

# Questions for Mayoral Candidate

The Somerville Chamber of Commerce is asking all who are running for mayor to fill out our questionnaire by **September 8, 2025**. We will be sending your answers to the chamber's membership and will have it on our website.

Online form can be found here:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Clv2okim2HbpRXW\\_852slz5KvNUDEJVBt9Cgo-Z4jsY/viewform?edit\\_requested=true](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Clv2okim2HbpRXW_852slz5KvNUDEJVBt9Cgo-Z4jsY/viewform?edit_requested=true)

Email\* [Katjana@katjana.org](mailto:Katjana@katjana.org)

1. What are your top three priorities for the city as mayor?

**Affordability - is the sides of two coins** On one side it the housing. Therefore we use every tool possible to create more affordable housing. The other side is the cost to live here. I tackled this through economic development. My top priority is addressing the issue of affordability. I have added 974 new affordable housing units to the development pipeline, like the nearly complete Clarendon Hill public housing redevelopment of 168 new, affordable family homes. These are efficient, fossil fuel free and LEED-certified. And I've distributed over \$9 million in rental assistance and housing vouchers to help families stay in Somerville. For economic development we have planned and written zoning for areas of Somernova, Brickbottom and planned Assembly Square. And I will continue my work collaboratively to keep, let grow and attract new businesses to Somerville.

**Infrastructure** - My administration has invested in infrastructure with the goal of transforming Somerville into a modern, sustainable, and equitable city, which means addressing decades of deferred maintenance on our buildings and roads. By prioritizing key areas such as public infrastructure, transportation, water and sewer infrastructure, we are laying the foundation for a thriving community for generations to come. Road and sidewalk reconstruction projects are ongoing throughout the city, with a focus on improving accessibility and aesthetics.

**Defending our rights under the constitution** – I am committed to protecting the City of Somerville and its residents from the illegal actions of the Trump Administration. As an immigrant myself, a naturalized citizen and leader of a sanctuary city, I have LED on this issue by filing in February 2025, a lawsuit against the Trump Administration. His

executive order to use our local law enforcement in the administration's mass deportation plans goes against our welcoming city status and it is unconstitutional.

Somerville is a safe city, an AAA bond rated city. Our law enforcement is focused on local policing, not federal immigration law.

2. What's your plan to improve safety, cleanliness, and walkability in business districts?

Under my leadership, Somerville has become one of the top 10 most walkable cities in the U.S. - and we're just getting started.

I've prioritized access and safety for pedestrians through strategic bike lanes and major highway redesigns. Now we're doubling down: more dedicated bus lanes, aggressive traffic calming measures, and better connections citywide.

Here's my philosophy: our streets should work for people who live, work, and shop here - not just commuters cutting through our neighborhoods. Complete streets aren't just good policy; they're good for business. When people can safely walk and bike to local shops and restaurants, our economy thrives.

On cleanliness, we're not messing around - especially with rats. We've revolutionized our approach, combining traditional methods with cutting-edge technology like electric traps and fertility control. The results? Boston and Cambridge are now coming to *us* for advice. When you're leading on rat control, you know you're doing something right.

This isn't just about making Somerville prettier or more convenient. Clean, walkable, accessible streets send a message: this is a city that takes care of itself and its people. That attracts residents, businesses, and visitors who want to be part of something well-run and forward-thinking.

We've proven we can lead on the big challenges. Now we keep pushing forward.

3. Commercial development had been robust in Somerville but with the economic slowdown commercial development and housing developments have ceased. In spite of this slowdown the City Council recently voted to increase linkage fees even though Somerville already had the highest fees including permit fees and inclusionary housing percentages in the State. How are you going to encourage developers to build, rather than go to other cities with lower linkage, fees, permit fees and inclusionary housing percentages? What incentives would you offer?

First, let me acknowledge the reality we're facing. The entire commercial development market is struggling in Greater Boston. With 15 million of space sitting vacant in the region, few new large-scale commercial developments will launch over the next few years.

We need to focus on **filling our vacant spaces**. This is our immediate priority and our biggest opportunity. When you look at a commercial lab building, roughly 40% of that building's value comes from building investments the tenant makes. That means every vacant space we fill doesn't just bring in workers who can spend money on local businesses, it dramatically increases the assessed value and our property tax revenue.

