

# 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? \*

Jake Wilson

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What position are you running for? \*

Councilor-at-Large

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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? \*

The great thing about profits from locally-owned, independent small businesses is that they tend to stay in the community. We're talking about our friends and neighbors' livelihoods, and these are worth protecting.

Regional and national chains enjoy competitive advantages because of their size and scale. They know how to navigate things like licensing and inspections and how to handle everything from insurance to employment law.

Whereas a Somervillian putting up a shingle for their small, local business is going to need to learn to navigate all of these things. And even an experienced small business owner isn't going to have the same resources at their disposal when issues inevitably arise. And that's where I think we can do much better by our local small business owners, by helping them navigate these processes and deal with things that come up in the course of running their business.

I liken it to my experience in this campaign as a newcomer to politics. Incumbents and people who have worked on campaigns before -- theirs or the campaigns of others -- have a are familiar with how everything works. I'm thankful for the people who took the time to sit down with me and go over basics and specifics. And I really appreciated resources like the OCPF staff, Mass Alliance candidate training, and the wonderful employees in the Elections Department at City Hall.

As a small business owner myself -- and the spouse of a small business owner -- I'd love to see those kind of resources and assistance made available to the small business community in our city. With property values making this city a place where it's increasingly more difficult to start a new business or to simply exist here as an artisan or small business, this is more important than ever.

Organizations like Union Square Main Streets, East Somerville Main Streets, and the Chamber of Commerce provide invaluable assistance to local business. We need to be building a city-wide network of support for local small business that involves licensing, permitting, and inspections. Whether for those taking the plunge into entrepreneurialism or commercial spaces and events that meet the need, City Hall should be a good partner by reducing red tape and making processes as streamlined and user-friendly as possible.

This means making sure both the relevant departments and the Licensing Commission are fully staffed and able to carry out their work. And we should be listening to those going through this about their experience and refining the process going forward.

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

Yes, anyone interacting with our city government should have an expectation of a responsive and helpful experience. Whether to a resident or a local business, the City of Somerville should be providing helpful information and assistance if it can, or pointing people in the right direction if that's not possible. Even when the answer isn't the one that had been hoped for, it's still important to hear back in a timely and clear manner.

The needs of business owners might differ in many instances from residents, but the same expectation of rapid, quality service and professionalism should apply to all interactions with the city.

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'll see how we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, but prior to the past 19 months, cities were having a real renaissance after decades of suburban flight. Let's hope this continues as the pandemic ends, because this rebirth of cities is good for our society -- and our planet.

Any why are we living in cities if not for being close to things and being able to get around conveniently? This is why urban real estate listings frequently include the WalkScore in property listings. And why the number of people getting around on bikes continues to rise.

I love The 15-Minute City's embrace of density. We often hear about the downside to our city's density, so it's refreshing to hear it talked about as a strength.

I understand the project's de-emphasis on mobility and I think it's a noble goal to have folks living and working in the same neighborhood. But given the lack of opportunity for spreading out and growing in our city and Somerville's position relative to major job centers in Cambridge and Boston, we need to accept the reality that we're always going to have a decent chunk of our population commuting to jobs outside of their neighborhood. So in that respect I do see some daylight between The 15-Minute City and Somerville's situation with regard to mobility.

But overall I believe The 15-Minute City is a fantastic way to look at the appeal of cities in general and Somerville specifically. I've found myself talking this up to people on the campaign trail recently and referring people to the website, and for the most part I think these are values we should be embracing here locally.

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

Doing anything completely by yourself is daunting, which is why it's great to have a support system around local business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs. There's nothing like being able to get informed advice and guidance from someone with experience in that area. As a first-time political candidate, the support and advice from veterans of local political campaigns has been incredibly helpful.

Local business support groups also help with networking and can lead to symbiotic relationships between businesses. I would support having a liaison in City Hall to encourage these groups and assist members with accessing city services and navigating licensing, permitting, and inspection processes.

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

As President of Somerville Youth Soccer I personally paid the Roving Academy Instructor each week using organizational funds. Additionally, I was in charge of the organization when an Executive Director was hired, so technically I was responsible for paying his full-time salary out of the organization's funds.

