

# Mayor Curtatone's Culture of Curiosity

## *Building Data Capabilities at Somerville City Hall*

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Days after his ninth inauguration in January 2020, Mayor Joseph Curtatone was reflecting on his sixteen years at the helm of city hall in Somerville, Massachusetts. The city he loved—his hometown—had made great strides since he took office, and his passion for serving the community was stronger than ever. Still, he wondered if it was time to pass the baton at term's end. And if not then, when?

In his 2020 inaugural address, he had promised to continue tackling issues beyond the city's borders. He relayed what he had heard on his most recent campaign trail, that "Residents don't want us just to provide . . . core services, they also want us to defend our community's values."<sup>1</sup> He spoke of issues that had crept into residents' everyday lives, such as "existential climate threat"; "a regional housing crisis that's spinning out of control"; an opioid crisis; and "a federal government that's targeting our immigrant residents."<sup>2</sup>

"As mayor," Curtatone said, "I'm constantly asking myself, what is my role?"<sup>3</sup> Known for peppering his staff with questions about their processes and results while constantly challenging them to do more, he felt he had instilled curiosity and calculated risk-taking in his city's operations over the years, saying, "I want people who are 'probative.'"<sup>i</sup> He dared his staff to "be abnormal," and demanded: "bring me your wackiest ideas." He quipped, "If you want to convince me to do something, just tell me it's absolutely crazy and nobody's ever done it . . . It goes right to the front . . . as long as we can explain it."

Curtatone knew he couldn't be mayor forever and hoped that "the next person is even more curious than I am." In the meantime, how could he set up Somerville for future success? He believed this was less about legacy; this was truly about how long-lasting the capabilities and culture were that he and his team had developed over the years. How would they hold up against some of the country's—and world's—most complex issues? And what did he have to do to ensure that city hall continued to question its practices, take risks backed by data, listen to residents, and innovate—whether he was at the helm or not?

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<sup>i</sup> While "probative" is a legal term meaning "having the quality of proving something," (Source: Oxford English Dictionary), Mayor Curtatone used it colloquially to mean the characteristic of questioning policies, approaches, phenomena, etc.

## Somerville, Massachusetts

Somerville, a city of roughly 81,000 people packed into 4.2 square miles,<sup>ii</sup> was the most densely populated municipality in New England and, with 20,000 foreign-born residents, one of the most diverse.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the leafy streets and Ivy League charm of neighboring Cambridge, Somerville had been home to brickmaking, meatpacking, and auto plants in the 1800s and 1900s.<sup>5</sup> Still, by 2019, it had earned an outsized reputation for innovation. For years, headline after headline had lauded its strides, calling it “The Model City,”<sup>6</sup> and “The Little City that Could.”<sup>7</sup> But, it hadn’t always been that way.

### *A Transformation*

In the 1970s and 1980s, Somerville boasted a rough-and-tumble reputation, known for auto theft, gang wars, and dishonest dealings.<sup>8</sup> But by the early 2000s, *The Boston Globe* described Somerville as “a city whose image was improving fast—from a mobbed-up sinkhole of corruption to a funky, family-friendly city, gaining ground on nearby Cambridge and Boston.”<sup>9</sup> Within a generation, residents were experiencing skyrocketing real estate prices and living in highly sought-after neighborhoods surrounded by burgeoning hubs of creativity and enterprise.<sup>10</sup>

Though not all residents welcomed the city’s popularity—like the many priced out of their long-time homes—academics, columnists, and others eagerly opined on the ingredients of the city’s success, such as its proximity to powerhouse universities; an inherent quirky, centuries-old character; the subway line that had extended to the city’s Davis Square in the mid-1980s; its data analytics program (SomerStat) that supported many major city decisions; or a mayor who embraced data and innovation, held his staff accountable to lofty goals, and had a steadfast commitment to customer service.

To some, the city’s success was inextricably linked to the mayor himself. Dan Hadley, a former chief of staff, said, “The city runs on Joe Power.”<sup>11</sup> Curtatone, however, saw success in collaborative terms: “I’ve tried to make sure I let people own [their ideas], ensure that the change is not going to be driven by me. I’ll be out front. I’ll take the hits, I’ll fight for it, so I hope, at least, people feel, ‘The mayor—he’s got our back.’”<sup>12</sup> The constituent services director, Steve Craig, explained, “He doesn’t mandate a certain outcome. He just mandates that the city be the best place it can be to live, work, play, raise a family, and grow old. That’s what he requires. And that’s, I think, why I still work here.”<sup>13</sup>

### Homegrown

Raised in Somerville by Italian immigrants, Curtatone was a man of innate curiosity. “I used to read the Encyclopedia Britannica, stay up late watching the Discovery Channel,” he recalled. Obsessed with airplanes—he would point them out overhead and recite their flight paths—he harbored dreams of becoming a pilot. He taught himself to play half a dozen musical instruments, loved history and math, and played varsity football at Somerville High School. “There were a lot of great mentors, teachers, coaches I’d had that helped me growing up in an urban community as a young kid,” said Curtatone. He graduated from Boston College and after law school practiced as an attorney.