This is why I'm proposing we be aggressive with property tax incentives specifically targeted at getting tenants into our existing vacant buildings. We're talking about immediate tax relief for deals that can demonstrate they're actively filling these spaces with quality tenants. The math is simple: a filled building generates exponentially more property tax revenue than an empty one, even with generous incentives in place. We're leaving money on the table every day these spaces sit vacant.

**Local Business Partnership Credits:** We'll also offer additional tax advantages for new tenants who will hire locally or partner with Somerville-based companies. We're not just looking for any tenant - we want tenants who strengthen our entire economic fabric.

The key is accountability. Every incentive comes with measurable outcomes and clawback provisions if commitments aren't met. We're going to be aggressive, but we're going to be smart about it. Somerville taxpayers deserve to see real returns on these investments. The best path to increasing property tax revenue is filling the spaces we already have built.

4. There is approximately 3 million square feet of life science space that is unoccupied in the city. What are your strategies for filling empty lab spaces?

We've made some important progress — most recently, the lease-up of 200 Chestnut Street — but it's true: **Somerville still has about 1.8 million square feet of lab space sitting vacant** across six buildings. That's part of a much larger trend in the Greater Boston area, where over **15 million square feet** is now on the market. We are in a highly competitive moment, and Somerville needs to meet that challenge head-on.

My administration is working in lockstep with state partners, property owners, and the Chamber of Commerce to aggressively market these sites and position Somerville as a top choice for life sciences, climatetech, and advanced manufacturing.

1. **Working in partnership:** We are actively collaborating with the state, the real estate community, and our local institutions to promote Somerville as a business destination. We know companies have options, and we're making the case for why they should choose Somerville — not just for the space, but for the community, the workforce, and the values.
2. **Coordinated marketing:** We've launched a joint marketing push in partnership with landlords and the Chamber of Commerce. That means telling a unified story — about our sites, our ecosystem, and our quality of life — at industry events, in marketing materials, and directly to site selectors and decision-makers.
3. **Exploring every tool available:** It may take more than great real estate to land a tenant. We're open to performance-based incentives — including tax relief in strategic cases — to help close the deal and get these spaces activated.
4. **Keeping options open:** We're also encouraging flexibility in how these spaces can be used. In addition to biotech, we see opportunities in climatetech and advanced manufacturing — sectors that align with Somerville's strengths and values.

We can't afford to sit back and hope the market rebounds on its own. Our approach is aggressive, coordinated, and realistic — and I'm committed to making sure these buildings bring jobs, innovation, and tax revenue into our city, not just sit empty.

5. How do you plan to balance attracting larger developments with ensuring that independent, locally owned businesses can survive and thrive?

Here's the truth: we can absolutely do both, and in fact, one feeds the other. When we fill our vacant lab spaces and bring in larger tenants, we're not just adding square footage - we're adding hundreds, sometimes thousands of high-paying jobs. Those employees need to eat lunch, grab coffee, pick up dry cleaning, and meet friends for dinner. They're the customer base that our independent businesses in Union Square, near Assembly, and in Brick Bottom have been waiting for.

Think about it this way: a single biotech company with 300 employees represents 300 potential daily customers walking through our commercial districts. These are people with disposable income who want convenience and quality - exactly what our local restaurants, shops, and service businesses can provide.

But creating this synergy doesn't happen automatically - it requires intentional support. That's why we've invested in a comprehensive small business ecosystem: a dedicated liaison streamlines the often bureaucratic permitting process, MainStreets organization backing revitalizes commercial districts through targeted investment and community engagement, and a specialized support team provides ongoing guidance from business planning to financing connections. Together, they create a business-friendly environment that removes barriers, builds community, and helps local entrepreneurs thrive alongside larger developments.

This is economic ecosystem building. The lab workers provide the customer base, the independent businesses provide the character and community that makes people want to work and live here, and together they create the kind of vibrant, economically diverse neighborhoods that attract even more investment. Our challenge isn't choosing between big business and small business - it's making sure they support each other.

6. Do you plan to make any changes to local taxes, permits, or fees that directly affect small businesses?

As I have stated to the small businesses inquiries, one of the most effective ways to support small businesses in Somerville is to **invest in both the entrepreneurs themselves and the neighborhood environments where they operate.**

During the pandemic, we focused on emergency relief — distributing more than **\$6 million in small business grants** to help keep doors open. Now, we're focused on

helping our small businesses grow, attract more customers, and strengthen their long-term footing in Somerville.

That means combining **technical assistance with public space activation** — supporting individual businesses while also making our commercial districts more vibrant, welcoming, and economically productive.

