

Candidate Questionnaire: People-centered Streets

Basic Information

If you would like to review a PDF of the entire questionnaire, you may find it here:

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/livablestreetsalliance/pages/1689/attachments/original/1503520445/Candidate_Questionnaire_Somerville_-_People-centered_streets.pdf?1503520445

Candidate name (first and last) *

Stephanie Hirsch

Office that the candidate is seeking (include district number if applicable) *

Alderman at Large, Somerville, MA

Name of person completing the questionnaire (first and last) *

Stephanie Hirsch

Name and EIN of the committee (if applicable)

Campaign to Elect Stephanie Hirsch

Campaign email address *

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About You

1. Do you personally walk to destinations in your community? If yes, how often do you do so?

Yes

No

Comments

My family of five has lived without a car for six years, and so we walk or take the bus everywhere. As our car-free life has evolved, we have shifted to doing as many activities as possible in the neighborhood, including shopping, going to the dentist/doctor, attending school, and going to work. My husband and I walk at least four miles each day. We rely on walking or taking the bus (with the T sometimes) to get around. We use zipcars about once a month and taxis a few time a year to get to the airport on early flights before the T starts running. We take the 86, 87, 91, and CT2 most frequently, combined with the Red or Orange lines. The real-time bus arrival information, combined with mobile technology, has been transformative, in terms of the practicality of relying on busses. We have not ever adjusted to biking with kids, though would love to if the bike infrastructure improves and/or if we can gain confidence with/knowledge about biking in traffic.

2. Do you personally travel by/ use public transit to get around? If yes, which trains and buses do you routinely use?

Yes

No

Comments

See above

3. Do you personally bike in your community or commute by bike to other communities? If no, would you be willing to give it a try periodically, e.g. once or twice per month?

Yes

No

Comments

See above. I have tried to bike, but have not felt confident enough to do it regularly. Better infrastructure and more confidence on my part might help get me biking.

Policy proposals

Please articulate concrete and feasible policy and budgetary proposals to advance the following goals. If you would like to submit supporting materials, please submit them on page 6 at the end of the questionnaire or email your proposals to info@visionzerocoalition.org.

Note that there is a glossary available at www.visionzerocoalition.org/glossary_for_2017_candidate_questionnaire

*indicates a definition available in the glossary

1. How will you work to establish funding for the infrastructure changes needed to slow traffic on your community's streets, and improve crosswalks and intersections to make them safer for people who are walking and using mobility assistive devices?

In Somerville, we have a very long list of capital project needs. I believe the best way we can get to road infrastructure changes is with these steps:

- Major road reconstruction: The City has reconstructed major roads, including Somerville Ave, East Broadway, and Beacon Street, and has more reconstructions planned. Those are very important, but it takes quite a few years to piece together funding sources and achieve sufficient consensus from abutters and commuters about the street design. Some of the major road and square redesign will happen as part of neighborhood planning processes, such as in Winter Hill (upper Broadway), Union Square (Washington, Somerville Ave, Prospect, Webster, McGrath), Sullivan and Assembly Squares, and the many other areas that will be experiencing major development in the next decade. Our leaders in the Administration, on the Board, and in the community will need to pay close attention to the pedestrian/bike needs of both the neighborhood and of the network.
- Guidelines for chapter 90 road repair/reconstruction: The City regularly resurfaces streets each year, funded by Chapter 90 or the City's general fund. We should, I think, develop guidelines for when street resurfacing should also involve creating curb-cuts, expanding sidewalks, adding separated bike lanes, or improving signaling.
- Infrastructure payment for smaller developments: Currently, large developments will pay into an infrastructure fund or negotiate a traffic mitigation plan, such as installation of a traffic calming table at a nearby crosswalk. I would like to see this obligation applied to investor/developers who renovate or build smaller buildings (particularly investors who are not also owner occupants), so that they too must help fund infrastructure changes and traffic calming.
- Coordination and phasing of projects: As the City works to change parts of the city, we will need to continue to figure out the connectivity of the projects and to see how streets that neighbor big projects can/should get changed as part of the project. For example, the City is just beginning work on the new high school. Nearby, Gilman Square and Winter Hill will be undergoing design planning and changes. Bike and pedestrian infrastructure near the high school and how it connects to nearby streets will be important to consider. This is, of course, very difficult because of all of the moving pieces and unknowns. Nevertheless, it's critical to having all the parts add up to a network that works well.
- Continued advocacy for State investment: We will need to continue to lobby the State to make good on their commitment to the Community Path extension and to support new investments in bike/pedestrian infrastructure.
- Pedestrian cut-through paths: I am interested in looking for ways the City can secure (or reclaim) right of way for pedestrians and bikes to cut across residential blocks, especially the

city's many super-blocks (like Prescott, Irving, Wallace, Albion, Hudson) and especially to link neighborhoods to open spaces. I have proposed that the City use CPA funding to look for "paper streets" which are city owned property not currently used by the city and to consider where it could secure right-of-way for a pedestrian path.

