

Civic Engagement in Somerville:

Joe Curtatone's Story of How Community Activism
Powered a Remarkable Urban Renaissance

Joe Curtatone, Andrew Tolve

MAY 2023



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER

for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

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About the Authors

Joe Curtatone served as mayor of Somerville, Massachusetts from 2004 to 2022. Under his leadership, the city added public transportation, improved education, championed immigration, lowered crime, attracted business and development, and won the prestigious All-America City award twice in five years. Born and raised in Somerville in a family of first-generation Italians, Curtatone earned his Bachelor of Arts from Boston College, his law degree from New England Law, and his Master of Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School. He is currently a senior fellow at the Harvard Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and president of the Northeast Clean Energy Council, where he oversees the growth and development of a green and equitable economy for the region.

Andrew Tolve is a writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Slate*, and *Men's Journal*, among others. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University, he has spent 20 years as a journalist pursuing nonfiction storytelling that focuses on culture, climate, outdoor adventure, and environmental and social change. In addition to his work at the Harvard Ash Center, he is currently writing a novel, *Genius's Daughter*, about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the five children he abandoned at birth, and the one who, unbeknownst to history, survived to tell her story.

About the Ash Center

The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation is Harvard's home for scholars, students, and practitioners dedicated to strengthening democracy around the globe. The center is devoted to fostering ideas and developing practices to advance the ideal of equal and inclusive multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy around the world.

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Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

617-495-0557

ash.harvard.edu

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Executive Summary

Under the leadership of Mayor Joe Curtatone, Somerville, Massachusetts achieved one of the most remarkable stories of urban transformation in recent American history. Once derided by Bostonians as “Slumerville” due to its broken transportation system and high levels of poverty, crime, and corruption, Somerville is now a thriving city. It has new metro lines, vibrant neighborhoods, a diverse population, and innovative zoning and housing initiatives. Coupled with its newfound hipster credentials, it’s earned a reputation as the Brooklyn of Boston. None of this would have been possible without Somerville’s bold and innovative approach to civic engagement.

In this case study, the former mayor of Somerville, Joe Curtatone, reflects on his 18 years in office and illuminates the many ways in which civic engagement enabled Somerville’s renaissance. The mayor offers intimate, behind-the-scenes accounts of the Assembly Square development, Green Line extension, and Shape Up Somerville program, which helped inspire Michelle Obama’s nationwide “Let’s Move!” campaign. Curtatone is a self-described innovation junky, who thrived on taking risks and implementing participatory policies that made his administration as transparent and inclusive as possible. The case details break-through programs in civic engagement, including ResiStat, SomerVision, and SomerViva, while also acknowledging setbacks and the resulting improvements.

“There is no blueprint for civic engagement,” says Curtatone, “but hopefully by sharing the principles and practices that Somerville implemented, other leaders can learn how to improve civic engagement in their own communities.”

Acknowledgments

By Joe Curtatone

Now that I have been out of elected office for a little over a year, I have had the opportunity to reflect with great pride on my experience as mayor of Somerville, the community where I was born and raised. Somerville has often been described as one of the most successful urban transformations in our nation's history. Our success, however, has always been the direct result of our community's collective work—*the product of many hands*.

First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the residents of Somerville. Throughout my 18 years as mayor, I was always a student of the job, with Somerville's neighborhoods serving as my classrooms and its residents as my teachers and mentors. I've developed an everlasting love and admiration for these residents and their values. Paramount among the many lessons that I have learned from my community is the vital importance of civic engagement in both ensuring organizational success and protecting our democracy.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the incredible staff that I had the honor and privilege to work alongside for over two decades. They were the most talented public administration in America. We made it our mission to embrace civic engagement in all aspects of our work, and we aimed to democratize our administration's tasks to build a learning organization that extended beyond the bricks and mortar of City Hall. This commitment became a part of our DNA.

After 26 years of public service (eight years as an alderman and 18 years as mayor), I can attest that my view of civic engagement and its importance has completely changed. From my early days as an alderman (1996) and into my initial term as mayor (2004), I viewed civic engagement as a sort of side show to the main act of running and leading a city. By the time I left, I had learned that it was one of the keystones to our success. For anyone who reads this case study, I pray their view of civic engagement will evolve as mine did. We need to not only appreciate it more but to recognize it as indispensable for our democratic principles.

I have lived in Somerville my entire life (56 years), and my wife, Nancy, and I have raised our four sons, Cosmo, Joey, Patrick, and James here—we are *Villens* through and through. However, and I just realized this as I am writing, I never fully appreciated and understood my community until we finally met. It has been an honor and a pleasure. Thank you, Somerville.

Preface

On the surface, Somerville, Massachusetts, is a typical mid-sized New England city grappling with a typical mixture of post-industrial policy challenges, ranging from transportation and housing to economic development and health equity. Yet anyone who has spent much time in the greater Boston area in the last decade can attest that Somerville has been at the vanguard of innovations in urban civic engagement.

At Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), we have been especially fortunate to have had a strong and lasting partnership with Somerville and its longtime mayor, Joe Curtatone, who led the city from 2004 until 2022. As mayor, Joe was long a generous collaborator with the Ash Center and many of our colleagues across the Kennedy School. In fact, his partnership with HKS began before he even took his seat in City Hall. In 2004, he participated in the school's longstanding orientation program for newly elected mayors. There, he met my colleague Linda Bilmes, a nationally renowned expert on performance budgeting, which led to a years-long collaboration between HKS and Somerville, including [a case study](#) examining the city's budgeting reforms.

We've embedded scores of HKS students across numerous city departments in Somerville over the years, the fruitful product of this budding teaching and research collaboration. This partnership was further cemented in 2011, when Joe, on top of his day job in Somerville, graduated from the Kennedy School with a Mid-Career Master Public Administration.

Here at the Ash Center, my colleague Jorrit de Jong teamed up with Joe as part of the Innovation Field Lab initiative, which used Joe's experience in Somerville as a model to improve effectiveness, increase efficiency, and address inequities in cities across the commonwealth. Together, Joe and Jorrit taught groups of both students and mayors from around the country to create more effective government by operationalizing equity and emphasizing the benefits of meaningful community engagement. [Their work together culminated in a case study](#) examining Joe's work to build data capabilities in Somerville City Hall. Jorrit and his team at the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative have since gone on to use it as an important curricular tool to educate scores of mayors about management and leadership.

When Joe was preparing to leave office after nine terms as mayor, it seemed only natural to invite him to join the Ash Center community as a senior fellow. Here, he could continue his work reflecting civic engagement and developing a suite of best practices that mayors, staff, and everyday citizens could employ in their communities. The Ash Center, as the nexus for the study and discussion of democracy across Harvard, seemed uniquely placed to partner with him on this next endeavor. Rather than produce a traditional academic case study, like my colleagues Linda and Jorrit have done so ably with Joe in the past, we asked Joe to tell us his story of civic engagement in Somerville in his own words.