Here's how we're doing it:

- We continue to **fund culturally competent technical assistance** through our Main Streets organizations, and have **added a dedicated small business permitting staff member** within OSPCD to help businesses move more quickly through City processes.
- We've **launched new permit streamlining initiatives** to cut red tape — not just for individual permits, but for larger development review processes that shape future small business opportunities.
- We released a **Commercial Leasing Toolkit** to help entrepreneurs better navigate the leasing process — a common barrier for new and growing businesses.

And just as importantly, we're **activating our commercial districts** to bring people back to our squares and corridors:

7. We're investing in **placemaking and public space improvements** — including outdoor dining, live performances, pop-ups, and art installations — to help drive foot traffic and make our small business areas destinations.
8. We're working closely with the business support agencies, like Main Streets and the Chamber, along with local artists, and business owners to **create programming that reflects the character of each square**, while drawing in new visitors and customers.
9. And we're supporting **flexible use of sidewalks, plazas, and underutilized public spaces** so that small businesses can literally take up more space — whether that's for selling goods, hosting events, or attracting new audiences.

If re-elected, I'll continue to invest in both the **people who run our small businesses** and the **places where they operate** — because that's how we build not just stronger businesses, but stronger neighborhoods. And, as we navigate these uncertain

economic times I will continue to promote our small businesses, and work collaboratively when developing changes.

10. Why is Somerville so extremely difficult for contractors and builders to obtain permits for construction from Inspectional Services. Inspection wait times have increased. Citizenserve has not been effective in streamlining the permitting process. How will you simplify or improve the permitting/licensing process for new and existing businesses?

My administration is focused on making it easier to do business in Somerville — by improving how we handle permits, licenses, and inspections.

I know that too many contractors, residents and small business owners find our permitting system frustrating. In recent years, Somerville underwent a complete zoning overhaul, navigated a global pandemic, and experienced a historic building boom — all of which put pressure on our systems and staff. Now that things have stabilized, the time is right to take a ground-up look at every part of our permitting process.

That's why I've tasked the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) with leading this work. The Economic Development Division is zeroing in on making small business permitting more straightforward. Meanwhile, our Planning, Preservation, and Zoning teams are reviewing development permits with the goal of shortening timelines while still protecting the community's goals and values. We're asking hard questions: Which steps are still relevant? Which can be simplified or eliminated? And how do we modernize the technology we use so that staff and applicants aren't spending time on redundant processes?

The result will be a more predictable, transparent system that gets businesses and projects moving faster, while still ensuring safety, sustainability, and community benefits. Simply put, our job is to help Somerville thrive — and that means helping our businesses grow without unnecessary red tape.

11. The Condo Conversion Ordinance Amendment: The process was done with no public input during the Fourth of July week. Do you feel this was transparent? Would you have done things differently?

The Legislative branch of government, City Council controls passage and schedule of the recent Condo Conversion Ordinance amendment, and as mayor, I respect their authority to set that timeline. That said, I understand the concern about the process and the perception that it moved forward without enough public input.

I believe strongly in transparency and inclusive decision-making. Major policy changes — especially those that affect housing and tenant protections — work best when shaped hand-in-hand with the community.

Certainly going forward I will continue to advocate to the Council, so that even if a legislative branch function moves quickly, that the process remains open, transparent, and responsive to the people of Somerville.

12. The Condo Conversion Ordinance Amendment: If the City has a goal to make housing more affordable, how does making development take longer and have more risk by doubling the tenant relocation payments and the condo conversion waiting period? Do you agree that condo ownership is a way for first time home buyers to get into Somerville?

Condos are certainly part of the housing mix in Somerville, and I agree that for some families, condo ownership can be an entry point into homeownership here. But we also have to face the reality that pursuing that path often comes with the risk of displacing long-term renters — many of whom are not in a financial position to buy. So this ordinance is about recognizing and addressing that risk. It's about striking a balance, making sure that while opportunities for ownership exist, we are not leaving our most vulnerable residents behind.

That being said, the larger question remains: can we continue increasing development costs by layering regulation on top of regulation? The answer is no. If we want progress — more affordable housing, more mixed-income development, and more opportunities for ownership — we must pair strong tenant protections with a rigorous focus on streamlining our permitting and regulatory processes. That's why I've directed my administration, particularly our Planning and Economic Development teams, to critically review every step of the development approval process. Our goal is to eliminate unnecessary delays while still protecting community goals, so that projects pencil out, tenants are shielded from displacement, and housing opportunities — including for first-time buyers — continue to grow.