- Real-time traffic engineering problem-solving: Because of the cost of these more significant engineering changes, we should also pursue less expensive changes using data to inform incremental changes. Building on its prior data-informed efforts, Somerville could create a Transit Stat (or "Traffic Stat", or "Travel Stat") division to increase focus on our streets and modes of travel. Steps could include:
 - o Data: Secure a source of real-time data on vehicular traffic (e.g. data sharing required from Uber/Lyft as a condition of them operating in Somerville, negotiated with WAZE, or from a cell phone data source). The City may also be able to ask bikers to share GPS data from their commutes;
 - o Traffic engineering: Invest in in-house traffic engineering staff capacity; and
 - o Incremental change: Use its expertise in data-informed decision making to make incremental, low-cost changes to streets and squares to achieve specific goals, including: reduction of cut-through traffic, increased reported feeling of safety for bikers/pedestrians, and reduced accidents of all type. Those change can include efforts that have already been tested with some proven results, including moving parking outside of the bike lane to create a separated space, creating temporary and then permanent traffic calming features, such as planters to narrow large intersections as is conceived of in the most awesome Neighborways efforts, and splitting streets in half with different travel direction to prevent non-resident cars from cutting through. It also allows us to experiment with new approaches to traffic calming and increased pedestrian/bike safety, such as temporary or permanent street closures and increased car/pedestrian street sharing. Being a community with institutional knowledge of using and responding to real-time traffic data will also enable us to be an early adopter of new technologies, such as driverless cars.
- Encouragement and incentives for reduction of car ownership: To increase the demand for infrastructure improvements, I believe we need to pay attention to other systems that relate to people's need for transportation options. I believe we should take these steps:
 - o Promote complete neighborhoods: Other municipal policies impact the need for households to have one or more car. For example, a student assignment model that encourages families to choose schools across town will increase the number of people driving twice a day. Similarly, athletic leagues in which teams compete with far-flung suburbs vs. teams from other parts of Somerville means families need a car if their kids want to play hockey, soccer, etc. Neighborhoods that have grocery stores, dog parks, dentists, small businesses, libraries etc. are easier to live in without a car, as residents can easily walk to get their needs met. Some people will want and need a car, but for those who don't want one or more cars, we should design neighborhood and systems of education, employment, shopping, etc. so that it's easy to live without a car. Living, attending school, shopping, and working in one

neighborhood has many other benefits as well, in terms of community building and promotion of small businesses.

- o Ways to get out of town: Ironically, maybe, some of the people who might be most interested in giving up their cars also want to hold onto them so that they can get into the woods on the weekend. We can build capacity for households to get out of town to help meet this need. At minimum, we can help create and curate a list of car-free vacation outings. Over time, we can try to create more connectivity to those destinations and promotions to increase the value of a town or business owner to target car-free households. I'm particularly interested in creating connections between Somerville and Fitchburg, so that people can travel from Porter to Fitchburg. We could, for example, create a Somerville-affiliated retreat center in Fitchburg that would allow people to "get out of town" on the commuter rail while still forming friendships with Somerville residents.
- o Allow people to experiment with car-free living: If I'm elected, I plan to launch a "car-free in Somerville" challenge. In 2011, my family's car got into a fender bender. I had always wanted to drive less, but usually took the car instead of walking because of the convenience. When our car got declared totaled, I told my husband, let's just try going car-free for a week. That week stretched to a month, and, over time, we found the benefits of living with a car far outweighed the costs. Our lives are less stressful and we spend less money and energy worrying about parking, maintenance, etc. We get more exercise now. However, if we hadn't experienced the fender bender which encouraged us to try going car free, we would still be driving everywhere. I'd like to create a challenge in which households can experiment with car-free living. If they want to participate, they'll park their car on a remote lot and turn over their keys. If they last the week (or whatever designated period of time), they will be rewarded with a year's membership to Zip Car, a free t-pass, or a car-free vacation. Over the week, we will feature tips of car-free living and will exchange ideas, as well as collect people's thoughts on what was easy about the week (that we can advertise) and what was hard (that we can try to fix with municipal policy).
- o Create car-free property status: An obstacle to building higher density housing, which will help address our housing affordability crisis, is people's worry about additional cars parked and additional traffic. Though many people believe that new development should have fewer parking spaces, neighbors and others are worried about the enforcement mechanism that would prevent new residents from taking up on-street parking. I understand from Somerville City planners that it's legally possible to create a permanently car-free status. That means that current and future owners and tenants may never have a car housed in Somerville, thus will never be eligible for a parking permit or curbside. If a property takes on this car-free status, owners may be able to have some additional development options, such as development of an accessory unit. Cambridge's Parking and Transportation Demand Management ordinance may be useful as a model to Somerville as we explore this idea.

