

Candidate Questionnaire - JT Scott, Ward 2

Will you attend the SEU Candidate Forum (zoom) on the evening of May 26th?

- Yes, though the timing will be important. There is a traffic safety rally hosted by Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets at the corner of McGrath and Broadway featuring Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley and most of our state delegation which I anticipate will draw the attendance of many municipal electeds and candidates. The rally portion of that event starts at 6pm.

Internet

Is high speed internet a necessity or a luxury? What changes would you like to see in the availability of and access to high speed internet in Somerville?

Clearly a necessity. I have advocated in the Finance Committee at City Council repeatedly for the city to pursue municipal broadband, providing high speed internet to all Somerville residents as a utility service.

High Stakes Testing (SC)

Students and educators are required to spend days of valuable learning time on high stakes testing each year. How do you feel about the current systems of testing and accountability in our state? What changes, if any, would you like to see and how do you plan to work toward those changes?

I'm guessing this is a School Committee question, but personally I'm not a fan of the MCAS and the focus on test results that it requires of school districts and support ending it. I support the advocacy of Sen Jehlen and the community, would support the SC in moving to opt out of the MCAS, and appreciate the education efforts to inform parents of their ability to opt out in the meantime.

Transit/parking

How do you feel about the transportation options currently available in our city? Do we have enough options? If not, what will you do to increase those?

We've got several transit problems here - and since public transportation is supplied by state agencies it's important to work with them to gain traction on solving them. Our bus routes are not sufficient to cover all the movement we need in the city, especially north-south, and the routes we do have would benefit from being much more frequently served (adding more buses). To encourage that, I've partnered with MBTA on a pilot bus lane project on Washington St, enrolling MBTA resources in helping design road changes that can speed up bus trips on the 86, serving Union Square, Harvard Square, Argenziano, and Capuano. The 90 will also be important as a link from Sullivan to SHS, and frequency there must be improved especially in the morning transit hours and after school. I'll continue to work with our Mobility Dept and MBTA to increase frequency expanded bus service to other wards.

I've also advocated personally to make the MBTA free within Somerville - we should be subsidizing this service directly to allow getting onto a bus in Somerville free, and providing Somerville educators with free transit passes as well.

Unfortunately road diets and bus lane improvements also mean a reduction in available parking spaces for teachers and staff, which is a problem the Washington St project has run up against. Given that many Somerville Educators are not able to afford living in Somerville currently, recognizing their need to drive at the moment while we work towards a better solution is absolutely necessary. The mistake of failing to provide structured parking for the new SHS - in a garage under the planned soccer field - will continue to cause headaches for years to come.

Ultimately I want our educators to live in this community and walk (or take local buses) to work alongside their students. To make that a reality for Somerville, we have to begin building public housing and creating subsidized affordable housing programs for Somerville educators.

Environmental Justice

What do you consider to be the most pressing environmental justice issues in Somerville? What actions do you plan to take in order to address those issues?

There are several: airborne pollutants near highways, urban heat island effect, and increased flooding.

Most directly related to public health are the airborne pollutants, and I have supported the efforts of our state delegation to get barriers installed along I-93 to mitigate those impacts on local residents. I also support the grounding of McGrath Highway and doing anything we can to reduce through traffic in Somerville; that puts an enormous amount of particulate pollution into the air which causes and exacerbates health issues in residents near those high-traffic corridors.

Next most pressing for my district is Urban Heat Island effect, which is caused by a lack of green space and tree canopy. This is most dramatically seen in Wards 1 and 2, where tree canopy is sparse and we have seen the amount of natural green spaces actually decrease in Somerville recently, with the replacement of grass with artificial turf at Foss Park and Conway Park, where this effect is already worst. While field access is important, these choices are going to exacerbate the Urban Heat Island effect which makes Wards 1 and 2 significantly hotter during the summer than other parts of Somerville and the surrounding area. That effect results in higher energy costs for the residents of those wards and creates negative health outcomes for our most vulnerable residents. We should be building a bubble-enclosed fields complex in Innerbelt, and using the tops of buildings and parking garages for turf fields, rather than replacing what little grass area we have with plastic.

Finally, climate change means that increased flooding is going to impact the residents of Wards 1, 2, and 4 in the next 10 years. The city's Climate Change Vulnerability Analysis points this out very clearly, to the point where residents may even be displaced by these events unless we take

action. I'm glad to see the investments in stormwater management happening in Ward 2 in Union Square and Brickbottom, but we need to be looking closely at the future of the Amelia Earhart dam on the Mystic and what long-range planning we need to do as a city to prepare for a future with more extreme weather events and a rising sea level, which could put many of our low-income residents (and critical public health infrastructure) underwater in the next half-century.