Distrust in government has never been higher, and that makes it all the more important to tell stories of transformative civic engagement and innovators like Joe. In fact, I asked Joe to recount his experiences strengthening public participation in government not because they are unique to Somerville, but because I felt what he and his team did in Somerville could be replicated in cities across the country and around the globe.

At the Ash Center, we've long believed that government innovation isn't solely the domain of the largest or wealthiest cities or countries. We teach that innovation stems from leadership. And in Somerville, you have a sterling example in Joe. It's my hope that cities will follow Joe and the Somerville community's example and not look at civic engagement as a mere box-checking exercise but as a process that is central to building—and rebuilding—citizen trust in government. While Joe's time in office has come to an end for now, I hope that others can learn from his example of innovative civic engagement in Somerville.

Sincerely,
 Tony Saich
 Daewoo Professor of International Affairs
 Harvard Kennedy School

Introduction

When I became mayor of Somerville in 2004, I, like so many other elected officials, viewed civic engagement as a procedural task. It was a sort of box to be checked, something that we should undertake in certain instances. I did not think it was vital for my administration's success, nor did I realize that it would become the engine that would power the transformation our city so desperately needed. And boy did we need it.

Somerville, located northwest of Boston, is wedged between Cambridge and Medford into 4.1 square miles.¹ With about 81,000 residents, we are the most densely populated municipality in New England.² From its earliest days, Somerville was home to a large immigrant population that came in search of jobs in our rail yards, food distribution centers, and factories, which included meatpacking, brick-making, and car-making. In the mid-20th century, these factories began to shut down as manufacturers moved to sunnier climates in the South or West and eventually offshore. Employment opportunities dried up across Somerville as crime rose and political corruption and dysfunction became commonplace. Trust in local government evaporated. Our transportation system fell apart. People came to view us as a backwater, a blight, a dumping ground, and a danger zone, all neatly encapsulated by the nickname that Bostonites bestowed upon us: "Slumerville."

I hated that name as a boy. I'll never forget the sting of embarrassment that came with it and the anger I felt. I hated it because I loved Somerville, as did my whole family. We were first-generation Italians. My parents worked in the factories here, having come to America in the wake of World War II in search of a better life. I was born in Somerville in 1966. The Somerville that I knew growing up was a wonderful community: tight-knit, funky, artistic, diverse. People on our block in Prospect Hill spoke Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and English with a heavy Irish brogue. The food was incredible. Everyone knew everyone's name. Radical hippies hung out with urban horticulturists; blue-collar workers lived side by side with graduate students from Harvard, MIT, and Tufts.

During my sophomore year of high school, my mother and father decided that it was finally time to leave our small, three-family home on our crowded block and move to the spacious suburb of North Reading. There, we would have a single-family home with a backyard and trees to call our own. Nothing against North Reading, but we couldn't stand it. We didn't know our neighbors. We missed the food, flavor, and noisy interconnectedness of our lives in Somerville. After two weeks, my father walked in and announced, "Everybody get in the car, we're going back to Somerville." I've never left since.

When I became mayor of Somerville, I wanted to replace the stigma of Slumerville with a reputation for innovation, growth, safety, and excellence. I knew that we deserved it as a city. More importantly, I knew that we had the potential to become a remarkable place to live, work, and play. My next 18 years in office confirmed this belief. We transformed in ways I never could have imagined. We won the All-America City Award twice, in 2009 and 2014, for our bold work improving transportation, fighting childhood obesity, and redeveloping our city centers.³ We successfully extended the Green Line and replaced the weeds in Assembly Square with a walkable waterfront neighborhood offering some of the best shopping, eating, and entertainment around. We brought our immigrant community more into the fold of civic life. We improved our schools and built affordable housing as a buffer against gentrification. And we did all of this with a speed and audacity that we never could have achieved without the community's full participation.

You see, Somerville's renaissance wasn't just for the people, it happened *because* of the people. Their civic engagement made it possible at every step of the way. In doing so, they transformed my understanding of what it means to be a good leader and how democratic institutions can best achieve their objectives.



“Do you want to transform Somerville?”

It was 2004, and the speaker was Dr. Christina Economos, a brilliant young Doctor of Philosophy and Nutritional Biochemistry and an associate professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition and the Tufts University School of Medicine. We were sitting in my office in the early days of my administration, and my answer was, I’m pretty sure, self-evident. Dr. Economos knew that I was dead set on transforming my hometown into a vibrant, inclusive, dynamic city that people would yearn to live in rather than avoid or belittle.

“I do,” I said. “What kind of transformation are you talking about?”

Dr. Economos explained that since 2002 she had been collecting data on schoolchildren in Somerville. The findings were alarming. Forty percent of schoolchildren across America were obese, putting this generation on track to be the unhealthiest in American history.⁴ Somerville’s students from first to third grade were worse than the national average. Forty-six percent of our first to third graders were either overweight or at risk of being overweight.⁵

“We can change this,” Dr. Economos said.

“I’m in. What do you need from me?”

“A champion,” she replied. “We need someone to narrate the problem and be out front and visible on this every day.”

I’ve never forgotten that conversation. In many respects, it foretold my journey as a leader. Over nearly two decades in office, I would discover that the people in my city had all the passion, vision, tenacity, and intelligence required to transform Somerville; they just needed a mayor who was willing to listen and learn from their perspectives, take a risk, and empower them with the support and authority of city government. Dr. Economos was case in point. She already had a federal grant lined up from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a team of researchers assembled under the catchy program name “Shape Up Somerville,” and a detailed game plan for how to effect change as quickly as possible. She envisioned a community-led, city-wide, evidence-based approach to reverse the trends of childhood obesity. This meant changing Somerville’s whole environment from a healthy food desert to a place with bustling farmers’ markets and bike lanes and verdant parks and rock gyms and public schools that served healthy foods and taught their students and staff about healthy living.⁶

Getting there would require coordinated efforts across the city. The cafeterias in Somerville’s elementary schools would need a healthy-food overhaul. Classrooms would need a new health curriculum (later called The HEAT Club, short for Health Eating and Active Time) to educate students about fruits and vegetables and the importance of exercise.⁷ Restaurants would need incentives to reduce portion sizes and incorporate more fresh produce into their menus. Our streets would need bike paths and freshly painted crosswalks to encourage walking and biking. And our mayor would need to be vocal and committed to making this a city-wide priority.

