



2025 Municipal Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Ben Wheeler

Office Sought: City Councilor At-Large

Website: benwheelerforsomerville.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61576835983920>

Twitter: n/a

BlueSky: n/a

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/benwheelerforsomerville>

(A) Your Candidacy

1. What would be your top three priorities if elected to serve?

- a. Better housing affordability
- b. making travel across the city multi-modal, inexpensive, safe and fast
- c. providing more support for working parents during the day, (early childhood ed, afterschool).

2. What qualifies you to hold this office?

I bring a proven record of delivering results in education, public service, and community advocacy. As a technology educator and curriculum designer, I've led large-scale business initiatives (with millions of users around the world), managed budgets, and built partnerships across sectors. I've worked in government and with labor organizations, navigating complex policy issues and bringing diverse stakeholders to agreement. In Somerville, I've advanced housing solutions through the Somerville Community Land Trust, and improved youth opportunities through citywide robotics programs. I know how to analyze policy, listen to constituents, and turn ideas into action—skills that will make me an effective, accountable City Councilor.

3. What is the one policy you've seen pioneered in another city that you'd most like to adopt locally?

I'm inspired by how Seattle's "Frequent Transit Network" guarantees buses every 10–15 minutes on key routes all day. Pairing that with free fares, as Kansas City has done, would make Somerville dramatically more accessible, cut car traffic, and improve equity. Reliable, frequent, and free service would connect every neighborhood—whether you're commuting, going to school, or running errands—without the stress and expense of driving and parking. With regional cooperation, we could build a network of high-frequency routes, plus local shuttle service, that makes the bus the easiest choice for everyone.

(B) Open-Ended Policy Questions

1. Given state law, municipalities in Massachusetts are limited in their taxing power. What opportunities do you see for the city to raise revenue to support essential city services?

Given state law, our ability to raise revenue locally is limited, but there are still important steps we can take. I support pursuing state authorization for local-option taxes like a real estate transfer fee to fund affordable housing. We should strengthen PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) agreements with large nonprofits to ensure they contribute fairly to city services.

In normal years, I would say we should be more aggressive in seeking competitive state and federal grants, especially for transportation, climate resilience, and school infrastructure... but we all know how radically the Trump administration is scaling back on these, including state block grants that indirectly provide much of the funding we've sought in the past. Still, we should do everything we can to pursue any such grants available.

Finally, we should review our existing fee structures to make sure they're fair, up-to-date, and aligned with our policy goals, without creating undue burdens on small businesses or on residents with low or fixed incomes. One such area is fees on abandoned or vacant commercial properties; another is properties, both commercial and residential, that aren't taking care of snow and ice removal in the winter.

2. What are your top priorities for ensuring that all students in your city can receive a high-quality public education?

We have to treat it as a crisis that roughly half of Somerville's students are not reading at grade level. That means focusing resources and urgency on early literacy,

effective teaching, and targeted support. I will advocate for fully funding our schools and for investing in teacher training, retention, and support. We should aggressively pursue CPPI (Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative) grants to expand universal pre-K to 3 year-olds, and update zoning to make it easier and faster to open high-quality preschool and daycare facilities in all neighborhoods. Expanding afterschool, arts, and STEM programs will help engage students beyond the classroom, but none of this works without equitable resources across schools and active family partnerships. Every child in Somerville—regardless of neighborhood, income, or background—should have the foundation, opportunity, and support they need to thrive.

3. What can your city do to help protect immigrant communities under attack from ICE and ensure genuine community safety?

Somerville must comprehensively respect and enforce our sanctuary policies, limit cooperation with ICE, and ensure that all residents can use city services without fear. Crucially, we have emphatic support on this from the Somerville Police Department. I support funding legal aid, expanding language access, and partnering with community groups to protect and empower immigrant neighbors. I'm proud that Somerville is suing the Trump administration, rather than roll over to its demands; we need to stand strong for what's right.

4. What are your top three policy priorities for making your city climate-resilient, and how would you ensure that equity is at the center of any such efforts?

Somerville's climate work has to be rooted in measurable results. We should accelerate municipal fleet electrification—including buses, police, and public works vehicles—and invest in charging infrastructure to support it. Climate resilience also means green infrastructure to manage stormwater in flood-prone neighborhoods, expanding the urban tree canopy in the hottest areas, and making public housing energy-efficient and climate-ready. And we need to take a hard, fresh look at our garbage pickup, recycling and (incipient) kitchen waste pickup programs to ensure they are actually reducing waste and emissions, not just giving the appearance of action (or making emissions worse, through miles driven by gasoline-powered trucks that pollute some neighborhoods more than others). Equity must be central—prioritizing communities most affected by flooding, heat, and pollution, and involving residents directly in planning and oversight.

5. What steps would you take to reduce dependence on cars and better facilitate the ability of city residents to safely get around by walking, biking, or public transit?