Police budget and SROs

What is your vision for public safety and policing in our community, including schools?

We need to change our approach to law enforcement, and I've been a leader in this work to date among our elected officials. We have come to rely on 911 as a "single point of contact" to address concerns far beyond what our police department is suited to address.

We need to remove police from our schools, but also to provide non-police resources in the community which allow urgent and emergency responses from unarmed responders to address a whole host of community requests. This kind of response model is not unprecedented, as CAHOOTS (in Portland) and MACRO (in Oakland) are showing; they do however need to be rooted in community partnerships and not just investing police authority in a different costume.

Our concept of "law enforcement" and the need to meet public concerns is very far from our reality of what actually constitutes a sense of "public safety". In fact, our Inspectional Services Department is already a pre-eminent Law Enforcement body within the city: they respond to about half the number of requests for service that our Police Dept does each year with about 10% of the staffing of our SPD, and those calls for service affect quality of life and public safety in ways that are perhaps less dramatic, but certainly not less impactful.

My vision for public safety looks much like a well-resourced fire department which responds urgently to active fires, augmented by a proactive fire prevention department working in conjunction with our Inspectional Services Building Division to proactively reduce the root causes and material conditions that lead to many fires. We have that, and it has worked well to prevent many tragedies. Likewise, for violent personal crimes I feel a first responder police department can only be successful if their mission is limited in scope and augmented by a network of proactive community services that intercept conflict and prevent the root causes of violent crime, and operates in support of unarmed responders who can offer assistance best suited to our community's needs to address the host of other calls for service which currently are directed to armed police officers.

Affordable housing

How do you think the city can address living conditions for lower income residents of Somerville?

There's a lot of approaches we've taken that are making a difference right now - the Condo Conversion Ordinance and Zoning Overhaul have reduced competition from condo-flip developers in the neighborhoods. In addition, the zoning overhaul opened up substantial density near the squares and transit which is resulting in hundreds of affordable (subsidized) units becoming in the next few years.

That said, purchase prices continue to skyrocket and rents are very high. The Somerville Community Land Trust will be an important tool for creating long-term, permanently affordable, community-owned housing, but it will take decades to make an impact. In the short term, I'll continue to fight for rent control and other options at the state level, and increase funding to the Office of Housing Stability to help tenants. I've also been working directly with our Sewer and Water department on a new assistance program which refunds low-income residents for their Water and Sewer bills, which are likely to double over the next decade. It's important to point out that this program will NOT be asset-tested, only income-based - which means that elderly residents on fixed incomes will not be disqualified simply because the house their family bought 40 years ago has skyrocketed in value.

To make a big difference in the next few years though, we need to get more aggressive in our investment in creating subsidized housing. I'd like to see the city embark on a program of buying land and building public housing. This would allow us to shape development to be more climate resilient, house our essential city employees within our community, and provide job training and employment to local residents through a public works program while also building permanently affordable housing that will serve the community for the next 100 years.

Supporting undocumented students

How do you think our city should ensure the safety and wellbeing of undocumented families and students.

I'm happy to say here for the first time that I've been working with the Somerville Police Dept to eliminate any reporting to COPLINK for residents 12 and younger, and that the policy is finally in place. Prior to now, *any* police interaction with a resident (of any age) was documented and uploaded to a regional law enforcement database (COPLINK) which is directly accessible by DHS and ICE. While I'd like us to discontinue the use of this technology entirely, removing those data uploads younger prevents kids from being labeled as gang members before they become teenagers (or even legally able to be charged with crimes), and places an additional barrier to DHS/ICE targeting families in Somerville. This is especially important given the continued presence of SPD in our school district at this time.

I'm obviously pleased with our Welcoming Community Ordinance (sec 2-6, link: https://library.municode.com/ma/somerville/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIICOOR_CH_2AD_ARTIINGE_S2-6SOWECOOR) that we passed over several objections from the mayor, but there's much more to be done. I'll continue to work with advocates for state level action around driver's licenses and fighting federal "REAL ID" requirements.

There are certainly a wealth of opportunities we are missing in the school district to better serve undocumented families and students, even though I do believe the district - and certainly individual teachers! - are making attempts. I'm hesitant to tread into School Committee territory too much, so I'll simply say that I've urged the School Committee for several years, especially last year, to increase their program requests and offered my support for any expanded budget requests they make. The financial relationship between the Mayor, City Council, and School Committee with relation to the schools budget is a rather complicated one, but my understanding of the city charter and state law is that the School Committee and Council have more joint power over the total allocation of the Schools budget than in any part of the city budget; I think it's worth exploring and using that authority.