Related to all these points above, while one of my top goals is reducing car reliance in Somerville and improving our bike/pedestrian infrastructure, I do also believe that it's

important to recognize differences of opinions and needs that go along with a diverse population. I hope to work to find shared benefits of reduced car traffic. As of the last time I studied the data, which was now more than 10 years ago, the majority of cars traveling through Somerville's squares at rush hour drive through Somerville without even stopping. Cut-through traffic hurts drivers, residents, and bikes/pedestrians alike, and thus is a shared point of pain. Therefore, I think reducing the volume of cut-through traffic should be a top priority. Also, I think it's important to continue bike enforcement, along with car enforcement, and make the expectations of how people will share the road more obvious and predictable, so that we reduce conflicts between bikes, cars, and pedestrians. With those caveats, I think we need to put a tremendous focus on bringing all tools to bear to change the infrastructure and culture of our city to become a model community for reduced car dependence.

2. How will you improve the reach, frequency, and quality of public transit in Somerville?

Bus service in Somerville is critical, but there's currently not enough attention or planning for this key capacity. I will work on the following steps if elected:

- **Formation of a Transportation Advisory Committee:** An advisory committee in Somerville, perhaps modeled after Cambridge's and after the amazing Somerville Bike Committee, can help collect and synthesize resident and business feedback, coordinate MBTA planning with Somerville planning, tap into local academic analytical capacity, and set and monitor progress on transit goals. The City may not currently have the staff capacity to manage a TAC, nor to carry out extensive analysis on bus transit needs or develop a vision for transit. Instead, some transit issues are getting considered as part of the larger road projects, and there are small priorities identified, such as dedicated bus lanes or transit signal priority, but there's no roadmap for a big future system. Perhaps this could be included in the duties of an additional traffic engineer as part of TravelStat. The MBTA will be starting a Service plan update, but it's not specific to Somerville, and we should have our own capacity increased before the MBTA study begins so we can piggyback on that effort.
- **North-south routes:** A frequent complaint I have heard while door knocking (as well as experienced myself almost weekly!) is the lack of bus route that connects the Winter Hill/Ten Hills neighborhood to points south, like Union Square and into Cambridge. This needs to get addressed, such as by changing the 85 route so that it extends farther north. However, the 85 (and CT2) do not run on the weekends, and a route would need to run seven days a week. Ten Hills and Winter Hill also have fewer bike lanes, which contribute to barriers in car-free travel, as do having to cross one or more highway to get to the rest of Somerville.
- **Means-tested rates:** I am interested in understanding of transit as part of a household's overall budget and as part of the affordability picture in the region, including a look at: the payment structure for people of different categories – children, seniors, low-income residents and what's the percent of their income different people pay on transit. What's the overall cost of transportation for households if they drive, take bus service, take subway service, bike/walk primarily, or do some mix of these. What's the total cost to a household if a housing unit doesn't include dedicated parking (thus lowering a monthly cost), and if the family instead depends on transit. If elected, I would like to investigate the feasibility of creating a municipal ID (that does not link to immigration status) that allows households to access different services, such as the library, recreation programming, food service in the schools, and the T. While every household would be issued one, it would enable low-income households -- or people meeting other criteria such as youth or seniors -- to access services at a lower cost. The "means test", that is verification of income, would be completed as part of the card application and then lower rates would be applied without a stigma to the user.
- **Mobility of kids and others:** I'm interested in creating ways for tweens and teens to get around the city via transit. I'm interested in educational programs, easy subsidies for ridership,

and projects like a badging system that encourages kids to try different programs in different parts of the city. Similarly, I'd like to do more to study how the systems works for passengers with mobility issues and for seniors.