After our conversation, I did everything in my power to be the spark plug that Dr. Economos asked me to be. I assembled a Nutrition Task Force that consisted of 27 stakeholders across the community to build a broad coalition of support for Shape Up Somerville. My administration made policy and infrastructure changes to support biking, walking, and access to open space. We created a new position for a pedestrian/bike coordinator to help advocate for more bike paths and make maps charting “Safe Routes to School,” which we distributed to parents, teachers, and staff. We opened farmers’ markets and community-supported agricultural drop-off sites. We made zoning upgrades that promoted a long-range plan to renovate parks and playgrounds.⁸

But my most important role was to be a cheerleader for community participation and an out-spoken supporter of Shape Up Somerville in public. As elementary schools began to celebrate fruits and vegetables, build school gardens, and transform their cafeterias with healthier eating options, I showed up whenever I could to serve meals and talk about the importance of healthy living. I ran with my toddler in a trailer behind me in our inaugural Shape Up Somerville Road Race. When they tested BMI in City Hall, I was first in line. When my family went out to eat, we supported “Shape Up approved” restaurants.⁹

Every time I spoke about the issue, I was careful that it never turned into me saying, “Hey, this is Joe, your mayor, and your kids need to be healthier.” Instead, the message was that we, as a city, have the ultimate responsibility and capability to put the healthiest, best choices before you. More often than not, people will make those choices when they’re easy. They’ll ride their bike if it’s safe to do so, and there are bicycle lanes and easy bicycle parking. They’ll go to the park if parks are accessible, up-to-date, and well maintained. They’ll buy fresh produce and healthy foods if they don’t have to drive miles to a store or dart across a six-lane highway to get there. The onus was on us to set our citizens up for success.

The program was a victory as both a community movement and a scientific experiment for what a city-wide approach could accomplish in a short amount of time. In just eight months, Shape Up Somerville reduced the average weight gain of an eight-year-old child in our schools by a pound.¹⁰ In the world of nutrition and obesity research, that was an astounding result, and it thrust Dr. Economos and Somerville into the national conversation around smart policies for fighting childhood obesity. After Dr. Economos’ federal grant expired and the program concluded in 2005, we made Shape Up Somerville a permanent part of our Somerville Health Department. In 2009, our success caught the eye of First Lady Michelle Obama, who was in the early stages of planning a nationwide campaign to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity and raise a healthier generation of kids. Her team began to work with Dr. Economos, me, and a few other mayors who had implemented successful programs around the country.

When First Lady Obama launched “Let’s Move!” in 2010, she invited me to the White House to speak on the occasion.¹¹ It was February, and Washington, D.C. had been hit with its biggest blizzard in 30 years. Sadly, Dr. Economos couldn’t make it because of the snow, but sitting there in the White House, I was struck by how one researcher’s initiative had turned into a federal grant that had become a city-wide program that had helped fuel a nationwide movement—a true testament to the power of activism and civic engagement.

“That’s what Shape Up Somerville is about,” I said in my speech that day at the White House. “Engaging community members of all ages and backgrounds, from all sectors of community life to transform the health of our community. It takes the leadership and support of an entire community to create an environment that supports children’s health from the time they leave their homes to go to school in the morning until the time they return home in the evening.”¹²

That same day, President Obama signed a presidential memorandum creating the first-ever Task Force on Childhood Obesity.¹³ After that, I saw the president on a number of occasions as a guest at special events at the White House. Every time we met, he talked about Somerville and reminded me how he had lived there when he was a graduate student at Harvard Law School.

“How’s my hometown, Joe?” he’d ask.

“We’re on the right track,” I’d tell him.



One afternoon in the winter of 2006, I was meeting with a member of the Somerville Board of Aldermen at City Hall. Suddenly, blood began to gush from my nose. I'm a lifelong athlete who's been knocked around on a football field and a hockey rink since I was a young boy, but I'd never experienced a nosebleed like this. The Somerville chief of police, Bob Bradley, happened to be in the building. He took one look at me and said, "You're going to the hospital."

"I'm fine," I told him.

He got on the radio. "I need an ambulance at City Hall."

They rushed me to the emergency room at Cambridge Hospital, where the doctors took me into surgery to cauterize a nasal hemorrhage. When I came to, I was lying in bed with a friendly Haitian nurse taking care of me. I tried to stand but my legs felt like rubber. The doctor informed me that I had lost so much blood that I would need to stay for the rest of the week.

"A week!" I thought.

I couldn't afford to be away from City Hall for that long, especially not this week, when the future of one of the biggest urban development plans in Somerville's history hung in the balance. By 2006, momentum was building behind my administration. In addition to the success of Shape Up Somerville, we had managed to implement a number of innovative programs, leading to our being named the best-run city in Massachusetts by *The Boston Globe Magazine*, no small feat considering where the city had been two years earlier when I took office.¹⁴ Under my leadership, we had established a new department, called SomerStat, that collected data on everything from potholes to poverty to public health and noise pollution. With this information, we aimed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our decision-making across every department of city government. We had also built a 311 "One Call to City Hall" program that allowed residents to call City Hall directly at any time, day or night, to report a problem or get information, with operators who spoke English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.¹⁵ We had partnered with Harvard, MIT, and Tufts, using the brilliance of their graduate students to turn our city into a laboratory for innovative ideas around governance and policy-making.¹⁶

Despite these many successes, large-scale commercial development—the kind that could attract new businesses, create thousands of jobs, and bring restaurants, shops, galleries, and more to town—still eluded us. Nowhere was better suited for this development than Assembly Square, which sits on the northeastern edge of Somerville on the banks of the Mystic River. The Square takes its name from the Ford Edsel Assembly Plant that was built here in 1926. The assembly plant soon drew other businesses to the area. Highways and railroads came to crisscross the land on their way into and out of Boston. Once the assembly plant closed its doors in 1958, the site fell into disrepair and lived in a state of neglect for almost half a century.¹⁷ Other businesses moved away. A low-grade strip mall took up residence in the factory. Weeds pushed up through the cracks in the concrete. Shady deals went down under the cover of night or in broad daylight. Despite this checkered past, Assembly Square already had the transportation infrastructure needed for a commercial hub. One commuter rail line and the Orange Line clattered through the site, although neither made a stop there. State Routes 28 and 38 ran by it. And it was waterfront property to boot. Our projections suggested that smart development of Assembly Square could double the city's tax base and jobs base.

Once I was elected, my administration put together a new Main Street Plan that proposed a walkable main street through Assembly Square, complete with mixed-use development, including retail, offices, and housing. We took some public feedback on the plan but developed it entirely within the walls of city government. Furthermore, I proposed a new zoning amendment that would allow for the old mall in Assembly Square to be re-tenanted to help generate revenue for the project. The new zoning amendment would also enable developers to start building straight away—free from the threat of lawsuits—so long as their projects aligned with our mixed-use vision for the neighborhood. Big-box

development would still require special planning and permission. IKEA already owned a large parcel of land along the waterfront and was eager to develop. We weren't a proponent of IKEA, but we wanted the rest of our Main Street Plan to get underway.

When the zoning amendment passed, we broke ground on the site, only to run into a lawsuit contending that our proposed zoning amendment was illegal.¹⁸ The Mystic View Task Force (MVTf), a local grassroots community group, had filed the lawsuit. Formed in 1998, MVTf had been a long-time advocate for smart development of Assembly Square.¹⁹ Their enthusiasm had turned into what many perceived as obstructionism during my predecessor's time in office, and now, it had spilled over into mine. They were tireless in pushing back against a plan that only prioritized, in their opinion, big boxes and parking lots. Planting a hulking IKEA on the waterfront, they argued, was tantamount to exchanging one blight for another. They wanted assurances that all development at Assembly Square would embody the tenets of smart growth and be transit-oriented. Bringing in an Orange Line stop was essential to that vision. They wanted a walkable, livable community with a 24-hour sense of place. My plan, they worried, wouldn't improve public health; instead, it would diminish it with a flood of cars streaming in and out of town for big-box shopping.