Addressing basic issues of food security, housing security, and internet access are all essential to serving Somerville's families better, regardless of documentation status.

Hate crimes and equity in our city

If elected, what steps would you take to make our city and schools safe for people of all racial, ethnic, religious, gender and sexual identities.

We do need a reporting structure to keep records about hate crime incidents in the city to assist organizations and federal agencies in tracking these incidents which are all too often unreported. But that reporting structure needs to be separate from the harmful interactions that people have experienced in our current police department to be successful. I propose reforming our reporting process which currently requires in-person interaction at the police HQ with uniformed, sworn, and armed personnel.

General questions

How do you plan to involve residents and employees in the decision making process in our city?

This is a real challenge, and I've strived to meet it on one front by focusing on hyper-local engagement and accessibility. While I only speak English conversationally, which makes other language outreach more complicated, I have hosted over 150 neighborhood meetings in the past 3 years on a wide variety of topics to solicit neighborhood engagement and feedback. In addition, I have held office hours for two hours each week - every week - for my entire term in office to make myself available for questions and help residents navigate city processes, and enrolled assistance from constituents with other language competencies to help bridge my language gap.

In terms of involving residents in the decision making processes, greater language and translation access for the city council is absolutely necessary - "on request" translation is not cutting it. But even more important is empowering and diversifying the boards and commissions we currently have in place in Somerville; these boards were defunded during Mayor Curtatone's tenure and that cut off many powerful voices in our city and important avenues for public

engagement in city processes.

What infrastructure changes do you think need to be prioritized in the next 5, 10 and 25 years?

With regard to infrastructure I think I answered it somewhat above, but we have several Billion Dollar Problems facing the city in that regard. Our water and sewer services alike are over a century old and are failing, putting us at risk of federal EPA enforcement actions that would quadruple our residents water bills overnight. Our streets are in horrid condition and with 100 miles of streets in Somerville, we are paving less than 1 mile per year at our current pace; we need to do better. The natural gas infrastructure under our streets continues to be leak-prone and counter to our environmental goals, our street designs are dangerous to pedestrians and cyclists, we lack affordable housing, and we are far behind in our fields and green space creation goals from the original Somervision process.

What is needed is a massive public works program - one that trains Somerville's high school students and employs Somerville's residents, not out-of-town contractors - in a complete overhaul of our public realm (above and below ground) to meet the challenges of our city moving into 2040 and beyond.

What do you think that the city should do to diversify staff in leadership positions across the city?

This is as simple - and as hard - as recruiting and retaining BIPOC talent for these positions; that means paying people better, providing tangible benefits (including potentially local housing), and then listening to them when they try to tell us about cultural problems in our institutions - schools and otherwise. In our frontline teaching staff we don't pay enough to compensate teachers enough to convince them to work in a system which needs work on the equity front; we need to make SPS a more supportive environment for BIPOC educators, and compensate our educators better. In leadership we defer too often to credentialed consultant-class expertise rather than cultivating talent from within. We need to recognize as a city that the reasons our staff lacks diversity include both cultural and economic factors, and work to make this city a better place to work for BIPOC job candidates and a better place to live for BIPOC residents.

What are your funding priorities with respect to our city and our schools?

Housing Stability, Infrastructure Improvement, and Expanded Public Services. In particular with our schools, I stood with the paras and SEU in their fight for a better wage, and believe even more can be done to compensate our educators and staff. With regard to COVID19, I have encouraged the School Committee to seek increased funding across the board, including for mental health and student support services, and stand ready to support them from the Finance Committee chair.

Yes/No

Will you support the extension of Massachusetts' recently updated PFML to city employees?
YES

Will you support Somerville's status as a sanctuary city? **YES**

Following DESE and Commissioner Riley's mandates around school reopening, will you support the state's authority to override local decision making in school systems? **NO**

Will you support expanding the school budget by 10%? **YES**

Will you support expanding the school budget by decreasing the police budget? **YES**

Will you support equity of class sizes across the district? **YES**

Will you support the removal of cops at school campuses, especially the high school? **YES**

Will you support continued student access to technology (post-pandemic)? **YES**

Will you support more opportunities for students to learn a second language in elementary schools? **YES**

Will you support adopting authentic and comprehensive Restorative Justice practices in schools?? **YES**

Will you support having on-site translators and interpreters in schools and city buildings? **YES**