



Somerville Dog Owners Group
Questionnaire for Candidates
2007 Municipal Elections

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Office for which you are seeking election: Alderman at Large

1. Tell us about your experiences as a Somerville resident at our municipal parks. What parks do you visit, how often, what do you do there when you visit?

Sadly, I haven't had much time to spend recreationally in Somerville parks. Most of the time when I want exercise, I take walks through the City. When I've had a few hours, I've typically gone to the Middlesex Fells or Blue Hills (it's been a while), or gone bicycling -- oftentimes starting out or ending up on the bike path. I've had a plot in the Bikeway Community Garden for about seven years, but I recently had to ask a friend to take care of it for me, while I am running for office. Over the years, I've attended ArtBeat and other events that took place in Seven Hills Park. I've played badminton with my wife in the park on Holland Street west of Davis. I used to lead volunteer projects (with Outdoor Explorations and Boston Cares) at the Somerville Growing Center, and went to a few cultural events and walked the labyrinth there, but haven't been there in the last couple of years. On an occasional evening walk with my wife, we will pass through the park at Powderhouse Circle. On one of their monthly community cleanup days, I went to Foss Park to help out and get a sense of the concerns of community members; to my surprise, I also got my photo in the Globe City Weekly section!). And on Family Fun Day, I made my first ever visit to Trum Field. Over the years, I've visited Draw Seven Park a few times to get a sense of its possibilities, in conjunction with the Assembly Square development.

2. Somerville has just over two (2) acres of open space for every thousand residents. We are the most densely populated city in the Commonwealth. Compare that to Cambridge, the second most densely populated city in Massachusetts, where there are over eight (8) acres of open space for every thousand residents. What will you do in the upcoming term to increase the area of open space per capita in Somerville.

One of the most important things we can do right now is to ensure that the Union Square zoning does not allow developers to buy their way out of the open space requirement. While there is certainly a need for funding to improve and maintain existing greenspaces, we cannot allow the contribution of funds for improvements of existing greenspaces to take the place of creation of new useable public open space.

Another thing we need to be vigilant about is the quality of the open space that is created at Assembly Square. As one of the members of the Mystic View Task Force's negotiating team, I was an advocate for more and higher quality open space than was initially proposed by the developers. Although we gained a small amount of new open space as a result of the negotiation, there remains considerable room for improvement. The MVTF and members of its negotiating team reserved the right to continue to advocate for additional and higher quality open space as the permitting and environmental review process continues. The upcoming hearing (on September 4) will be an opportunity to raise concerns about how Ikea is apparently proposing to count small islands in its parking lot towards its open space contribution. Although the MEPA Office approved a Phase One waiver for the Assembly Square development project, thereby limiting our ability to advocate for more and better open space as part of the initial development, the full MEPA process will provide an opportunity to revisit the question.

I have had a preliminary conversation with Daria Ovide from the Trust for Public Lands, which recently did an assessment of open space in Somerville. Ms. Ovide believes that there are realistic opportunities to gain grant funding that would support the acquisition and improvement of parkland and public open space, and as an Alderman, I would strongly advocate that we aggressively pursue those opportunities. The Friends of the Community Path have suggested that fully developed, the Community Path would become Somerville's largest park, and as such deserves greater attention. I would certainly put more energy into gaining access to the right-of-way and into leveraging improvement of the Path. There has been discussion about the City taking over maintenance of Foss Park. I would continue to explore that option, provided there was a credible assurance that the costs of such maintenance would be reasonably supported by the State. While (apparently) the DCR has not been a reliable partner in the maintenance of the park, over-extending the City's responsibilities (if funding were not forthcoming) could result in comparable breakdowns in maintenance.

3. Despite recent improvements, nonetheless families with dogs remain underserved by Somerville's open spaces, particularly in East Somerville, in West Somerville and in the Davis Square, Magoun Square and Winter Hill neighborhoods. What opportunities will you create to improve access for families with dogs to open space?

I think it is critically important to bring advocates for open space together to try to leverage a larger "piece of the pie" rather than having, for example, advocates for ball fields fight with advocates for leash-free zones over a too-limited amount of open space. In fact, many dog owners have children, and conversely, many families with children also have dogs. As I noted above, Daria Ovide from the Trust for Public Lands was confident about the availability of grant funds to help with acquisition and development of open space by communities like Somerville with such limited existing open space.