These were noble objectives to be sure, and I shared them. But I also wanted to get the project done after so many years of waiting, and I knew that we were losing precious time locked in court battles over zoning permits. The latest of these battles was set to be decided as I lay bedridden at Cambridge Hospital. The next morning, my chief of staff, Janice Delory, called to see how I was doing.

"It turns out that training for a marathon in cold weather, within a week of outpatient sinus surgery, wasn't the most brilliant idea," I told her.

"How long do you think you'll be there?" she asked.

"Could be the rest of the week."

There was a pause.

"Any updates?" I asked.

"About Assembly Square . . . we lost in court."

I fell back on the bed and tossed my phone aside. Lying there covered in bandages, physically and mentally beat up, I realized that we couldn't go on this way as a city, ceaselessly litigating our future. It felt like a game of who sues whom next? I'd prefer the morphine drip to that. Something had to change, and maybe that something was me. It dawned on me that I was failing as a mayor—failing to earn the trust of my community and effectively harness their passion to make our city a better place. The activists in the Mystic View Task Force weren't gadflies buzzing in the ears of Somerville City Hall to pester us, nor were they anti-development die-hards out to scuttle our plans no matter what. On the contrary, they were pro-development citizens fighting for a bolder vision beyond big boxes and parking lots. We wanted the same thing, but they didn't trust me to execute it.

Could I blame them? I had asked for public feedback on our Main Street Plan, but I hadn't involved the community in its creation. Furthermore, I was a young, upstart mayor in charge of a city government with a long history of misleading its citizens and making rash decisions today without thinking about tomorrow. If I was going to succeed as mayor in building that better tomorrow and ushering in a new type of city government, I needed to do a better job of engaging my citizens, listening to them, and earning their confidence. Without that confidence, life would proceed from one lawsuit to the next in perpetuity.

After I got out of the hospital, I decided we needed to bring in a trusted voice to guide us forward, someone who was well regarded and respected by all sides. I asked Doug Foy, a brilliant economic development and environmental expert and the former chief of commonwealth development under Governor Mitt Romney, if he would advise the city of Somerville on its development plans. He accepted.

Shortly thereafter, one of the founders of MVTF, Wig Zamore, was at City Hall for a meeting and stopped by my secretary's desk. "Hey, is the mayor around?" he asked.

I invited him in.

"Listen, I'm glad you hired Doug on," he said. "Do you mind if I reach out to him?"

"Of course not."

"I'm getting too old for this, Joe," he sighed. "I don't want to wait for the next fight. I really want to see if we can get to a common place."

"Me too, Wig. Please, meet with Doug. Tell me how it goes."

It was an eye-opening moment. It showed me that by stepping out of the driver's seat as mayor and opening the door for others to take the lead, our city could take a step forward. This wasn't about self-aggrandizement or laying claim to a shimmery prize. It was about progress and empowering our residents to have a stake in the development of their own community. Wig Zamore did meet with Doug Foy, and within six months, the MVTF had reached a landmark agreement with our developer, the Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), and IKEA. The agreement included an assurance of mixed-use development and affordable housing. IKEA exchanged its waterfront location for one further inland, opening the door for FRIT to develop Assembly Row, a pedestrian-friendly destination neighborhood with shopping and dining on the waterfront. Both FRIT and IKEA agreed to make a \$15-million investment to help fund an Orange Line station at Assembly Square.²⁰

Fast forward 16 years and Assembly Square has transformed into one of the jewels of Somerville. It's a significant reason that our city has become one of the most desirable places to live in all of Massachusetts and a model for smart growth and policy innovation around the country. I am sitting in Assembly Row as I write this, in a coffee shop looking out at a bustling community. Bikers zip by. Parents push strollers. The T rattles in and out of the nearby Orange Line station. There's a cinema here now, hotels and condominiums, a conference center, affordable housing, and shops of every variety. This is what smart growth is supposed to feel like—diverse, fun, delicious, sustainable, with ample options for good eating, easy transportation, and green space. Thanks to the community's activism, the Assembly Square development included a boardwalk under Route 28, connecting the Ten Hills neighborhood where I live with Assembly Square next door. As a result, I come here almost every day to work or walk with my wife. Getting to experience Assembly Square as a citizen of Somerville is wonderful. As the mayor who oversaw its development, it's a daily reminder of the power of civic engagement and the importance of building trust, not just asking for it.



After our breakthrough with the Mystic View Task Force (MVTF) at Assembly Square, I set out to transform Somerville's relationship with civic engagement. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm a zealot for innovation and risk-taking. If you want to entice me to do something, just tell me that it's never been done before. I like to think outside of the box and challenge people around me to be as uncommonly audacious as possible. From the outset, I sought to build my administration as a learning organization powered by curiosity. In every interview with a prospective staffer, one of the first questions I asked was, "Do you have a passion for curiosity and a willingness to be abnormal?" I wanted us to welcome adversity, seek out pressing questions, and pursue bold answers.

The pressing question before us now was how we could build more confidence in our administration and our city's ability to deliver services and smart growth. The answer was that we needed to create more transparency and accountability throughout local government. If we wanted to gain our residents' trust, they needed to know where to get information and have access to real-time data and status

updates. Furthermore, they needed to understand how decisions were being made as well as where money was being spent and why. We'd already covered the basics. How could we go further?

In 2007, we introduced ResiStat, short for Resident Statistics, a first-of-its-kind program that aimed to give every resident of Somerville a way to get directly involved in city government and stay apprised of everything that we were doing (or not doing) in their neighborhoods.²¹ Somerville is the City of Seven Hills, and around each hill, there's a ward. In each ward, we committed to hosting biannual ResiStat meetings. At these meetings, we offered to discuss issues pertinent to the city as a whole and the ward in particular. We wanted residents to see the data and information we were considering and to probe and push on it. By encouraging a constructive tension, we aimed to create a sense of shared ownership.

Ultimately, the community got to set the agenda for each ResiStat meeting. If they said they wanted to hear more about traffic data and how that relates to other issues in their neighborhood, that's where we would go. If they said they'd like to know about public health data and how that impacts a child's ability to achieve academically and socially, that was the topic of the day. We'd bring statistics, updates on policies, and pertinent public works. And we would listen as the community voiced opinions, grievances, ideas, and concerns.

At the city level, meetings like this tend to get reactive when a crisis happens, or they tend to involve junior staffers standing in for senior officials who don't want to take the heat. ResiStat was different. At every meeting in every ward, we pledged to have all the senior agencies and their executive directors in attendance. We never faltered from this commitment. If there was a conflict, sometimes a deputy executive director stood in, but a senior member of each agency's team was always present. The police chief was a regular. I was, too. At every meeting, twice a year in every ward over 15 years in office, I was there, barring a couple of unavoidable conflicts.

