

Candidate answers 2021, question 4

4. What do you see as the link between affordability and Fair Housing in Somerville?

Katjana Ballantyne, Candidate for Mayor:

Housing security is fundamental to having food security, safety, education and employment opportunities. Fair access to housing is the foundation that enables all other kinds of social equity, including affordability. Vulnerable community groups including single-parent households, minorities and immigrants are disproportionately excluded by the most common systems and structures that we use to secure safe housing, healthy food, good education, and living-wage jobs. Affordability and Fair Housing are absolutely linked. By working to address affordability we can make a positive impact upon Fair Housing. To create and/or to purchase affordable housing is expensive, but by improving affordability, and the regulatory requirements supporting affordability, our Fair Housing objectives can be accomplished.

Mary Cassesso, Candidate for Mayor:

Fair Housing policies were created to protect against discrimination and racism in housing but the outcomes have not been sufficient to address the needs in communities, especially Somerville, where we have witnessed a tremendous increase in home equity. Even though Fair Housing laws are on the books, the critical component often lacking is enforcement, which can keep families with portable subsidies from being able to rent in Somerville. Providing equal access to the amenities and resources in Somerville to households from diverse backgrounds is a critical goal, and in many ways a lack of affordable options can act as a de facto Fair Housing barrier. While this is an issue in Somerville, it is also an issue regionally. We must work together with Boston, Cambridge, and other neighboring cities to stabilize affordable rental and buying opportunities.

Will Mbah, Candidate for Mayor:

Protected classes that are discriminated against are often forced to seek affordable housing because they are denied housing by landlords and property managers. This is wrong, and individuals and families should not be forced into affordable housing because they have been discriminated against.

Charlotte Kelly, Candidate for City Council At Large:

Centuries of systemic disenfranchisement and discrimination against Black people, immigrants, disabled people, and women have led to our current economic conditions. Today, many people lack the same kind of generational wealth that upper middle class white people have been able to build, which allows some to afford housing that meets their needs while others struggle to cobble together rent payments. While programs like the New Deal and the GI bill did help lift some people with oppressed identities into the middle class, discrimination in local administering of New Deal programs, decentralization of certain economic benefits of the GI Bill, and the eventual practice of redlining all shaped the current housing landscape that we live in today. Fair

Housing standards are important to highlight and name, and we must also get to the much deeper roots of the housing crisis. We can do this by addressing the economic and material conditions of people from protected classes who have suffered for decades at the hands of discriminatory financial institutions, segregationist housing policies, means-tested programs, mass incarceration, misogynist and ableist employment practices, and other ways that people in power maintain a status quo that does not provide stable, affordable housing to all of us. Somerville is a city shaped by all of this. Working class neighborhoods in Somerville see higher rates of asthma and cancer, increased rodent population, and dangerous roads and sidewalks, while more middle class neighborhoods in Somerville see more bike lanes, green space, and tree canopy. Housing is a human right and until we have a community where all of our neighbors are provided with everything they need to live in safe and stable shelter, we must continue to fight for Fair Housing — not just in name but with real resources. We can push for things like universally designed affordable units, more family-sized affordable units, working with state and federal officials to invest and build more public housing, and to approach homelessness with a housing-first model. In order to build a truly affordable city, we must make policies that invest real resources into the people whom Fair Housing laws are set up to protect.

Justin Klekota, Candidate for City Council At Large:

Discrimination based on source of income (e.g. Section 8) and other protected classes listed above is contrary our law and our values as a community as it pertains to housing affordability and the cause of justice. Our housing stock should include affordable units and fair practices that make them accessible regardless of source of income and other protected classes.

Kristen Strezo, Councilor At Large:

One prominent link that I see between affordability and Fair Housing in Somerville is destigmatizing the need for affordable housing in the community. We need to assess if there is a stigma against low-income and affordable housing residents that presents a large barrier to passing policies that increase affordable housing stock. If we work to destigmatize affordability and instead, support lower-income residents, we are able to enact policy that expands access to affordable and accessible units including increasing the number of large units for families, units for families with small children, Section 8 stock, and ADA accessible and senior-friendly units. We have to destigmatize low-income renters and affordable housing by fighting for tenants' rights and encouraging more landlords to rent to low-income residents. One of my main goals as a City Councilor is to expand affordable housing options in the community and to emphasize that many members of our community are housing insecure -- through no fault of their own. I am working to destigmatize and expand affordable housing through supporting programs--and amplifying the significance of programs like SomerVIP -- which incentivizes landlords and realtors to rent to residents with Section 8 housing vouchers -- and inclusionary zoning policies to achieve a more equitable city.