3. How will you ensure fast-tracked implementation of a city-wide network of off-street paths and protected bike lanes* on major thoroughfares and connecting streets that are comfortable for people of all ages and abilities?

See above.

4. How will you increase access to biking in every neighborhood equally? What do you see as the major obstacles to encouraging ridership, and how will you address them?

See above.

5. How will you increase funding for biking infrastructure?

See above.

Yes/no questions

Note that explanations for your responses are not required, but provide useful context and are strongly encouraged.

*indicates a definition available in the glossary (available here:

http://www.visionzerocoalition.org/glossary_for_2017_candidate_questionnaire)

1. Do you support the adoption of Vision Zero* and funding for its rapid implementation? Vision Zero is an approach which aims to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries by 2030 and has been adopted by several communities, including Boston and Cambridge. *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

If elected, I hope to tap into the expertise and advocacy of Livable Streets and the Vision Zero effort to implement best practices in Somerville and test any new ideas.

2. Do you support lowering design speeds* through traffic calming measures* on downtown and neighborhood streets as a means of enhancing the safety of people walking, using mobility assistive devices, biking, and driving? This may involve the expansion and enhancement of programs like Neighborhood Slow Streets* (Boston) and Neighborways* (Somerville). *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

I have helped with our neighborhood Neighborway and will help organize other neighborhoods.

3. One key strategy that has been proven to effectively reduce speeding, improve safety, and remove racial bias in traffic enforcement in other states and countries is automated enforcement (i.e. speed cameras and red light cameras). Do you support state legislation that authorizes the use of automated enforcement in Massachusetts, per the July 2017 recommendation of the National Transportation Safety Board*? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

While working in the Mayor's Office in Somerville in around 2008, I researched the feasibility of implementing red light camera enforcement. At the time and still today, State law prohibited use of red light cameras. Issues of privacy and frustration with new fines make the move controversial and have caused some communities to reverse their implementation. Nevertheless, I believe the benefits outweigh the challenges, and I think we should continue to work towards state-level legislation that enables community use of the cameras. It does, though, require working out lots of details and having a community conversation about the trade-offs.

4. Do you support redesigning space on the street in order to improve safety for people biking by creating protected bike lanes? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

This would make my family more likely to ride and seems like, in some cases, a less expensive re-engineering process than some.

5. Do you support the increased use of curb extensions* to improve safety and visibility at intersections, even if it requires the removal of one to two parking spaces? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

See above. This should be done as part of the schedule of regular road reconstruction.

6. Do you commit to implementation of improved bike facilities identified in your community's Bike Network Plan or do you commit to the creation of a Bike Network Plan if none already exists? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

See longer narrative above.

7. Do you support the creation of the joint biking-pedestrian Grand Junction Path and Somerville Community Path through mandates, resolutions or zoning ordinances targeted at adjacent property owners? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

See longer narrative above.

8. Will you address age-friendly walking in your community -- an issue raised by many seniors as critical to their ability to "age in community"? If yes, how? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

Many of the traffic calming that helps seniors also works well for children and people with mobility issues. See longer narrative for more thoughts.

9. Do you support the restriction of on-street parking during rush hour on major thoroughfares in order to provide lanes for the exclusive use of buses? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

If buses can travel faster than cars, it will increase ridership, I believe.

10. Do you support exploring new ways of raising revenue to provide the City of Somerville with more tools to improve conditions for people walking, using mobility assistive devices, and biking (e.g. congestion pricing)? If yes, please give examples that interest you. *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

11. Do you support raising the annual fee for residential parking permits? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

At this point, Somerville residents are feeling very frustrated by new fees. I believe that we will need to find other ways, at least right now, to help people understand the value and opportunity cost of land used for parking.

12. Do you support the rollout of dynamic parking meter pricing* (i.e. increasing meter rates during periods of increased demand) in business districts to free up on-street parking and reduce cars “cruising” for open spaces? *

Yes

No

Please explain your choice

This, for example, is one way to manage parking demand that I think will face less public opposition.

Supporting materials

If you would like to submit supporting materials, please include them in the answer field below or email them to info@visionzerocoalition.org

I will email a document (and please let me know if it'd be easier if I send this whole write-up as a word or PDF.) Thank you for doing this important work!

This form was created inside of LivableStreets Alliance.

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