To me, this was essential. It wasn't just a matter of optics. If we wanted to create real trust in city government, I had to be accessible as mayor. I didn't want people to think of me as locked away in City Hall apart from the community. I said it all the time: "Forget about mayor; just call me Joe." Any chance I had to put on a Patriots jersey, jog in a road race, play in a three-on-three youth basketball game, or participate in some freaky arts event, I took it. At ResiStat meetings, if someone had a good idea, I wanted to hear it from their mouth and see if we could implement it. If we had messed up as a city government, I wanted to take ownership of it on the spot. And if people were pissed off, I wanted to hear it to my face.

And believe me, sometimes they were pissed off. That's the nature of civic engagement. I remember one time we presented data at a ResiStat meeting and discussed how we had interpreted it as a government, and someone stood up and said, "You're full of shit." Some leaders might bristle at that sort of candor, but to me, it was a sign that we were getting somewhere. I wanted honest feedback. I wanted citizens to push back, challenge, get mad, ask why, and ultimately believe that we were doing the best that we could to represent them and their shared values.

Growing up in Somerville, my family had a big Sunday supper every week. We made amazing Italian food, came together, talked, laughed, embraced, and had one hell of a fight. That was a perfect day in our house. We'd argue, but we'd always come back together, gathering again the next Sunday. And over time, those dinners, including the arguments, built an unshakable familial bond. ResiStat meetings were like Sunday Italian suppers. The community and my administration pushed. We probed. We listened. We learned. We got into fights. We took some falls. But when we landed, we were in a much more unified, stable, trusting place to achieve our goals together.

After each meeting, my administration made it a priority to follow up on issues that were aired or addressed. We didn't wait to reconnect six months later. The goal was relentless connection and transparency, and we succeeded. When those meetings began, just a handful of people attended; soon,

there were well over 100 in each ward, with people excited to be there. As the program moved from a grant-funded pilot to a permanent fixture of our administration, housed in the communications department, community participation more than doubled within two years. We created online portals where we posted relevant updates and sent out monthly printed newsletters and weekly emails to keep everyone engaged. ResiStat continues to this day in Somerville, under the new mayor, now with the name of Spring and Fall City Hall Community Meetings.



The more ResiStat meetings I attended, the more impressed I became with the thoughtfulness and forward-thinking nature of our residents. These were people from all walks of life: aging hippies and Millennial hipsters, local small business owners eager for more development, and single moms worried about being displaced through gentrification. They brought with them a host of practical experiences that helped us identify our key priorities as a community. And they were keen to share their perspectives on how to optimize our shared potential as a city moving forward.

“What if we could capture all these different experiences,” I wondered one night at a ResiStat meeting, “all these disparate visions, dreams, and concerns and distill them down into a shared vision—a SomerVision—to mobilize us as a city and guide our decision- and policy-making moving forward?”

The need for this shared vision became more acute as the Great Recession worsened and began to wreak havoc on our city budget. When I first took office, Somerville had just \$400,000 in our rainy-day fund. When I left office 18 years later, it was up to \$65 million, but little of that growth had taken place before 2008. At the time, with little commercial property tax base, we still received more than 40 percent of our municipal revenue from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Faced with a crisis of his own, Governor Deval Patrick had instituted severe statewide cutbacks, which diminished one of our biggest sources of revenue. We had to make tough decisions about layoffs to implement, services to scale back, and projects to suspend or abandon, all without a comprehensive plan to guide us and ensure that we were prioritizing the right things in the short- and long-term.

So, in the spring of 2009, we jumped into SomerVision, a three-year process to establish a community-led comprehensive plan for Somerville. The work existed entirely in the public sphere. Instead of hiring consultants that we couldn’t afford, we created the SomerVision Steering Committee. It tapped into every corner and facet of our community, from long-time business owners to environmental activists, immigrants who spoke English as a second language to educators and leading academics at Harvard and Tufts. The SomerVision Steering Committee was 60 Somerville residents strong, representing dozens of community groups, nonprofits, and business associations.

Once assembled, the Steering Committee’s first task was to clearly and objectively look at our data and form some initial shared thoughts and opinions around the findings. In 2008, our SomerStat Department had teamed up with researchers at Tufts University and local nonprofit partners to create hundreds of pages of research related to Somerville’s demographics, housing, economics, transportation, and land use. The Steering Committee used these Trend Reports to lead conversations at eight public workshops in 2009.²² Anyone from the community could attend and express their views about the data, our community’s direction, and our shared goals. This was before online live-streaming was commonplace, but we broadcast every workshop on TV so anyone could watch from home or at work.

The Trends Reports and the resulting public dialogue helped create the foundation for a comprehensive plan. To flesh out Somerville’s shared values, we created a four-part Community Values Workshop Series and invited residents to participate in small-group breakouts. This came at a critical moment in Somerville history, as tension was growing between the working-class Old Somerville and



the quickly gentrifying New Somerville. Could the two exist in harmony? What were the points of commonality between old and new that would guide us into a shared and inclusive future? Translators were on hand to ensure that we incorporated ideas presented in any language. Based on resident feedback, we created word clouds to capture the full range of values expressed, with the most common values commanding the largest font.²³

Throughout 2010, the Steering Committee developed the draft version of the Somerville Comprehensive Plan and regularly presented to the Planning Board and Board of Aldermen on its progress. We updated the community every ResiStat Meeting. In 2011, we launched a SomerVision Goals Showcase Series to present the latest version of the Committee’s work to the community. We offered these showcases around the city with multilingual translation services to ensure residents could participate no matter where they lived or what language they spoke. We followed that up with online and print surveys that allowed the general public to offer feedback on the draft goals.

In February 2012, the Steering Committee submitted the final draft of the Somerville Comprehensive Plan to the Planning Board and Board of Aldermen. Two months later, the plan was formally endorsed and adopted.²⁴ SomerVision 2030 established a shared vision for Somerville’s future built around three shared values: Proud, Vibrant, and Connected. In line with these values, it produced clear targets, known as SomerVision Numbers, for us to aspire to and focus on. These were as follows, quoting from the original document:

- **30,000 New Jobs** as part of a responsible plan to create opportunity for all Somerville workers and entrepreneurs.²⁵
- **125 New Acres of Publicly Accessible Open Space** as part of our bold plan to provide high-quality and well-programmed community spaces.²⁶

- **6,000 New Housing Units - 1,200 Permanently Affordable** as part of a sensitive plan to attract and retain Somerville's best asset: its people.²⁷
- **50% of New Trips via Transit, Bike, or Walking** as part of an equitable plan for access and circulation to and through the City.²⁸
- **85% of New Development in Transformative Areas** as part of a predictable land use plan that protects neighborhood character.²⁹

In addition to the SomerVision Numbers, the plan produced a SomerVision Map that highlighted specific geographic areas where the community wanted conservation, enhancement, or transformation. The plan charted hundreds of actionable goals for our neighborhoods, commercial corridors, resources, transportation and infrastructure, and housing. Finally, it produced implementation priorities to hold my administration accountable as we implemented programs and policies in pursuit of those goals.³⁰

The collaborative development of a long-range plan for Somerville's future served as the catalyst for the success that followed in my next 10 years in office. Again and again, I returned to our shared values, plucking those value strings when we needed to generate support for a cause or get a bill across the line. The SomerVision Numbers became a drumbeat for me as mayor. I referenced them all the time. We tried to exceed them as a city. I got mad when we fell short and redoubled our efforts to make sure we got back on track.

