

Union Square Main Streets Candidate Questionnaire

This questionnaire will give you a chance to weigh in concepts and challenges faced by small businesses in Somerville. After the September preliminary, we plan to issue a second questionnaire which will dive deeper into more in depth questions and issues that our small business community faces.

Email *

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What is your name? *

JT Scott

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What position are you running for? *

Ward 2 City Councilor

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Section 1 | The role of small business

The section below will focus on the role you feel small businesses should play in Somerville

1) In what practical ways, if any, do you think the City of Somerville should treat locally-owned, independent small businesses differently than other sized or formula businesses? *

It should be both easier to locate and start a locally owned independent business (through zoning and permitting). We have done that to an extent in the 2019 zoning overhaul, but we could do much better at helping local small businesses through the startup process. Economic Development should have staff dedicated to helping usher local startups through the processes and providing feedback on how those processes can be streamlined. I spend a fair amount of time helping small local startups navigate some truly slow and intimidating city processes.

2) Should business owners and employees receive the same level of support and responsiveness from the city as residents receive? *

Everyone deserves a prompt response to inquiries to ISD or Planning, for example; not many get one. I don't think the city's responsiveness - particularly during COVID - has met either businesses' or residents' expectations.

3) Explain how you align with the premises of the 15-minute city *

The 15-minute city is based on the idea that "everyone living in a city should have access to essential urban services within a 15 minute walk or bike." Learn more at [15minutecity.com](https://www.15minutecity.com)

We're blessed that all of ward 2 has access to high quality grocery stores in under a 10 minute walk, between Market Basket and the Star Markets on Beacon and in Twin City - and the strong centers of commercial activity in Union Square, Porter Square, Inman Square and Twin City serve a large variety of needs. However, we can do even more to encourage essential services provided by small businesses to populate throughout our neighborhoods. That's why I created the Small Business Overlay, a zoning option which allows for small shops to start along the corridors between those centers, on Washington and Beacon St among others, lowering the regulatory barrier to siting new service businesses. We can and should do more, particularly in lowering the number of steps needed for locally owned small businesses to start and ideally removing all requirements for Special Permit approval for the vast majority of these businesses.

4) Describe the ideal role of business support groups in Somerville. *

USMS does an excellent job of working with the city to coordinate and host festivals and events which draw attention to the range of small businesses that call our corner of Somerville home. In addition to that, I've found USMS to be very helpful in gathering input from business operators as to what practical day-to-day challenges they're facing and advocating for structural changes that can improve the vitality of our city. One vital role which our Economic Development department has *not* been filling particularly well is in providing resources to help new businesses navigate the startup process, and that's a role that I think business support groups could play an incredibly helpful part in addressing as our new Mayor hopefully works to rectify this longstanding situation.

5) Have you ever been responsible for someone else's paycheck? Please explain. *

Absolutely. I've been a brick-and-mortar small business owner for 12 years, and supported my employees and their families throughout.

6) Do you believe increasing the price of metered parking will help, hurt, or not affect businesses? Explain your thinking. *

Perhaps paradoxically, higher metered parking prices (and robust enforcement) tends to help small businesses. The purpose of the meters isn't to raise revenue, it's to ensure that spaces are available during the day for multiple users - like people who are just driving in to access the services in the area briefly and move on. Raising meter rates has been shown in multiple cities (including Boston's recent pilot project) to increase the number of available parking spaces throughout the day, reduce double-parking, and reduce resident-permit-only violations in the surrounding area. When spaces are more commonly available, it encourages people more often to swing in for a quick visit to an urban center rather than go outward to a more suburban shopping destination.

Reducing VMT is going to be vital for our future as a city, and increasing surface parking capacity isn't a viable solution going forward. With that in mind, higher parking meter rates ensure that spaces are available for those residents who are reliant on vehicles (including disabled and elderly residents) to access businesses in places like Union Square.

Section 2 | Ranking small business priorities

The section below asks you to rank certain priorities from 1 -3. We recognize that you may be in favor of (or not in favor of) many of these choices; after each set of choices, you'll be able to explain your answer. The end of this section will allow you an opportunity to explain your priorities without having to rank them against one another.

7) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Reducing the time it takes for all businesses to get their city permits and licenses	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ensuring that the licensing and permitting process is equitable	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Creating a business focused version of SomerStat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

Everyone should be able to get through this process faster, but the larger resources of large businesses mean they have greater ability to weather delays and are also more likely to hire lawyers and additional staff to "push" the processes and department personnel. Small businesses don't have the time or muscle for that - and so while there is certainly a need to improve turnaround time on every licensing/permitting process, we should also make assistance available to small businesses and find other ways to expedite the process for them.

8) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Increasing the commercial tax base	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increasing the overall number of jobs available in Somerville	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Decreasing the number of employees in Somerville who make less than the current 100% Area Median Income (AMI)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

Only 15% of Somerville's residents have jobs in Somerville. This leads to a city which has a very imbalanced tax base, but also one that has exacerbated traffic and parking problems as well as the environmental detriments of the same.

Not to be pedantic, but the Median income is the income that exactly half of the employees in Somerville earn above it and half earn below it. Our goal should be to raise the overall AMI, particularly by increasing salaries in the lower half.

9) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Using city funds to pay for permanent public art created by artists from marginalized communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Creating multi-language wayfinding	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Creating infrastructure for festivals like stages and lighting systems	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

I love a good art installation, and it can bring distinction to a square, but I can't count how many times I've been stopped to give directions or help someone find a business in Union Square - frequently in another language. Having a better set of resources than my mangled Portuguese would be a real boon to the area. In terms of the infrastructure for festivals, I've been delighted by the success of the ONCE Outdoors installation in Boynton Yards this year, and I absolutely recognize that every dollar we spend on creative arts programming - like the Evolution of Hip Hop Festival or Nepali Cultural Festival or many other Arts Council events - returns to the city many times over in terms of economic benefit and business traffic. Having open spaces with the capacity to easily host more of these events (putting event infrastructure in plazas) would lead to even more activation of our public realm.

10) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Creating specific affordable commercial spaces, similar to inclusionary housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fining landlords who hold property vacant for two long	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rewarding landlords who lease to small businesses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

Land banking - holding spaces vacant overlong in hopes of capturing a higher-rent tenant or future redevelopment value - is predatory and harmful; it reduces supply and drives up median rents, and the vacant spaces themselves create "missing teeth" in our business districts which drive down interest, vitality, and activity for their neighbors. We should absolutely do more to address this. I've been sorely disappointed that the Vacant Property Ordinance we passed in 2019 has been sidelined due to the pandemic, and I hope that next year we can move more aggressively on encouraging property owners to fill their commercial spaces quickly with higher fees for vacancy inspections.

11) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Creating more dining parklets/pedestrian streets	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Creating more bus lanes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Creating more bike lanes	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

Activating the public realm is priority one, and enabling more bike/ped access to businesses drives up activity in the squares. While adding bus lanes and capacity would be nice, and we can continue to look for opportunities where they make sense to increase frequency and reliability of bus service, our limited street space is probably better utilized by reducing VMT across the board - which would also improve bus line performance.

12) Which of the following statements best represents the most important goal of zoning?

	1st	2nd	3rd
Protecting the character of Somerville's neighborhoods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Creating economic opportunity	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supporting equity	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

I believe the character of the neighborhood is defined more by its residents and businesses than by the buildings themselves. We need to expand Somerville's commercial tax base, and nowhere in the city is doing more than we have done in the past 4 years here in Union Square. With that said, equity is supported by more than just inclusionary zoning requirements - it's also important to enable small locally-owned businesses to start up easily and thrive, and ensuring that gentrification isn't accelerated as the surrounding residential neighborhoods feel besieged by the construction and development happening in our squares.

13) Please rank the following ways for improving the appeal of Somerville's business districts

	1st	2nd	3rd
Decreasing construction noise, dust, and detours	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Decreasing rodent activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Investing in maintenance and upkeep of public infrastructure	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

14) Besides the cost of rent, please rank the following in order of the greatest challenge to small businesses in Somerville:

	1st	2nd	3rd
Hiring locally	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competing with national brands	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Rising operational costs	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices.

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15) Please use this space to list your top priorities without the need to rank them against one another.

My campaign - and my tenure as Councilor - has been all about Affordability, Accessibility, Accountability, and Transparency. We need to continue to expand the opportunity for small businesses to flourish, including by fostering the creation of new commercial spaces for businesses of all sizes and improving both the transportation network and subsurface infrastructure around Union Square. Operationally, the highest priority needs to be given to improving both the inspection and permitting processes in the city and removing invisible hurdles and costs to starting a business in the square. As someone who has been through those processes myself as a small business owner, nobody understands better just how difficult and costly that can be.

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16) Should you wish, please use this space to share other thoughts you feel are relevant to our small business community.

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