

## Fair Housing questionnaire, follow-up questions 2023

- 1. (As a follow-up to question #1) Now that you have served in your current position, would you have handled the housing discrimination that you experienced in a different way? What advice would you now give to Somerville residents who may be facing housing discrimination?**
- 2. (As a follow-up to question 5) Since being elected to your current position, how do you feel that you have addressed systemic housing discrimination against protected classes in Somerville and affirmatively furthered fair housing in Somerville?**

Mayor Katjana Ballantyne, Incumbent and Candidate for Major

### **Question 1:**

Obviously, someone who is a member of a protected class should report any such discrimination to the Fair Housing Commission so that appropriate action can be taken. I am committed to enforcing the law. Discrimination, though, can take many forms, including people being priced out of the market. The lack of affordable housing is an issue not only in Somerville but throughout the Commonwealth and, indeed, our entire country. To address that, my administration has been working on several tracks.

Since becoming Mayor in 2022 we have created a first time ever Land Acquisition Fund so that affordable housing developers can compete in the competitive market housing arena. We now have over 700 affordability housing units actively in the construction pipeline. I favor a multi-pronged approach including collaborating with non-profit developers and/or the Somerville Housing Authority to develop new affordable housing.

In addition to promoting the construction of new housing, my administration created our landmark Municipal Voucher Program, the first of its kind in the state to aid against the displacement of our residents. This new program will deliver essential rental aid to residents in crisis, predominantly low-income families with children, including immigrant families that are often not eligible for other supports.

Finally, the City's Anti-Displacement Task Force (ADTF) is currently in the process of drafting a rent stabilization law, and we are reaching out to community members to share their input on what should be included. Two separate sessions have been offered so that everyone can be heard: one for property owners, and one for renters.

### **Question 5:**

In addition to everything I have outlined above, I support further strengthening the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO) relaxing height, density, and permitting rules for buildings dedicated to income-restricted housing. This would not only allow an increase in the number of affordable units but bring a significant increase in the number of family-sized (3+BR) units. Just as importantly, we must strengthen the Inclusionary Zoning provisions to ensure that small units and family size units follow an identical pattern of affordability.

Willie Burnley, Jr., City Councilor At Large

**Question 1:**

There have been significant improvements in the availability of institutional support for renters facing displacement since 2017 when I was pushed out of Somerville. Like many people experiencing an economic crisis in our community, I was incredibly ashamed of what I perceived as my failure to be able to provide for myself amidst an increasingly hostile housing market. I wish that I felt equipped at that time to transcend those feelings and move to a place of action, of resilience, of community organizing and communal support. My advice to anyone currently struggling is to immediately seek out support - from CAAS (the Community Action Agency of Somerville), to Somerville's Office of Housing Stability, to your city councilors, and to your neighbors. The most beautiful thing about Somerville is how many people will show up for a neighbor in need.

**Question 5:**

As I've previously indicated, addressing housing stability and ensuring an end to housing discrimination have been core values that I have practiced for years, up to and including when I worked at the civil rights non-profit the Equal Rights Center on housing discrimination referrals. With my pride as a renter at stake, I have been proud to lead on this front. The first law that I passed in my role was a Renter's Know Your Rights law that requires landlords to provide new tenants with a city-drafted document containing renters' legal rights and financial resources at the start of their tenancy in their preferred language. In doing so, the City has taken a leading approach to equip tens of thousands of residents with more information and power to act against illegal activities on the part of their landlord. Moreover, I have also passed a first-in-the-nation non-discrimination ordinance that prevents anyone from facing housing discrimination on the basis of their actual or perceived family or relationship structure, which will give polyamorous and non-traditional families greater protections in the market. Further, it will also give the City the opportunity to collect data to assess the scope of this issue - as we know there are many of these such individuals and families in Somerville. In short, as a councilor, I have increased access to the information available to renters when facing housing discrimination and expanded the protected classes that Somerville recognizes as being deserving of support.

Finally, there are so many ways in which the council has its hands tied in terms of supporting housing stability that I do not believe that the work we do within the chamber can be sufficient.

That is why I continue to stand with CAAS, the La Court Tenant Union, and all members of our community organizing against evictions and displacement.

Kristen Strezo, City Councilor At Large

**Question 1:**

When I first experienced housing discrimination, I didn't know I actually had an option of reporting this discrimination. I also didn't know that it was illegal to discriminate against families or ask certain questions that reveal likely scenarios, making it harder to receive affordable housing. My goal and my hope is to make sure that I am doing as much as I can in my capacity to make other residents aware that there are lots of people and organizations that are willing to help and can act as an additional resource. To current Somerville residents facing housing discrimination, don't give up. This system is frustrating and it is easy to be scared away by the process and long waitlists. Take the risk when it comes to applying and sign up anyway. Be your own best advocate, keep asking questions, and exhaust all of your options. There are resources available and while they are strained, justice can and does prevail.

**Question 5:**

As the chair of the Housing and Community Development Committee, I handled several conversations about housing discrimination in the city and the lack of funding for resources. I am looking at what exists at the state level to understand what we can do at a municipal level to prevent housing discrimination. I am hopeful that the fall and winter will bring more concrete action responses to the fair housing commission's concerns. Moreover, I will do everything I can to support the commission in every way