The SomerVision goals and implementation priorities led us to undertake a massive zoning overhaul. The goal was to use a new zoning code to stimulate growth while keeping our city affordable for its immigrant and low-income population. We wanted more jobs and affordable housing, but we also wanted to prioritize quality and sustainability in our brick-and-mortar development. I'll be the first to admit that there's nothing sexy about zoning. Alphabet soups like FBC (form-based code) tend to cause people's eyes to glaze over. But SomerVision 2030 gave us the mandate and joint support to undertake a seven-year process, complete with public hearings and hundreds of community meetings. In 2019, it resulted in the most transformational zoning update for any city in Greater Boston in the past 30 years.³¹

Our new form-based zoning code created building sustainability standards that put us on a path to being carbon neutral by 2050. The new code mandated that the majority of new development in Somerville had to carve out at least 20 percent of their units as affordable housing. Developers who built 100 percent affordable housing units or net-zero-ready buildings received graduated bonuses. It created a Somerville Green Score to measure the sustainability of new projects and established a new category in the code for a "Fabrication District" and an "Arts & Creative Enterprise" to stimulate growth and economic activity around our arts community and our burgeoning green tech startup sector.³²

I could devote another 10 pages to the zoning overhaul alone, at which point your eyes would glaze over, too. The major point here is that the zoning overhaul—and every other initiative that we undertook during my final decade in office—aligned with and drew inspiration from SomerVision 2030. It made all of our progress possible, including the hardest-earned and arguably most impactful accomplishment of my administration: the Green Line Extension.



The Green Line Extension (GLX) was our transportation equivalent to Assembly Square: the project that loomed perpetually on Somerville's horizon, tantalizingly close but forever just out of reach.

To understand the GLX's importance, consider that Somerville has a long and rich history of getting screwed over by municipal transportation projects. In the early 20th century, our seven hills were

home to a commuter rail and streetcar system that rivaled San Francisco's cable cars. By mid-century, our streetcars had been abandoned as a consequence of discriminatory highway practices and investment. The folks from Massachusetts plowed through our city with Interstate 93 and sliced up our neighborhoods with State Routes 16, 28, and 38. In the process, they demolished hundreds of homes, divided our community, and deposited noxious fumes in our air.

I grew up in the shadow of State Route 28, with a cacophony of cars and diesel trucks downshifting in the background. Like many kids in my neighborhood, I developed what we called the "Somerville cough." As we grew up, researchers made it clear why: Somerville had more exposure to traffic than 90 percent of the country.³³ Our traffic-related air pollution (TRAP) was off the charts, meaning that ultra-fine particles swirled through our neighborhoods, snuck through our windows, and slipped under our doorsills, filling our lungs at dangerous levels. The Community Assessment of Freeway Exposure and Health Study (CAFEH), a painstaking, four-year research project out of Tufts University, linked Somerville's traffic exposure to higher rates of heart disease, asthma, and lung cancer in our residents.³⁴

The GLX was at its core an environmental justice project. When I took office in 2004, Somerville was a veritable public transportation desert. Only 15 percent of our population lived within a half-mile walk of a subway stop at the time, despite being the biggest users per capita of the T in all of Greater Boston.³⁵ We had only one subway stop in our whole city of 81,000 people: the Red Line stop at Davis Square. Our next-door neighbors in Cambridge had seven stops.³⁶ Far-flung suburbs like Needham, which had four times fewer residents than Somerville, had four times more subway stops.³⁷ When we added the Orange Line Station at Assembly Square in 2014, that was the first transportation addition to our community in 27 years, a shameful statistic.³⁸

The GLX proposed extending the Green Line from its existing terminus at Lechmere Station in East Cambridge into Somerville and Medford, with a new final destination at Tufts University. The original project dated back to the 1990s, when the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) promised Somerville and Medford the GLX in exchange for the Big Dig, whose construction would clog our streets with even more congestion.³⁹ The MBTA tried to renege on that promise many times over as Big Dig costs and timelines spiraled out of control, making a subway extension into a city with primarily immigrant and Black and brown residents a low priority. In 2005, the MBTA offered us a Bus Rapid Transit system instead of the GLX, arguing that it would satisfy the state's mitigation requirements. Activists, community groups, concerned residents, and my administration packed a public meeting with state officials and made our message clear: We weren't interested in apology gifts. We wanted the Green Line.

Two things happened in our favor the next year: First, the Conservation Law Foundation sued the State of Massachusetts for dragging its heels on a host of transportation projects, which led to a settlement and new GLX promises from the state with new deadlines.⁴⁰ Second, Democratic candidate for governor Deval Patrick ran for office on a campaign partly built on criticizing the Big Dig and pushing for new transportation projects, like the GLX, that would increase mobility and lead to economic development in the region. He won the race comfortably in fall 2006.

In 2007, the Transportation Finance Commission published research suggesting that the existing infrastructure of the T was languishing so badly that the cost of updates and improvements would lead to a shortfall of \$15 to \$19 billion over the course of two decades.⁴¹ Some argued that prioritizing any new infrastructure against this bleak financial backdrop was pie in the sky. And despite Governor Patrick's support, I sensed that his new secretary of transportation, Bernard Cohen, was less enthusiastic about the GLX. After months in office, he still hadn't assigned any staff to the project. Instead, he seemed to be prioritizing the South Coast Rail project, which would extend commuter rail service to southeastern Massachusetts. So, I went to meet with him at the State Transportation Building.

“Let me understand something,” I said. “What is the administration’s stance on the GLX?”

“The administration is committed to the South Coast Rail project,” he said.

“That’s a good project, and you should do it, but its benefits pale in comparison to the GLX, which your governor supports.”

“I have the governor’s support.”

“Don’t drag your feet on Somerville.”

“We’re not dragging our feet.”

“We have a legally binding commitment from the state. If this keeps up, I’m going to sue you, and I’m going to win. Before it comes to that, I’m calling the governor, and I’m calling you guys out on this.”

After that conversation, I requested a meeting with the governor and headed to the state house shortly thereafter. Secretary Cohen’s chief of staff was in attendance as well as some other key players in Governor Patrick’s administration.

“Listen, everyone in this room is a good person,” I said, “but none of this stuff is getting done. Who’s in charge?”