Somerville's future requires balance: protecting renters from displacement, supporting affordability, and making it feasible to build and buy homes. My vision is to ensure Somerville remains a place where everyone — renters and buyers alike — can thrive.

13. How will you ensure that changes to parking, bike lanes, or public transit projects support—not harm—small business foot traffic and customer access?

My administration is committed to rebuilding Somerville's streets to support all modes of transportation. We need to get the basics of sidewalk access and safety right, otherwise nothing else works. For seniors, people with disabilities, caregivers pushing strollers,

and anyone on foot, uneven pavement, poorly timed signals, and fast-moving vehicles make everyday travel difficult — and sometimes dangerous. These improvements make moving around our city easier and more equitable for everyone. I know that for small businesses, access and foot traffic are absolutely essential, and every project must be designed with their success in mind.

That's why our approach is rooted in ongoing, collaborative outreach. Our Mobility Division doesn't just hold large public meetings; we engage directly along the corridors where projects are planned—stopping into businesses, listening to small business owners and employees, and holding small group discussions to gather real feedback on what will help or hurt customer access. Our small business team coordinates closely with Mobility on every project near business districts to ensure business needs are heard early and often, and adjustments can be made where necessary.

By prioritizing both safe streets and vibrant small businesses, and by embedding active, hands-on engagement into every step, we're building a more accessible, connected Somerville—one where commerce and community thrive together.

14. Some people and businesses in our community say that we have parking issues. How would you mitigate those concerns or change the situation? On recent changes to streets in Somerville would you require after say 6 months of completing a street project a look back with meetings of the people and businesses in the area to see if these changes solved the problem or created more problem?

Recent street redesigns are always intended to improve safety, accessibility, and business vitality, but we also recognize that every change can have both positive and negative impacts. To ensure we are truly addressing the needs of our community, I fully support conducting a formal review and community “look-back” six months after completion of every major street project. These dedicated meetings with residents and businesses will allow us to reflect honestly, assess what is and isn't working, and adjust where needed — because continuous improvement is part of our culture.

Somerville's approach to parking and street changes is rooted in collaboration and open reflection: listening to feedback, being willing to revisit decisions, and working together so that our streets work for everyone

15. Why is the city significantly adding numerous traffic calming measures throughout various neighborhoods without input from all residents, businesses and religious institutions? What we are hearing is the city conducts listening sessions but are not hearing what is being said. How would you change that?

To save lives, is the reason for traffic calming measures. And the results reveal that crashes due to death and serious injuries have reduced. Somerville residents have told us that the number one publicly safety concern they have is speeding, cut through traffic. They want the traffic to slow down. Note that eight out of ten cars on Somerville streets are passing through. They do not stop at a business, nor a residential home. They are cutting through to get to Boston or Cambridge, and then back home. I understand, when one raises a concern and then sees a project move forward another way, it can feel like one is not heard. But let me be clear, your input is genuinely considered alongside safety data, traffic engineering standards, accessibility requirements, and yes, input from other residents who may have different priorities.

I've worked closely with Safe Streets for Somerville, served on the Bike Advisory Committee and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. Through this collaboration, we've made significant, visible improvements that have literally saved lives. The data backs this up - fewer accidents, safer crossings, more accessible streets.

We always strive to do better. So, we're expanding beyond traditional listening sessions. Some people can't make evening meetings. Some don't feel comfortable speaking up in groups. We're adding online surveys, one-on-one conversations, and utilizing relationships our Economic Development Team has nurtured.

Also, we're being more transparent about decision-making factors. When we move forward with a project despite objections, we're explaining why - what safety data drove the decision, what engineering standards we had to meet, what other community voices we balanced.

Not every voice will agree with every decision, but every voice deserves to understand how that decision was made. That's the difference between being heard and being ignored.

16. What will you do in your elected role to ensure that everyone including businesses and religious institutions in Somerville have equal access to all City services, resources, programs, and meetings? How will transparency play a role?

Building on the comprehensive equity work we've already accomplished - from our Language Justice staffing to our Digital Bridge Coordinator - I'm committed to ensuring that businesses and religious institutions have that same level of access and support.

We're expanding our multilingual business services beyond just translation. Our Economic Development team now conducts outreach in Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages our business community speaks. My administration has expanded our Language Justice and Access staffing to ensure language is not a barrier to accessing city services and civic life. And we're making sure our permitting process is accessible - that means translated materials, multilingual staff available during business hours, and clear timelines that businesses can count on.