At thirty, he was elected to Somerville’s Board of Aldermen (later called city council). He recounted that when he was elected alderman, “I was really curious . . . about how cities function, what city

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<sup>ii</sup> 4.2 square miles is equivalent to 10.9 square kilometers.

government's purpose is. I tried getting a better understanding of the city as a complex ecosystem."<sup>14</sup> He served as an alderman for eight years and chaired the finance committee, all while practicing law, coaching high school football, running three miles a day, lifting weights at the local gym, and practicing martial arts. "I have undiagnosed ADHD," Curtatone often said.

Of his calling to run for mayor, he said, "I felt we needed a narrative and a plan and a compass for the future that broke us out of our mold. And a reputation where we weren't known as, I don't repeat it really ever, but 'Slumerville,' which always offended me as a young boy growing up here."<sup>15</sup> He explained, "Generations ago, it was well deserved . . . we couldn't deliver services. We missed every opportunity for economic upturn. We had no plan for transportation, land use, or how we were going to develop and grow."<sup>16</sup> Curtatone sought to upend that narrative: "I wanted to build the most professional, innovative, dynamic administration that not only delivers the best service, but that understands how that impacts peoples' lives in the future."<sup>17</sup>

After losing the mayoral election in 1999, in 2003, Curtatone "strode into City Hall and, less than an hour before the filing deadline, took out nomination papers for the mayor's race."<sup>18</sup> Although he had declined to run just weeks before because he was a new father, he soon declared, "I can't stand by idly for personal reasons while Somerville goes down the wrong track."<sup>19</sup>

## First Term: Inheriting a Bureaucracy

In November 2003, Curtatone won the race, taking 52 percent of the vote.<sup>20</sup> In his victory speech, he said, "They said I had too many plans, that I had too much substance . . . No one should underestimate the intelligence of Somerville voters."<sup>21</sup> Curtatone would have to guide the city's residents through a trying time: state funding cuts had just lost 200 municipal workers their jobs.<sup>22</sup> He reflected, "The city did not have a capacity for analytics or to look at any data on a real-time basis . . . We couldn't manage our way to success because we weren't measuring anything."<sup>23</sup> He added, "I am not a fiscal expert or even an analyst."<sup>24</sup> Still, it quickly became clear that the mayor loved data, in addition to hearing directly from community voices.

Upon taking office, Curtatone remembered a "static, bureaucratic, budget-focused, traditional city." He vowed to "accept none of that approach. . . While fiduciary duties are always important . . . Neither a balanced budget nor your bond rating touches anything about whether life is worth living in your community, whether there is opportunity, whether equity exists, whether you can start a small business, and so forth. But that was the normal way of doing it."

Curtatone knew changing a city hall's culture was no simple feat. "It's like turning around an aircraft carrier," he said. Of his change-making style, he said, "I'm not antagonistic; I'm competitive. And I hire for that. I also hire for being probative and abnormal—not being afraid to be different and try new things." For that reason, he typically asked in interviews for new hires, "Do you have a passion for curiosity and a willingness to be abnormal?" He noted, "The public doesn't want static."

Curtatone's reform agenda included a stat program (SomerStat), a 311 call center, modernizing budgeting practices, and taking on childhood obesity with a novel ecosystem approach.

### *SomerStat: "The Nervous System of the City"*

Before taking office, Curtatone took his transition team to Baltimore to see Mayor Martin O'Malley's pioneering interdepartmental stat program, CitiStat. The Somerville delegation witnessed the fast-paced meetings held in the "war room" and data-informed decision-making in action.

Hired in 2004, inaugural SomerStat director Stephanie Hirsch recalled that the mayor wanted SomerStat meetings on the books within a week, "He didn't want to spend time planning the perfect model. Starting the program was as simple as getting the data that people have and sitting around a table and talking about it."<sup>25</sup> Hirsch met with the mayor every morning for an hour to review what had happened the day before, the current day's task list, and what would happen the next day. "He was incredibly supportive," she said. "If we asked something of a department manager, he always backed the SomerStat team without exception." She also recalled that SomerStat launched during a tumultuous time with pressure on department heads to move fast and make changes. "It was painful for some people and stressful for everyone," said Hirsch. "There was turnover. There were a lot of changes. Some of it was addressing long-standing municipal challenges, some of it was professionalizing the city."