Governor Patrick looked around the room. “I want this done today,” he said.

Of course, it didn’t get done in a day, a week, a month, or a year. It soon became clear that despite Governor Patrick’s support, we were fighting a three-headed monster: the state’s bureaucracy, finite time, and finite resources. I knew that we couldn’t afford to add a fourth head to this monster: our own. As a city and community, we needed to present an allied front and fight together, unleashing our activists and my administration in a coordinated assault. SomerVision 2030 was critical.

Throughout the drafting phase, we worked with community groups to help them understand how the GLX was vital to so many of our shared and individual goals, whether it be transportation or job growth, climate change or housing development. One of our community groups, the Friends of the Community Path, had been working for years to build a network of interconnected bike paths from Boston through Somerville as a viable alternative to mass transit. In response to their concerns about the GLX, we invited them to create a map of bike routes that could connect with proposed GLX stations. Another community group, the Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership, worked to ensure that GLX stations would be wheelchair accessible and connect with walking paths.

This broad-based community alignment was tested in 2012 when, shortly after SomerVision 2030 was formally adopted, the GLX project nearly flew off the rails. The MBTA and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation conducted a risk assessment of building the GLX through Somerville’s Union Square. The results were grim. A host of problems came to light that could lead to serious delays, mostly stemming from Union Square’s industrial history. Old factories and a badly polluted scrap metal yard aren’t the sort of structural foundation that engineers desire when building a track bed. The negative risk assessment threatened federal funding for the project. And if we lost federal funding, we lost the Green Line.

The MBTA was too financially strapped to undertake the cleanup itself, so my administration switched gears and marshaled a rapid response. We applied to designate Union Square a “Revitalization District” under Massachusetts state law and drafted an urban renewal plan that would allow us to fast-track the municipal acquisition of dilapidated buildings and polluted parcels, by eminent domain if necessary.⁴² We identified seven development blocks within the Union Square neighborhood and furnished plans to transform them over a 20-year period with new office buildings, residential housing, retail space, and research labs.⁴³ Some aldermen and members of the community grew concerned that we were moving too fast and placing too much control in the hands of the Somerville Redevelopment Authority. As we moved forward and sought a developer for the project, residents banded together to form the Union Square Neighborhood Council and voiced frustration about the lack of civic engagement and involvement that had gone into the urban renewal plan.

They were particularly frustrated after seeing how we had partnered with the Mystic View Task Force as co-creators at Assembly Square. Likewise, where SomerVision 2030 had invited the whole community to co-author our future, the city of Somerville was now seeking to rapidly acquire parcels and clear the way for the GLX, causing justifiable concerns about displacement and increased inequity in the neighborhood. There was a sense of betrayal, which was hard to swallow as a mayor who had worked so hard for so long to build trust and confidence in the community.

I told them straight up, “Listen, I get it. We’re asking to do this ass-backward. I’m sorry we have to do it this way.”

That being said, I pushed back on the thesis that rapid urban renewal at Union Square would threaten their well-being. To the contrary, it would clean up contaminated sites and bring more housing, commerce, and jobs to the area. It would help to reduce air pollution and increase our commercial tax base, which in turn would more than cover the \$10 million that the city would need to acquire the parcels. I reminded residents and the Board of Aldermen about SomerVision 2030 and the hundreds of shared goals in the comprehensive plan, many of which would be unattainable without the GLX and urban renewal at Union Square. And I told the Union Square Neighborhood Council that we would work hand in hand with them moving forward, so that they could partake in the visioning and planning process for Union Square.

Ultimately, the Board of Aldermen approved the Union Square Revitalization Plan in October 2012. The state approved it shortly thereafter. In 2013, the Board of Aldermen green-lit \$10 million in funds for parcel acquisition. We took over the scrap metal yard site by eminent domain later that year, and the business, Prospect Iron and Steel Corp, moved upstate to Lawrence, Massachusetts.⁴⁴

The next year, Governor Patrick, whose support had been so critical, announced that he would not seek reelection for governor of Massachusetts. The tea leaves suggested that Republican candidate Charlie Baker would soon take over, and he was openly against the GLX. My administration worked tirelessly to secure state approval and federal funding for the GLX before Governor Patrick’s time was up. We succeeded in January 2015, three days before the end of Governor Patrick’s administration, when the Federal Transit Administration finalized a nearly \$1 billion Full-Funding Grant Agreement and the state approved the project.⁴⁵ We made sure to get U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx out to Somerville with Governor Patrick to celebrate the accomplishment in public. One of the last things Governor Patrick did before leaving office was to hire designers, engineers, and contractors for the GLX.

But we still weren’t in the clear. Charlie Baker took office on January 8, 2015. Despite winning his initial approval for the GLX, it soon came out that the plan was running more than \$1 billion over its original \$2 billion budget.⁴⁶ Plenty of people in Baker’s camp wanted to kill the project on ideological grounds. They were opposed to spending \$1 billion or more of state funding on a new transportation project when the existing transportation infrastructure and services were ailing badly. Baker was presented with the need to either pause, rescope, and rebid the project or cancel it altogether. Stephanie Pollack, the CEO of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, called to brief me on the situation.

“We’re ready to work with you at every step, ensure we do this the right way, and get spending under control,” I said. “But if you cancel this project, Somerville won’t give up. We will make this a public fight, and we will win eventually. Please tell the governor he needs to call me.”

A couple of days later, Charlie Baker followed up personally.

“I want to do this project, Joe, but I don’t want to spend an extra billion on it.”

“We don’t either. You’re not wrong on that. We will collaborate with you and do everything we can to keep spending under control, if you pledge your support.”

“I pledge my support, Joe.”

The MBTA brought in a new team of designers, engineers, and contractors to rescope the GLX. It was unclear what parts of the original design would survive, if any. The community groups, allies, and stakeholders in Somerville who had worked tirelessly on this for years were deflated. I had never seen morale so low among Somerville's most ardent activists. I called them together, along with allies from surrounding Medford and Arlington. "The Green Line is going to happen," I promised, "and let me tell you why. The commonwealth has already spent more than \$800 million on this project. They're not going to get that back unless they get the federal money. If there's a billion dollars of federal money sitting on the table, they're going to take it. Think about the message it would send to Washington if Massachusetts sends a billion in funding back because we can't execute a transportation project. That's not good for anyone. Plus, the Green Line delivers 10,000 units of housing, economic activity, and 30,000 net new jobs. It's going to happen. Charlie Baker's not stupid."

I told them that we couldn't lose faith now, that unleashing our community activism and maintaining alignment was as important as it ever had been. When the rescoped project came out, it included the community bike path and wheelchair-accessible stations. The Union Square station was still there. We got everything we wanted except the Route 16 extension.⁴⁷ On the flip side, as a contingency of moving forward with the project, Governor Baker now asked Somerville to produce \$50 million in funding and Cambridge for \$25 million as well. With widespread community support, the Somerville Board of Aldermen approved the \$50 million in December 2016.⁴⁸ The MBTA broke ground on the project on June 25, 2018.⁴⁹ Four and a half years later, in December 2022, the Green Line officially opened for service in Somerville.⁵⁰ Eighty percent of our residents now live within a half-mile walk of a subway stop.