Tracey Pratt, Candidate for City Council At Large:

In my opinion, lack of affordability is a violation of fair housing. If we can't afford something; how do we gain access to it? If a person cannot gain access to safe, affordable housing, how do

they take care of themselves and their families? It's a basic human right and if you don't have it, the next generation is negatively affected. Wealth is generational and unfortunately so is poverty. One of the few ways to attain assets is through home ownership, which can then be passed to the next generation. Home ownership does not happen in a vacuum. Rarely can people jump from poverty to home ownership opportunities. First they need stable and fair housing opportunities that they can afford.

Virginia Hussey, Candidate for City Council At Large:

With housing so expensive, it's impossible to afford to live here unless you have assistance, whether it is government or family, or if you are lucky enough to have a high paying job in tech. We can't fix this with only building more units. We need good paying jobs, more Somerville residents in city jobs, and better connections between the trade unions and the high school.

Willie Burnley, Jr., Candidate for City Council At Large:

As an activist, an organizer, and someone who has staffed the re-election campaign of both Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Ed Markey, I've seen the power that governments of all kinds have to build pathways to prosperity or impede them. Affordability and Fair Housing are two of those pathways, without which many of our community members would be barred from dignified lives in Somerville. I see it as the job of city councilors, as well as all elected officials, to facilitate an enforceable system of fair housing to ensure that violators are identified, publicized, and financially penalized in such a way that eliminates discriminatory practices in our community. Perhaps funds that result from such fines could be used to help further affordability in our community and be instilled into a trust.

I share Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's dream of eliminating racism, poverty, and war, and this question reminds me very much of two of his quotes. Firstly, one related to the interrelated nature of capitalism (systemically-imposed or tolerated poverty) and racism (white supremacy).

"We know that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters," King [said](#) in 1968. "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?" In this quote, I see the need as a future city councilor to do as much as I can to ensure our residents make living wages with which they can have dignified fiscal and social lives in our community. I see the need to eliminate the structural and interpersonal barriers that get in the way of Dr. King's vision. But there is another quote that also comes to mind, this one more firmly centered around capitalism.

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar," Dr. King once said. "It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Quite frankly, we must move in a direction where we understand that justice is more than relying on a soulless market in which some people are able to afford to house themselves with dignity. We must move toward housing as a human right where one's income is not the deciding factor for what is, quite literally, a life-saving commodity.

JT Scott, City Councilor, Ward 2:

One very clear link is the interaction between the Affordability Standards for SHA Section 8 vouchers vs the average market rental prices of units, which makes many Section 8 voucher holders unable to use those vouchers locally. Another significant link is observable in the segmentation of our rental market - namely that newer, more expensive units are more likely to be in compliance with ADA and lead paint certifications. For a family seeking housing, the owners of the "most affordable" older units are more likely to discriminate against them because of the lack of accessibility or de-leading certifications, leaving families and people with disabilities priced out in a search which only includes more expensive new/"luxury" units.

Ben Ewen-Campen, City Councilor, Ward 3:

In addition to direct discrimination, I believe that in fact the primary factor keeping most people from stable housing in Somerville is the skyrocketing cost of housing in our community. Very few working families can afford the current "market rate" rents or home-prices in Somerville, and nearly all rely on the shrinking stock of relatively less expensive housing that manages to still exist in our neighborhoods. Without plentiful housing options that are safe, affordable, and accessible, and without a strong tenant rights enforcement program, we will continue to see housing become less and less attainable for everyone who isn't wealthy. And with such an expensive and competitive real estate market, landlords and property owners are able to "pick and choose" tenants in a discriminatory fashion.

Beatriz Gómez Mouakad, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Due to economic inequality certain racial and ethnic and mobility/visually impaired groups are unable to afford to live and have access to decent housing and therefore live in certain neighborhoods. This means that to achieve true housing equity affordability needs to be factored in as it is a means to increase access and improve equity for these groups throughout the community.