And my company, Winter Hill Media, has had paid employees. These typically weren't principal paychecks for the people we hired to cover events as journalists, but they were paychecks to people doing work for us.

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

If all we do is increase parking rates across the board, this likely will hurt local businesses. However, if this is part of a re-think of how we're using current metered parking spots in business districts, it could end up helping. I support taking our current inventory of on-street, metered parking spots in the heart of business districts and creating more handicapped spots and combination loading zone and senior parking spots -- at least during certain hours of the day, when seniors tend to do most of their trips and deliveries are made to restaurants and retail.

Then we can increase the price of metered parking in parking areas on the periphery of business districts, raising revenues while also incentivizing those who can walk or bike but choose instead to drive to do the desired behavior. This will become easier as our walking and biking infrastructure improves in the city.

## 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

All three are goals we need to be pursuing. But if we're ranking them by urgency, I would start with the bare minimum expectation of equity, fairness, and transparency in how licenses and permits are handled. Then I'd look at refining the process to make it easier and faster. Then I'd be looking to see data on Somerville businesses gathered, processed, and reported in a way that allows us to do things like gauge the health of our local business community and track progress on the first two items, to know whether we're making any impact.

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8) Please rank the following in order of priority

	1st	2nd	3rd
Increasing the commercial tax base	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increasing the overall number of jobs available in Somerville	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" 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

Increasing the commercial tax base has long been a priority for our city. We're finally starting to see some of the returns on that investment, and there are very promising commercial and mixed-use developments in the works that should help balance our tax burden more equally between residential and commercial property. It's definitely a challenge to create more jobs here locally with the labor market so tight, but this situation won't last forever. We need to have a plan in place for growing our city's job base to grow Somerville businesses and reduce the commutes of Somervillians. Finally, while I think bringing up people to 100% of the AMI is a noble goal, first I'd be concerned with helping those in our city living below the poverty line.

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

We're a divided city, and language is one factor in that. With such a large Spanish-speaking population, multi-language signage is one way to make our immigrant community feel welcome and ensure that they feel like a part of the city. This is a relatively easy lift that could matter a great deal to a lot of people. The many festivals that happen here are one of the truly unique things about Somerville. I'm supportive of creating an infrastructure that improves the experience for everyone at these events. As a supporter of the arts, I'd also like to see our public art reflect all members of the community, so while I'm marking that third, that doesn't mean it's not a worthy use of funds and efforts.

## 10) Please rank the following in order of priority

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

## Please use this space to explain your choices

While the stresses of the pandemic on business have made commercial spaces more affordable here, it's still a major barrier to entry for prospective businesses in Somerville. The success of Bow Market with its pop-up spaces and smaller rental spaces shows that this model works. I'd love to see it duplicated elsewhere in the city, ideally with a lower cost per square foot for brand-new businesses. I'm a big fan of incentivizing consumer behavior, so a program that subsidizes landlords who rent to small businesses is one way to tackle the affordability issue. And let me just say that as a neighbor of the former Star Market site in Winter Hill, I can tell you that it's incredibly frustrating having prominent commercial real estate sitting empty and dormant for a long period of time. I'm absolutely in favor of levying fines for property owners who do that, but we also should be proactively looking to connect those owners with potential buyers and lessees.

11) Please rank the following in order of priority

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

Please use this space to explain your choices

I marked bus lanes as the lowest priority, but that's more a reflection on what we've done already and what remains possible in terms of dedicated bus lanes. One possible solution is the idea of Bus Only hours in some lanes during rush hour in key areas of congestion. I'd really like to tackle a key driver of congestion on Somerville streets: the cut-through commuter traffic that makes up an estimated 70 percent of vehicles on our city streets in morning and evening rush hour. By making it tougher for commuters to cut through our city, we'll make it quicker, easier, and safer to get around Somerville. I do support adding bike lanes whenever feasible on our relatively narrow streets. As with dining parklets, this gets caught up in the zero-sum game with vehicles and, specifically, parking. So we'll need to balance those interests. Nowhere does the competition between vehicles and pedestrians play out as obviously as in our main squares. Both Davis Square and Union Square are both pedestrian destinations and confluences of relatively important streets. Ultimately, we need to decide what the purpose of these areas should be. I support prioritizing pedestrians over vehicles, particularly in Davis Square, where there are main thoroughfares nearby on either side of the square in Broadway and Massachusetts Avenue. Union Square is slightly more complicated because of Prospect Street and Somerville Avenue, but I believe there are ways to push cut-through traffic over to the McGrath Highway to help alleviate that.

