



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

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Agenda Summary

Conveying budget priorities and requests for FY 2025.

Official Text

Dear Honorable Mayor Ballantyne:

Thank you for requesting budget priorities from the Somerville City Council once again this year as part of the Fiscal Year 2025 budget process. I’m deeply appreciative of your administration’s willingness to engage with the council on this, and I welcome the opportunity to collaborate by sharing my budget priorities as an individual councilor.

The new growth in our city continues to bless us with just about the best problem a municipality can face: figuring out how best to spend new revenues. So I’d like to highlight the following budget priorities that I feel are particularly deserving of new or additional funding as you and your team prepare the proposed FY 2025 budget. Whether funding these areas 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:

Schools

Additional funding for out of school time programming to meet demand: I greatly appreciated the Administration including additional funding for out-of-school time programming in the FY24 budget. I’d like to see us build on that investment this year to ensure we’re fully meeting demand, with a mix of outside providers and increased staffing.

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 meaningfully in our youth in this way.

City Clerk

Funding to support and sustain enterprise records management software and the citywide use of electronic records: I was heartened to see the recently-announced funding for these vital efforts to digitize our City archives. I noted the City Clerk's comments in a Finance Committee meeting earlier this month about the expected lengthy duration of the work, so I'd like to see us expedite this important project with additional funding.

Personnel

Funding to standardize minimum salary grades for City of Somerville department and division head positions to address inequality in the current grades: We have department head positions graded similarly to division deputy positions. I'm particularly concerned that the Health and Human Services, Library, and City Clerk department head positions are below their colleagues grade-wise. And I see similarly concerning grade issues among division heads. We really should be revisiting these position grades to ensure there are standard minimums that align with our stated values. I hope the long-awaited compensation study remedies this, but I want to put this out there in case it fails to address it.

Funding for cost-of-living compensation increases for elected positions: The salary of a (non-President) 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 \$51,185.72. Meanwhile, School Committee representatives are paid just \$15,000 per year, despite a massive increase in the volume and consequence of their work during the pandemic. Given the de facto payout members of both bodies have taken over the years due to the lack of cost-of-living adjustments to compensation, I expect the compensation study will recommend compensation increases for members of both elected bodies very shortly. So I would ask that the Administration budget accordingly to enact anticipated compensation increase recommendations with immediate effect.

Executive Office - Administration

Additional funding for youth jobs in the summer and year round: 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 letter last year 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.

Sustainability & Environment

Funding to study decarbonization of municipal buildings, especially Somerville Public Schools buildings: The City of Somerville talks a good game about our commitment to sustainability and decarbonizing, but our municipal buildings aren't walking that walk. It's the right thing financially and morally to bring our municipal buildings up to the standard they should be at as climate change heats our planet and floods our city. Let's get a good understanding of what it would take cost-wise and staff lift-wise to decarbonize our municipal buildings, with an initial focus on our school buildings.

Funding to establish a municipal curbside composting pilot program: 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 then conducting a curbside municipal composting pilot there.

Funding to re-establish a composting program in all Somerville Public Schools school buildings: In addition to reducing food waste in our municipal waste stream and a rodent food source in municipal trash receptacles, the previous composting pilot 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.

Communications & Community Engagement

Funding for a GIS-based microsite on the City website with full information on projects happening in the city: Ideally, this microsite would include information on project scopes, permitting details, updated timelines, municipal costs and sourcing of funds, expected municipal financial and community benefits, and competitive bidding details -- on current and future public (municipal, state, and federal) projects, private development proposals and projects, utility work, and Mobility and Engineering improvements.

Increased funding for public information videos explaining municipal projects, programs, and policies: Short videos are a great tool for telling good stories about what we're doing as a municipality, in an effort to increase the public's awareness. There are excellent recent examples of City TV staff putting out exactly these sorts of videos. They were extremely well received and I'd love to see many more of these created and shared with the public.