From the start, Curtatone set the tone. "I made clear that I wasn't trying to be 'Big Brother' with the data," he said. "It wasn't punitive. But did it hold people accountable? Yes." Emily Monea, a former SomerStat director who became Curtatone's chief of staff in November 2019, said, "Even calling it 'the war room' in Baltimore speaks to how there was a little bit of a punitive approach to it."<sup>26</sup> She added, "Analysts needed to build up trust with the department heads in order to get them to share information freely, both failures and successes . . . to get them not to juke the stats, which is actually pretty easy for them to do."<sup>27</sup>

Skye Stewart, SomerStat's director before Monea and chief of staff until 2019, said, "It helps that the mayor really does have a deep-seated desire to understand how things work. He would often ask his staff, especially early on, 'Can you show me how you do that thing that you do? What resources do you need to do that thing better? What inefficiencies do you see?'"<sup>28</sup> Hirsch remembered that early SomerStat projects included analyzing staffing budgets to decide if paying overtime or hiring new staff was more efficient, playing a role in a police reform taskforce, and renegotiating a waste transfer station that saved the city \$6 million.

The team also pursued innovative approaches driven by customer service values, such as overseeing surveys to collect data from residents, participating on city-wide task forces, and developing ideas that were instigated by the mayor's questions or brought to him by staff. One such idea was to share an open data portal with residents, which SomerStat launched in 2013. Over the next few years, the team worked to include automatically updating data from 311 calls, public safety, and permits and licenses, eventually creating a dashboard in 2016 that was updated in real time for the mayor and anyone else who had an internet connection.<sup>29</sup> (See Appendix 1 for an example.)

"Emily [Monea] has compared the current iteration of SomerStat to the nervous system of the city," said Cortni Desir, a principal analyst. "We really are touching a lot of initiatives and projects and operations."<sup>30</sup> Michael Mastrobuoni, the budget manager, said that SomerStat analysts became so involved with the departments with which they were working, that they sometimes jumped to other

positions. For example, the chief of staff, the purchasing director, several finance and administrative staff members, and the fire department's data analyst were all former SomerStat staff, he said.<sup>31</sup>

Stewart compared SomerStat's work to internal consultants: "These departments know their work better than everybody else, and I think we've evolved into helping them do their jobs and improve their processes, set expectations, and use data to get the resources they need." Hirsch confirmed the mayor's commitment to data: "Even if he flat out disagrees with something, if you provide enough evidence, he changes his mind unapologetically."

By 2019, SomerStat had a staff of six. Its portfolio included twenty-six departments and divisions. SomerStat meetings—two half-hour meetings every Tuesday—had a tightly structured agenda and were held with the mayor, senior staff, key administrative department heads, and any other department heads relevant to the meeting's specific topic. Typically, the two meetings were separate, but staff would sometimes schedule them back-to-back if there were synergies between the departments. Other meetings were scheduled throughout the year to cover performance management and to present new ideas.

### *Budgeting Transformation*

Even as an alderman, Curtatone lamented, "Budget time really used to get to me . . . Here we were, a multimillion-dollar operation with absolutely no real-time information on even the most basic services. We weren't measuring anything. How many potholes were we filling? How were we filling them?"<sup>32</sup>

Shortly after taking office, he enlisted graduate students<sup>iii</sup> to help convert the city to activity-based costing (ABC). He saw the project as a win-win: "The city could be an experiential classroom for the students. The school would be a resource of knowledge for the city."<sup>33</sup> Once the students moved on, the city found ABC too cumbersome, but the collaboration had helped jump start the process of breaking the budget down into more transparent parts, and the city began presenting the annual budget by program area, which linked directly to departments.

SomerStat worked with city departments to establish means of tracking data to measure performance, which allowed the budget to double as a strategic plan. Departmental goals were included in the budget and reviewed in SomerStat meetings.<sup>34</sup> Soon, the budget also included outcome measures for each department, tying them to specific questions from citizen and staff surveys. For example, the Arts Council kept a close eye on the percent of residents surveyed who felt that art was an important part of the city's identity.<sup>35</sup>

To strengthen the connection between the budget and city hall's performance even further, in fiscal year 2013, the role responsible for creating the operating budget moved from the auditing department to SomerStat. Michael Mastrobuoni, who filled the position in 2016, said the move made sense, since "this is where the city's performance measurement experts are." Mastrobuoni soon revised the annual budget to include tables with more granular performance metrics, "to bring a real sense of accountability to what the budget is promising," he said. For example, in the FY 2015 budget, the Arts Council's metrics included the number of street festivals/events, the number of business sponsors, the

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<sup>iii</sup> The graduate students were in Harvard Kennedy School Professor Linda Bilmes' course, Greater Boston Applied Field Lab.

number of youth served through programs/events, and the amount of outside financial support for the fiscal year.<sup>36</sup>

In FY 2016, the city launched an online budget-visualization tool for residents to explore spending through dynamic charts and graphs. “We’ll always be working on transparency to make clear what residents are buying with their taxes,” said Mastrobuoni. “At the end of the day, they’re our customers and they expect certain things from us.”