We can make it far easier for Somerville residents to get around without a car by combining safe bike infrastructure, reliable local transit, and smarter parking policy. The Community Path already shows how connected, protected routes can make biking a safe daily option—we should expand that network across the city. On transit, we can build on existing resources like Tufts’ public shuttle, the Museum of Fine Arts shuttle, the Green Line “bridge-hopper,” and Door2Door’s pilot to create more frequent neighborhood connections, especially in areas MBTA buses can’t reach. Housing policy matters too—MAPC research shows that housing near transit without parking attracts car-light households and helps keep rents down, while mandatory parking raises costs and encourages more driving. By investing in walking, biking, and transit together, we can cut congestion, improve safety, and make car-light living a realistic choice for many more residents.

6. What policies will you advocate for to ensure that your city can be a place that is affordable for residents to live at any stage of life?

We need a housing strategy that works for everyone—from young adults just starting out to seniors who want to age in place. That means allowing more homes of all types, especially near transit, and expanding permanently affordable housing through tools like the Somerville Community Land Trust. We should preserve existing affordable units, protect tenants from arbitrary displacement, and encourage smaller, accessible units for older adults. Many older homeowners whose homes have appreciated radically get property tax bills they don’t have the income to pay; we should expand our tax deferral program by updating the wealth limits so that more seniors can use this sensible tool. Housing policy should make it possible to stay in Somerville at every stage of life without being priced out.

7. [If relevant] How would you assess your city's MBTA Communities Act rezoning efforts so far?

Somerville is already in compliance with the MBTA Communities Act—we were one of the first cities in the state to meet the requirements by allowing three-unit homes citywide without special permits. That’s a positive step, but it doesn’t fully capture the spirit of the law, which is to encourage denser, transit-oriented housing near stations. I believe we should go further by rezoning around Green Line and Red Line stops for more mixed-use,

multi-family development with strong affordability requirements, good public space, and safe walking and biking connections. We can use this mandate not just to comply, but to lead in showing how transit-oriented growth can make housing more abundant, neighborhoods more vibrant, and the city more sustainable.

8. What strategies would you employ to resist federal overreach from the Trump Administration while protecting critical services and funding for residents?

If harmful federal policies threaten our residents or funding, I will work with other cities to challenge them through the courts and coordinated advocacy. Somerville is already taking that stand—joining one lawsuit to protect federal education funding from being cut as punishment for enforcing civil rights, and another to block housing funds from being withheld from sanctuary cities. Locally, we can strengthen protections for vulnerable communities, ensure our funding priorities are met, and shield residents from discriminatory or punitive federal actions. Somerville should be ready to defend both our values and our autonomy.

9. How would you model transparency and accountability if elected?

I will hold regular open office hours in person and online, provide plain-language updates on issues before the Council, and explain the reasoning behind my votes. Transparency also means that city processes—from policy development to project implementation—should have open, accessible documentation so residents can track decisions in real time. For major initiatives, especially streetscaping and infrastructure projects, planning documents, designs, and timelines should be shared early for public comment, not just after decisions are made. Residents deserve both timely responses and a clear window into how decisions are formed, so they can meaningfully shape the outcome.

(C) Yes/No Policy Questions

1. Do you oppose the expansion of charter schools? **YES**, I think the state's alternative school approaches offer a way to achieve the innovation that charter supporters seek, while staying within an equitable framework and with full support for teacher and employee pay and working conditions.

2. Do you support the creation of an unarmed, community-based emergency response program, separate from the Police Department, to respond to mental and behavioral health crises? **YES**
3. If your community has not already, do you support adopting the new specialized stretch code, which would require new construction and major renovations to be built to a very high-efficiency standard with all-electric (as opposed to fossil fuel) heating and cooling systems? **YES - (Somerville has already)**
4. Do you support fare-free public transit? **YES**
5. Do you support the expansion of the network of permanent, protected bike lanes in your city? **YES**
6. Would you support a home rule petition to establish a small transfer fee on high-end real estate transactions to create dedicated funding for affordable housing production and preservation? **YES**
7. Would you support a home rule petition to enable the city to stabilize rents? **YES** — I would want it to block raises significantly above the prevailing rate; something like, no more than the rate of inflation + 2%.
8. According to the American Library Association, in 2022 there were at least 45 attempts to restrict access to books in MA schools, disproportionately books that speak to the experiences of LGBTQ students and students of color. Would you oppose such book-banning efforts if they occurred in your city? **YES**

(D) Additional Comments

(Use this space to make any final comments you deem important for progressive voters assessing your candidacy.)

I'm running for City Council because Somerville needs leadership that's progressive, principled, and unafraid to act. Our city faces real challenges—housing costs that push people out, streets that feel unsafe to walk or bike, and a climate crisis that demands local action. I believe we can meet these challenges with solutions grounded in evidence and shaped by the people who live here. That means building more housing of all types, investing in safe, efficient transportation, protecting our most vulnerable neighbors, and making City Hall responsive and accountable.

I've spent years working in our schools, advocating for safe streets, and pushing for responsive government. I know how to listen, work through disagreements, and turn good ideas into action. Somerville is worth fighting for, and I'm ready to bring the persistence, integrity, and focus it takes to make our city work for everyone who calls it home.