Inspectional Services

Increased funding for rodent mitigation programs: Ideally, this would include expanding our SMART box pilot program, purchasing carbon monoxide devices, a rodent hormonal birth control pilot, and dramatically increased public education efforts. We're faring better in The War on Rats than we were a few years back, but we need to keep our eye on the ball and continue increasing investments and intensifying our efforts here.

Funding to establish a fund to reimburse residents and businesses for property damage and mitigation costs incurred due to multi-property rodent infestations: 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.

Public Works

Funding for regular neighborhood community cleanups: These community cleanups used to be regular events around the city. Let's bring them back to clean up our neighborhoods, show the pride we have in Somerville, and set a good example for our youth.

Strategic Planning & Community Development

Funding for creating a community center master plan: We're hearing numerous private parties express an interest in building community centers in the past year, while the City doing a public community center continues to enjoy strong support in the community. Given all of these moving parts, I'm concerned about potentially duplicative efforts in some areas, while other community needs slip through the cracks and go unmet. Therefore, I think it would be wise for us to create a Community Center Use Task Force charged with creating a Community Center Master Plan to effectively coordinate all these efforts.

Housing

Increased funding for affordable housing creation at 30%, 60%, and 80% AMI levels, with a focus on two-plus bedroom units: The \$8.3 million redirected to the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund for affordable housing acquisition at the end of FY23 was great to see. 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.

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, and Gov. Maura Healey's housing bond bill contains support for social housing. 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 in order to lead the way.

Housing Stability

Increased funding for housing stability programs: ARPA funding is going away at the end of the 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 both their Personal Services and Ordinary Maintenance budget lines.

Mobility/Engineering

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.

Additional funding for Mobility and Engineering Personal Services and Ordinary Maintenance to increase traffic calming infrastructure capacity: Traffic calming - and speed humps in particular - continue to enjoy widespread support in the community, and generate a lot of requests for more of these on our streets. While City staff have ramped up output significantly in recent years, demand still far exceeds our current capacity. So I believe it makes sense to increase funding for staff and/or contractors to dramatically up the number of these installations taking place in our city.

Funding for the design and construction of a raised crosswalk across Jaques Street at the intersection with Edgar Avenue: This is a crosswalk that sees vehicles with increasingly-tall bumper heights roll through the STOP sign at the end of Jaques Street. Add in Healey School students rushing across the crosswalk at arrival to get to school on time, and it's only a matter of time until there's a tragedy. I strongly believe a raised crosswalk is badly needed at this intersection in the interest of pedestrian safety, and I will continue advocating loudly for this safety improvement.

Additional funding to increase capacity for bicycle infrastructure: The Bicycle Network Plan makes the point that the full network would take 30 years to implement at the current rate. 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 for additional bicycle parking infrastructure: Some of the most popular destinations for folks who get around by bicycle suffer from a lack of good bicycle parking. It would be great to add additional bicycle parking capacity - including for cargo bikes - at sites like school buildings, athletic facilities, and commercial business districts.

Additional funding for Engineering to increase street resurfacing capacity: During a Finance Committee meeting in late 2024, we heard again that increased funding would, 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 for design and construction of curb bump-outs around trees with roots making sidewalks impassable: The conflict between preserving invaluable mature trees and the need to have sidewalks everyone can use becomes frustratingly real when tree roots create impassable situations. The solution is bumping out the sidewalk into the street and preserving the roots while creating a sidewalk that can be used by everyone. Yes, these bump-out projects can come with engineering challenges on hills, but we can overcome these challenges with good designs.

Additional funding to increase City capacity for accessibility projects: The Americans with Disabilities Act turns 34 this year. As we continue to make up for lost time by meeting our legal and moral obligations under that act, it's clear just how much remains to be done. Let's increase funding to accelerate making our city accessible to everyone who lives, works, and plays here.

Public Space & Urban Forestry

Funding to bring existing playgrounds up to universal design standards: Few things are more heartbreaking than a child excluded from playing with peers because they aren't able to use the same playground equipment. We can do better than this, and universal design is the way forward. Let's start the process of bringing our existing playgrounds up to the standard required to not exclude kids with disabilities.