I am not an expert on design strategies and operating policies which facilitate the sharing of open space by people and dogs, and which keep park maintenance costs as affordable as possible. But I know that there are park/open space designers around the country who have made such sharing arrangements work, and I would encourage City planning staff to seek their advice as opportunities to acquire or improve parks and open spaces arise. I suspect that a number of individuals with such talents are already here in Somerville (like Gina Foglia, with whom I

worked on the Assembly Square negotiation), and may very well be members of, or known to, SomDog.

4. The Somerville Dog Owners Group has been delighted to see improvements in recent years in the City's Animal Control Department and in the enforcement of municipal ordinances pertaining to animals, including the leash law and the "pooper-scooper" law. What initiatives would you undertake to further improve Animal Control in Somerville?

Encouraging the building of bridges between different segments of the Somerville population is a critically important role of elected officials, whether we're talking about long-time residents and newer residents, people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, or dog owners and non-dog owners. Too often, though, progress in bridge-building is set back by people whose behaviors reinforce the worst stereotypes. SomDog and its members have been very proactive in strengthening the positive image of dog-owners, participating in Night Out, the Memorial Day parade, clean-ups, ArtBeat, etc. That good work could be easily undone by an irresponsible dog owner whose dog causes property damage or an injury sufficiently serious to be newsworthy. Apart from any City initiatives, I would encourage SomDog to continue to promote owner responsibility (perhaps including training and "certification" for new dog owners).

In concert with efforts to expand open space and efforts to strengthen the culture and image of responsible ownership, I would encourage the kind of neighborhood meetings that led to the replacement of the no-dogs-allowed policy on the Community Path with a leash/clean-up-after-your-dog policy. Where appropriate, I would propose such changes on a provisional basis, subject to evaluation after the trial period. And, as the City began to do in Wards 5 and 6, I would explore potential sites for off-leash areas that serve residents who cannot easily get to the Nunziato site. I would work with SomDog to erect the kind of poop/scoop bags that exist at other locations where dogs are allowed, so as to visibly promote the commitment to responsible ownership.

5. Do you own a dog/dogs? No. My wife and I own two cats. While they are not kept on leashes, we understand and practice responsible pet ownership: they were adopted from a shelter, they were spayed/neutered, they receive regular veterinary care, we have installed a "hidden" (electric) fence that prevents them from wandering the neighborhood, we periodically spray portions of our neighbor's garden that become attractive places to dig, and we maintain clean litterboxes so that our cats do not begin to seek alternate places to poop.

6. If you are a dog owner please tell us about your dog(s); if not, please share some of your experiences with dogs in the community.

I have had both good and bad experiences with dogs. Our friends Will and Dorothy have a dog (and a young daughter) with whom we have taken a number of walks in the Middlesex Fells over the past couple of years. With Dorothy recovering from back surgery, we recently took Brewer for a walk through the neighborhood. Our friend Marc, who lives in Arlington, had a dog that we used to go on hikes with (in the few parks that allowed dogs), but his dog died after a long life. Our neighbors across the street have a dog that is very friendly, and probably a little too careless about cars and pedestrians when he is temporarily off leash.

Over the years, most of my experiences with dogs have been positive. However, I have been bitten three times, twice while I was riding a bicycle (in Maryland (about 20 years ago), after which I went through the rabies series, and before that in Oregon), and once when I was canvassing (about 25 years ago) in some South Shore community. So, I appreciate both how dogs can be part of the family, and how dogs can be frighteningly out of control. And I believe that training, responsible ownership, and sensible policies and urban design can dramatically reduce the risks of problematic behaviors.

Obviously, not every parent and not every pet owner and not every motorist or bicyclist is as responsible as we might hope. Sometimes, the law and the "operating environment" need to be designed with the less responsible individual in mind, so as to minimize the chance of problems. We all lose, however, when the primary basis for our laws and policies are our worst assumptions about one another. The blanket prohibition of dogs in Somerville parks is an example of policy being based on worst assumptions, and the gradual relaxation of that prohibition is largely, if not entirely, a reflection of the work of SomDog in countering the stereotypes and fears that helped sustain those more restrictive policies over the years.

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