One day in 2013, my director of communications and community engagement, Denise Taylor, walked into my office with an astounding statistic.

"We recently conducted a survey with our immigrant population to track their engagement with city government," she said. "Here are the results."

I expected something positive. Engaging our immigrant population was a point of pride at Somerville City Hall. As a kid who grew up in Somerville in a family where English was a second language, it mattered a lot to my administration and to me personally. In the 21st century, a third of Somerville's population was still foreign-born. More than 50 languages were spoken in our schools and communities.⁵¹ When I was young, you most often heard Italian and Greek. These days, it was Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. The church where I was baptized, St. Anthony of Padua, was the heart of the Roman Catholic Italian community in Prospect Hill when I was a boy. Now, it was the heart of the Brazilian-Portuguese population.

Either way, then as now, cultural and linguistic diversity was core to our identity. That's why when we launched ResiStat, we had translators on hand so that residents could speak in whatever language they felt most comfortable. When we launched SomerVision, we made sure that representatives for each demographic and cultural community had a seat on the SomerVision Steering Community. Our 311 "One Call to City Hall" hotline was serviced by operators who spoke a host of languages. I wanted everyone to understand that I was *their* mayor and that this was *their* city government. We served them. They were our constituents and clients.

I looked at the paper. Ninety percent of survey respondents said that they had never received any form of outreach from city government. That meant about 25,000 people, or a third of our residents, had reported that they had no relationship with us. I was flabbergasted.

“We need to fix this,” I said.

As a learning organization, we took it as an opportunity. How could we better engage our immigrant population and why were we failing when we thought we were succeeding? In the fall of 2013, we took our data to the Board of Aldermen and used it as an argument to create a new program called SomerViva to oversee our work around immigrant outreach. We hired three cultural liaisons for the new program, which existed within our communications department. One spoke fluent Portuguese, one fluent Spanish, and one fluent Haitian Creole and French.³² First and foremost, their primary role was to ensure that city communications reached their respective immigrant communities. This meant more than just translating press releases and announcements; it meant helping us forge relationships with local immigrant communities and figuring out why we were failing to connect with them.

Our liaisons learned that a lot of the immigrant population distrusted government, both because of their relationships with untrustworthy governments in their home countries and because of their perception of ours as an enemy rather than an ally. Furthermore, our liaisons added, most of our immigrant communities didn’t feel comfortable coming to a meeting at City Hall or a ResiStat meeting.

“So, where would they trust meeting with us?” I asked.

Church, it turned out. We started meeting in local churches, like at Saint Anthony of Padua, and listening to immigrants describe their challenges and experiences in our city. I attended every one of these eye-opening meetings. We realized that we couldn’t wait for the immigrant community to come to us, even if we had translators on hand. We needed to go to them and meet them where they were. As a result, we started posting all of our translated announcements at churches around Somerville, at local supermarkets, and at public schools. Instead of checking our website or receiving mail from the city, some immigrant communities felt more comfortable receiving text messages on their cell phones. We also learned that immigrant communities were tuned into local radio stations, allowing us to communicate effectively with them over the airwaves.

In 2014, we grew SomerViva from a small program to the new SomerViva Office of Immigrant Affairs. Our liaisons went from part-time employees to full-time city staff members. At the same time, we expanded our goal from doing a better job communicating with our immigrant population to ensuring that they had equitable access to city services and community resources and felt comfortable participating in city government. We stepped up education efforts around our affordable housing initiatives, like our “100 Homes” program, which bought 100 existing multi-family units in Somerville and made them permanently affordable.³³ Our immigrant communities were prime candidates for programs like these but often didn’t know about them or understand how to apply or qualify.

At the suggestion of one of our SomerViva liaisons, Irma Flores, we switched up the format at select ResiStat meetings to increase immigrant participation. In the past, English was always the default language, though translators were available. Now, the default language was Spanish, Portuguese, or Haitian Creole, with translators present so that I and other senior officials could listen along.

I’ll never forget sitting in my first ResiStat meeting with headphones on, hearing a whole conversation translated from Spanish in real time. It was a transformative moment for me and the community alike. “I don’t feel like you’re giving me some handout,” one resident said. “You’re here to listen to me. Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “It’s important that you understand that we need you. You’re an important part of our lives in Somerville. Your kids and my kids go to school together. You’re my neighbor, my friend. This is not an obligation or a burden to us. This is our responsibility. You make us better.”

The SomerViva Office of Immigrant Affairs worked to increase engagement with immigrant youth in our after-school and summer programming as well as services like Teen Empowerment Somerville,

which got youth involved in leadership roles to combat drug use, violence, and suicide. After the Trump Administration announced that it would end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017,⁵⁴ a group of immigrant students came to visit me at City Hall with a representative from the SomerViva Office. The students ranged from eighth graders all the way down to kindergartners, and they all wanted Somerville to take a public stand in support of Dreamers and DACA. I went before the Board of Aldermen and asked them to pass a resolution that would express that our city's wills and beliefs were aligned with Dreamers. While I wasn't asking for a binding piece of legislation, the Board of Aldermen still turned my request down.

A few days later I met with the students. They were dejected. I told them, "As a mayor, I have some influence and power, and yes, I can express your voice. But no one can do it better than you. What's helped me is to hear your perspective and your stories. I think they need to hear it from you."

A month later, the students went before the Board of Aldermen, this time not as silent voices in the audience but as presenters. It was incredibly moving. The Board of Aldermen passed the resolution unanimously.

Conclusion

Nothing in leadership is linear save for paving a pothole. The moment you feel like you're comfortably walking a straight line, a surprise comes along to throw you off balance. Like, for instance, learning that you're failing to engage your immigrant population in civic matters, when previously you had prided yourself on this very accomplishment. The non-linear nature of the job isn't a bad thing. In fact, it often leads to positive results that you as a leader never could have anticipated or foreseen.

That's why it's so important for politicians, academics, and activists to understand that there is no one blueprint for building better civic engagement. There's no manual where you can follow step A, B, C, and D to arrive at the promised land of a fully participatory and democratized city government. To me, civic engagement is a work in progress. It's a study and a lifelong commitment to learning. For 18 years, Somerville was my classroom. And I enjoyed feeling like the least informed person in the room, eager to soak up as much information as I could and then turn around and give our administration and the community the license and latitude to implement what I call "abnormal" solutions.

To me, abnormal means more than going beyond the status quo. It's not just thinking outside of the box. Sometimes, we need to turn the whole world upside down. We need people to be probative and to push back on our policies, even things that are being lauded as successful. "If it's not hard, it's not fun," I often say. In welcoming the community into City Hall, with all the messiness and noise that comes with participatory government, I improved as mayor and the city thrived because of it.

Notes

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Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School
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Cambridge, MA 02138

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