Capital Projects

Funding for necessary roof repairs to the Armory: The Amory's building envelope has serious problems and the roof is leaking. This means Center for Arts at the Armory staff have to put out buckets to catch the water dripping down from the ceiling in the performance hall. Since the City is the landlord, we need to fulfill our duties and fix the roof with urgency.

Water & Sewer

Funding to increase financial support to low-income residents to offset double-digit water and sewer bill increases in the current and previous fiscal years: My colleagues and I have repeatedly expressed concerns about the financial impact of the dramatic increases in our water and sewer base charges required to fund the expensive and overdue water and sewer infrastructure upgrades in the city. Rather than allowing these rate increases to disproportionately impact seniors on fixed incomes and low-income households, we should be subsidizing the increased costs for those who can't afford these price hikes.

Police & Mobility & Traffic & Parking

Funding for a camera traffic enforcement pilot program: The data clearly show driving infractions are increasing over time, but conventional enforcement through traffic stops has decreased here in Somerville - and these stops raise 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 bless this automated approach, Massachusetts General Law *does* allow us to pursue a pilot program that would see us install red light and speed cameras and have sworn police officers issue citations by mail to vehicle owners based on photographic and video evidence. We can do this right now at this moment without any action by the state. Let's do this, because the alternative is to admit defeat and cede our streets to lawlessness, chaos, and injuries and deaths.

Parks & Recreation

Funding for staffing and programming to activate the high school as a community center outside of school hours: We have a beautiful, new, state-of-the-art high school building sitting underutilized right in a great location next to a T station on Central Hill. Meanwhile, our community is desperate for a community center. By hiring staff and investing in programming on weeknights and weekends, we can make much better use of this amazing new resource without the City or anyone else needing to build a new building.

Additional funding to formalize compensation for local non-profit youth athletics and recreation service providers: We have amazing youth athletics non-profits like Somerville Youth Hockey Association, the YMCA swim team, and Tennis with Coach Drew who provide crucial services to our youth. In the past, there have been handshake deals trading access to facilities for in exchange for providing services like the Learn to Skate and Learn to Swim programs. We do need to have formalized agreements, so let's make sure our budgets reflect this reality and have funds included to avoid leaving community partners in financial binds.

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. Working with Communications and Public Engagement, Racial and Social Justice, and SomerViva to survey the community in a way that results in a truly 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.

Arts Council

Increased funding to create affordable artist spaces in the city: Last year we saw the Arts Council create a fantastic new dance rehearsal space near Union Square. I hear all the time from local artists either facing displacement or anxious about potential future displacement with all the development happening in Somerville. We have developers creating required Arts & Creative Enterprise (ACE) spaces required by our zoning, but our artists face an uphill battle in competing with certain allowed uses. I'd love to the City do more of what we did with the dance rehearsal space and lease ACE space directly, then allow it to be used by local artists.

Health & Human Services

Funding to create an unarmed civilian response pilot program: I noted the inclusion of Community Health Workers in the FY24 budget as a possible embryo for an alternative emergency response program. AER can take a variety of forms, so I would suggest we pick out an approach that we believe would work here in Somerville, and create 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.

Increased funding for community non-profits providing food, shelter, and services to 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 localized food and shelter, and I support the City using funds to support and grow this work.

Increased funding for additional outdoor standalone public toilets: The first three standalone outdoor public toilets are set to arrive in our city in the coming months. I expect these to be wildly popular. Given that 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.

Veterans Services

Increased funding for veterans events. When I meet with veterans, one of the themes I tend to hear over and over is their perception that they aren't a priority to the City. A decrease in events for veterans and for the public where veterans' service is recognized is often cited as a cause of this sentiment.

ARPA

ARPA community non-profit grant for medical debt forgiveness for Somerville residents. I appreciated the well-researched resolution put forward by my colleagues last term, 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 by awarding a community non-profit grant to make this happen.

Thank you for your attention to this memo and your consideration of these areas as you go about putting together the proposed FY 2025 budget. I am available to discuss any of these items, should you wish.