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

The history of zoning is full of shameful episodes where it was used in the worst ways. But zoning is just a tool, and when paired with a drive to do right by all people, I believe it can be a force for good. We need to start with ensuring that the aims of zoning reflect the values of our community, then we can get started with the nuts and bolts of it. We all love local character, but I've seen that argument used in bad faith to obstruct good projects that would improve the quality of a neighborhood. If we do things right and ensure that developers listen to the community when presenting proposals and incorporate that feedback into changes to those proposals, I believe we create economic opportunity while also keeping neighborhoods' unique character alive. One thing I believe to be particularly important is supporting businesses owned by immigrants, women, and people of color. Historically, Somerville has had an impressive number of these businesses, and we don't want to see that imperiled by the changes in the city.

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 checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Decreasing rodent activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Investing in maintenance and upkeep of public infrastructure	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices

I know from personal experience trying to access business during construction and from friends who own businesses that were impacted by construction that it's hugely disruptive and detrimental to a business to be located in a construction zone. It's no accident that we saw the #Loyal2Local campaign during this period of major construction projects throughout the city. So whatever we can do to minimize the impact of construction in business districts, we need to be doing that as a city. Repairing and replacing our aging infrastructure is always going to be a concern, but if we can do regular maintenance then we might be able to put off those projects as long as possible so we aren't in a constant state of construction. Despite marking rodent activity as the third priority here, rest assured that taking on our city's rodent problem is a key issue for my campaign and something I'll look to work on personally as a City Councilor. I'd love to serve on the Rodent Issues Special Committee and would make sure we commit resources to combating Somerville's rats.

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 type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Competing with national brands	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rising operational costs	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please use this space to explain your choices.

The current labor shortage has left businesses desperate for workers. Combined with supply chain issues and rising costs, it's forcing businesses to decide whether they're going to raise prices and pass these higher costs on to customers or absorb those higher costs themselves. For the first time in generations, inflation is a very real concern. Meanwhile, our small businesses face unfair competition from national (and even regional) chains due to those businesses' supply chain advantages and their lower costs due to their buying power. Encouraging a culture of shopping locally is something I want to see us do in our community. Hiring locally is a great practice, but in the current labor market most employers are going to need to hire whoever they can find.

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

From my conversations with small business owners, I hear loud and clear the frustration with getting licenses, permits, and inspections from the city. It's clear this is an area badly in need of reform, and City Council is uniquely poised to address these with the Licenses and Permits Committee and general oversight of these matters. I would make this a priority as a Councilor-At-Large to work on reforming these areas.

We want to support and encourage the creation of new small businesses and the growth of existing small businesses. I will support finding the funding for new staffing required to liaise with our business community and small business support groups.

It's clear there's a demand for smaller commercial spaces for pop-ups and small businesses. We need to be creating more of these sites, so I'm in favor of measures and programs to make this happen. Whether it's incentives to landlords or making sure zoning supports new projects that create these spaces, this should be a priority in our city.

I know it's been a rough few years here with all the construction, but it just underscores the need to build and maintain the necessary infrastructure to support our business districts. As your City Councilor, I'll always engage with business owners to best understand what they need and work to make that happen.

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

I'm concerned that in this election, not nearly enough attention has been paid to Somerville's small businesses. I include my own campaign in that criticism, so in the final weeks of the campaign, I'm looking to set that right. As such, I'm making an effort to engage business owners in conversations about their experiences and to let them know what I plan on doing for small business in Somerville. I would encourage any local business owner reading this to get in touch with me at [jake@jakeforsomerville.org](mailto:jake@jakeforsomerville.org).

This form was created inside of Union Square Main Streets.

Google Forms