Importantly, our Mobility Division has refined their public outreach strategies and now works closely with our Economic Development team to ensure that business concerns are front and center in our transportation and infrastructure planning. When we're designing bike lanes, bus routes, or pedestrian improvements, we're not just thinking about residents - we're considering how these changes impact customer access, deliveries, and the day-to-day operations of our local businesses.

Religious Institutions are community anchors, and they need to know they have equal access to city resources whether they're applying for special event permits, seeking support for community programming, or navigating property issues.

Every business owner, every faith leader, every resident should be able to see how decisions get made in this city. That means continuing our practice of publishing meeting materials in multiple languages, live-streaming council meetings with interpretation services, and maintaining our open data portal so people can track everything from budget allocations to development projects.

This cross-departmental collaboration ensures that equal access isn't just about language or technology - it's about making sure every city decision considers the full impact on our diverse community.

17. Currently city meetings (virtual) do not have participation features such as raise your hand button, chat features and restrict participants visibility to see who is in the meeting. Do you feel this is open and transparent? Please explain your reasoning. Also, as Mayor, would you require that all city meetings including all city council committee and board meetings be held in public with a virtual component and that all elected officials be required to attend in person all meetings in public?

I believe the government works best when it is open, accessible, and transparent. The goal and the expectation today is to have hybrid meetings — combining the benefits of in-person engagement with the accessibility of remote participation. That's the direction we're moving in, because it allows more residents to take part in civic life regardless of their schedules, mobility, or caregiving responsibilities.

It's true that the City Council controls its own meetings, and I respect that authority. At the same time, my administration is committed to working with the Council and our boards and commissions to make sure the city provides the resources, staffing, and technology needed to make hybrid participation easier and more effective. That includes looking at meeting platforms with stronger public participation features and creating spaces in our city buildings that are designed with hybrid access in mind.

As for attendance, I believe elected officials have a responsibility to be present and visible — both to one another and to the public they serve. In-person participation strengthens accountability and dialogue, while maintaining a remote option ensures inclusivity. My expectation is that we continue building toward a standard where every meeting of the City Council, its committees, and our boards includes a public, hybrid option that offers real transparency and real participation.

This is about more than technology, it's about trust. Somerville residents deserve to know that their government is accessible and accountable, both online and in person.

18. What would you like to see from local associations in terms of working positively and proactively with you and your office? How can organizations like the Somerville Chamber of Commerce be an asset to you as mayor?

My vision for Somerville is a place where we can all thrive. That means I welcome input from the Chamber on your needs and ideas, and would welcome your support and participation, as appropriate, in our programs and events.

The Somerville Chamber of Commerce and other local associations aren't just stakeholders - they're essential partners in making this city work better for everyone.

Here's what I'd love to see: **real collaboration, not just consultation after we've already made decisions.**

Take our street redesigns. Instead of the Chamber hearing about bike lanes and traffic calming after we've finalized plans, let's flip that script. I want the Chamber to collect baseline data from businesses before we transform any street - foot traffic counts,

delivery patterns, and customer feedback on accessibility. Then we track those same metrics six months and a year after implementation. This isn't just good policy; it's proof of concept. When we can show that our investments actually help businesses thrive, it makes the case for doing more.

**Marketing our vacant spaces should be a top priority collaboration.** The City has data, zoning expertise, and development pipelines. The Chamber has business networks, market intelligence, and credibility with potential tenants. Put those together, and we can actively market Somerville's opportunities instead of waiting for people to discover them.

I also want the Chamber helping us identify regulatory friction before it becomes a problem. You're hearing from businesses every day about permitting delays, unclear processes, or policy conflicts. Bring those insights to us early so we can fix systems, not just individual cases.

The strongest cities are where the government and business community combine their unique strengths. We have the policy tools and public resources. You have the market knowledge and business relationships. When we work together proactively - not reactively - that's when we can truly compete with any municipality in the region.

Let's stop working in parallel and start working in partnership.

Actively collaborate with us to provide training and job opportunities for our youth. A good example of the latter would be providing training and internships for our young people. On a visit to Ultragenics, a new biotech lab in Brickbottom, I ran into a Somerville High School graduate now working as a researcher there. Her parents immigrated here, and she has been able to continue to live with her family in Somerville because an exciting local employer hired her.