Tessa Bridge, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Fair Housing and affordability are intertwined. We must take bold action so that everyone, regardless of their identity or family, economic, or immigration status, has access to affordable and accessible housing. To achieve this, we must increase funding to the Office of Housing Stability and to local community organizing efforts such as CAAS to ensure that tenants have access to the services they need to find housing, and then ensure that they are well-treated by their landlords and that the housing is maintained. By investing in a thriving network of community organizations we can build a strong safety net to support tenants. Furthermore, Somerville must build on existing progressive affordable housing policies including increasing the percentage of affordable housing from 20% to 25%, building mixed-income social housing (rental housing that is owned by the city), focusing on transit-oriented housing, and supporting the Somerville Community Land Trust (SCLT) by moving more publicly owned land into the SCLT. All efforts to increase affordable housing in our city must be made through the lens of equity and justice, and with an understanding of the history and current predatory housing practices perpetuated against BIPOC, immigrants, and low-income residents.

Todd Easton, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Somerville needs to be proactive to ensure future large scale development addresses current housing needs of all populations of the city. City policies should be designed in such a way that developers meet the needs of the city before their own financial gains. Development that caters to one particular segment of the population should be deterred.

Alexander Anderson, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

A huge proportion of all of our challenges in Somerville relates to the lack of affordability in our community for so many people. With a limited supply of rental and for-sale housing all over the city, property is increasingly available only to the highest earners. This affordability crisis is amplified because of systems of oppression like racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination disproportionately impact community members from historically disadvantaged groups. If we are able to address the affordability crisis – which to me involves a significant increase in housing supply by building new units and upgrading and updating existing units for all levels of affordability – we can relieve some of the pressures associated with renting or buying. When our housing system is operating on limited supply and the rental or buying experience is highly competitive, landlords, owners, etc. have the upper hand in decision making and will seek to maximize their position. All too often, this results in perpetuating the inequity between those with historic power and privilege and those who have been historically excluded from power and privilege. Making our community more affordable is necessary to advance fair housing in Somerville.

Additionally, we cannot talk about affordability in our community without talking about transportation and planning. Our streets connect all of our neighborhoods and are a reflection of decisions that prioritize cut-through car traffic at the expense of neighborhood affordability and population health. It is well established that [cheap parking causes increases in home prices](#) and that [traffic and congestion is a public health challenge](#). The closer people live to high volume streets, the more likely they are to experience cancer, asthma, and learning disabilities in their life. Some of our community's busiest and most driven streets are closet to our publicly supported housing buildings. People and families who are most likely to face discrimination in housing are also facing a disproportionate burden of the public health harms of traffic in our community. If we want to get to real affordability and improve the quality of life and health of people in our community, we must have an honest conversation about the harms we are all experiencing because of how we have prioritized cut-through traffic instead of fair housing and health in our community.

Becca Miller, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

There are many links between affordability and fair housing. In general I believe we need to treat housing as a right rather than solely a wealth accumulating tool for those who can afford it. The start-up cost to rent a unit for tenants (often including first month, last month, a security deposit of one of ½ month's rent, as well as one month's brokers fee) are extremely high! For the average Somerville two bedroom apartment renting at \$2,000 a month, this requires tenants to have \$8,000 immediately on hand, a difficult sum for many working families. This cost leads to many working people choosing to not even apply for housing in Somerville. Many potential

tenants with section 8 vouchers from Somerville are not able to find housing in the city because of the high cost of apartments, above what vouchers will cover. As rents have risen, many families are priced out from large (3-4 bedroom) apartments and may be discriminated against when landlords prefer other types of tenants.

Judy Pineda Neufeld, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

Building and maintaining affordable housing stock is essential to creating a competitive market for renters and potential home buyers. This will allow tenants facing discrimination to more easily find new housing, and put pressure on landlords and sellers to ensure they are not violating the Fair Housing rights of buyers or of new and existing tenants. I also support the Fair Housing bill (HD.1990/SD.2220) at the State House, introduced by Representative Christine Barber and Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, which will ban exclusionary zoning practices that favor developing single family homes, and ensures communities can't discriminate against housing developments that have affordable units or accommodations for children.

Maria Koutsoubaris, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

The link seen is that control of properties is the general consensus to adopt by the administration focus. New guidelines easing the financial and ethical burdens that homeowners face is crucial to the economic future of the city finances.