussion around the plan to build a badly-needed new elementary school highlighted the bandwidth issues facing the division. Director Raiche lamented the situation, exacerbated by the tight labor market. If it's a question of paying competitive salaries to compete with other sectors and attract the talent needed, I'd suggest we increase the Personal Services line of Capital Projects' budget accordingly.

Youth

- **Funding for universal afterschool Out-of-School Time programming:** Currently Community Schools is a self-sustaining program, offering afterschool childcare and clubs. However, this arrangement leads to a limited capacity due to space constraints and staffing limitations. I believe it's time to start dedicating municipal funds to this in order to create afterschool programming available to all SPS students, with a sliding-scale fee structure to ensure it's also accessible to every family.
- **Increased funding for Out-of-School Time clubs, ideally involving community partners:** Neighboring communities offer a wide variety of afterschool clubs for public school students. We have such a wealth of community members and organizations here in Somerville. Whether it's an afterschool TikTok video production club or a program blending sports, academic support, mentoring, and immigration legal services, I want to see us invest in our youth in this way.
- **Increased funding for youth jobs:** We have the Mayor's Summer Jobs Program and the Teen Snow Shoveling Program, and those are great programs. I believe we can do much more – as a recent letter from Winter Hill Community Innovation School students made clear, with a significant portion of that letter devoted to job opportunities. We should be partnering with local community-based organizations if necessary to create year-round job opportunities for our youth.

Public Safety

- **Funding for an Alternative Emergency Response pilot program:** The City Council named this as a budget priority last year. I understand the Department of Racial and Social Justice is including this in its Public Safety for All task force. In the meantime, I would suggest picking out an approach that would work here in Somerville, and creating a pilot program. Start small with a van and two to four staff members and use an approach similar to what was done with zoning a few years back and tweak the program on the fly using lessons learned from doing the work. The SPD patrol officers I've spoken to all supported this sort of program, and I strongly believe it would be a real benefit to our city.
- **Funding for equipment and staffing to build out automated traffic enforcement pilot:** The data clearly shows driving infractions are increasing over time, but conventional enforcement through traffic stops raises equity concerns. Beacon Hill currently is considering legislation to explicitly permit some types of automated enforcement. Regardless of whether we wait for the state government to specifically permit this approach or whether we go bold and test out automated enforcement here in the absence of a green light from the state, now is the time to invest in the staffing and equipment to be able to do this. The alternative is to admit defeat and cede our streets to lawlessness and chaos.
- **Funding for partnership(s) with community non-profit(s) to provide food and shelter for unhoused residents:** Our community is facing the challenge of a significant unhoused population in the city – particularly in Davis Square and East Somerville. Community groups have stepped up to try to provide meals and food, but the challenge is beyond what they can handle, particularly in East Somerville. Those folks need food and shelter, and I support the City using funds to support and grow this work.

Equity

- **Increased funding for language justice and language access plan initiatives:** I appreciated the Administration's attention to our budget priority resolution on these initiatives last year. Given the work that has been done on this front, including meetings to gather community input, I would expect that we'll be at the point during FY 2024 where we'll need to spend on staff and contractors to bring this to fruition. I've heard repeatedly that there's a particular need for assistance for small business owners who aren't native English speakers and can have difficulty navigating our licensing and permitting processes. Language justice sends a clear message that this is everyone's city, not just native English speakers.

- **Additional funding to increase City capacity for accessibility projects:** The Americans with Disabilities Act turns 33 this summer. As we continue to try to make up for lost time by meeting our legal and moral obligations under that act, it's clear just how much work remains to be done. I support increasing funding for accelerating the timeline for making our city accessible to everyone who lives, works, and plays here.
- **Medical debt forgiveness:** I appreciated the well-researched resolution put forward by my colleagues calling on the Administration to use municipal funds to purchase and then forgive packaged and re-sold outstanding medical debts. This is a way for us to tangibly improve the lives of Somerville residents. And due to the realities of debt re-selling, we'd be accomplishing this for a fraction of the amount of debt being forgiven. Other municipalities have done this, and I support Somerville joining that list.

Multiple Member Bodies

- **Funding for additional support staff for boards and commissions:** Our boards and commissions are filled with Somervillians who, in many cases, give their time and energy to improve our city out of the goodness of their hearts, with no compensation in return. In many cases, staff liaisons are City staff performing those duties in addition to their everyday duties. I was thrilled to see the new Boards & Commissions Administrative Assistant added to the FY 2023 budget. As we look to fill vacant and expired terms on these multiple-member bodies, investing in staff whose primary job is to liaise with these bodies and facilitate their meetings seems like a logical next step.
- **Funding for additional staffing for City Council:** I've seen the positive impact that our Legislative and Policy Analyst has had in areas like crafting ordinances, charter review, and the shared budget priority process. I strongly believe that funding staff to support the City Council at the committee level would result in improved committee meetings, while freeing up councilors to spend more of their time on legislative policy and constituent services.
- **Increased funding to study compensation for City Council and School Committee:** The salary of a City Councilor has sat at \$40,000 since 2016. Had that salary increased at the rate of inflation over the previous seven years, it would now sit at \$50,138.54. Meanwhile, School Committee representatives are paid \$15,000 per year, despite massive increase in the volume of work during the pandemic. I request that the Administration fund a compensation study to determine if compensation should be increased for these positions, as well as the feasibility of automatically chaining future increases to the Consumer Price Index.

Thank you for your attention to this memo and your consideration of these areas as you go about piecing together the proposed FY 2024 budget. I am eager to discuss any of these items, should you wish.

Sincerely,



Jake Wilson