In 2017, the city earned the GFOA’s Distinguished Budget Presentation Award, which it went on to win for several years in a row.<sup>37</sup> Over Curtatone’s tenure, the city’s bond rating had risen four steps on Moody’s scale to AA1 and five steps on S&P’s to AA+.

### *311, the Constituent Call Line*

Somerville’s 311 call line, which would be accessible twenty-four hours a day, began taking shape in December 2005, with the tagline “one call to city hall.”<sup>38</sup> SomerStat developed the early rollout plan, selecting software, defining the initial scope, and hiring the department’s first director in 2006.<sup>39</sup>

Initially, 311 handled customer service for the department of public works (DPW) and transferred calls related to other departments. Soon, it took on responsibility for the parking department, which received thousands of calls a month. “If you call in about a parking permit, we actually have the ability to go into the system [and] let you know . . . what you need to do to move forward,” said Craig. Staff were also trained to answer questions for departments that had their own customer service, like the treasury department. “A lot of people just need to know where to make their tax payments,” said Craig. “We don’t say, ‘Let me transfer you, so they can tell you.’ The whole point is to make it a first-call resolution.”

Craig, 311’s director since 2009, said, “I’d been told my predecessor came in with a more heavy-handed approach saying, ‘This is what the mayor demands, this is what you have to do.’” Craig said his own approach recognized the expertise of the departments. “We don’t tell DPW how to fill a pothole, we don’t tell the parking department how to issue a ticket.” However, Craig explained that 311 needed buy-in from across city hall to be able to resolve issues quickly and close communication loops, not just close out a ticket that would reopen later that day, which he said would be “gaming the system.”

As more data was tracked—and eventually mapped—on why people were calling, leadership was able to not only predict where the city needed extra resources, but also which other departments 311 should support and to what degree. Craig explained, “Some of it we triage and fix and it’s resolved. But other calls represent a systemic need. Like, look, a lot of people are calling about city clerk issues . . . It’s not just a suspicion, we have all this data to validate that.”

Still, Monea noted that no data set was perfect.<sup>40</sup> For example, someone could call in a rat sighting multiple times and encourage their neighbors to do the same, resulting in many reports for just one incident. Craig explained in response, “My belief is the data we provide is meant to be guidance and . . . it needs to be considered for what it is . . . It’s analysis of qualitative feedback and insights and emotional feedback. . . . The potential for qualitative improvements in any organization through feedback, whether it’s structured or unstructured—we’re just barely scratching the surface on the value of that type of information.” Monea added, “We have to acknowledge the strengths and

weaknesses of all of the imperfect data we have access to and properly analyze them to figure out as best we can what is going on in the city. This is what SomerStat does and why they're so important."

Craig noted that the city's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, installed in 2015, helped 311 operate at a high standard relative to its budget. He explained that large cities could afford enterprise systems while Somerville could not and needed a robust CRM to address changing expectations. "When I got here," he said, "You could call 311 and they'd say, 'Let me give you a reference number so that if you call back, we can give you a status update.' . . . People scoff at that now. It's more like, 'why can't you just text it to me?' . . . The goalposts keep moving as the city evolves, and we have to keep reevaluating how much this staff can accurately and courteously deliver to the public."

By 2019, 311 managed services for fifteen departments and handled over 140,000 interactions per year. About one-third of the representatives spoke more than one language, and translation services were available. Queue time was roughly twenty seconds and calls typically lasted under three minutes.

### *Shape Up Somerville*

In Curtatone's first term, Tufts University Professor Christina Economos walked into his office with an attention-grabbing data point: nearly half of Somerville's first and third graders were either overweight or obese.<sup>41</sup> "When you see a number like that, it makes clear that this is a complex systems problem," said Curtatone. Economos had received a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) grant to apply systems-thinking to reducing obesity in schoolchildren, and she said, "I knew I needed a sparkplug, a champion."<sup>42</sup> As she recalled, in that very first meeting, the mayor said, "I'm in."

The initiative, called Shape Up Somerville (SUS), focused on children's diet and physical activity. The city encouraged children to walk to school and painted more crosswalks and re-assigned crossing guards to new locations. Soon, 5 percent more children were walking.<sup>43</sup> At school, the cafeteria offered more fruit, vegetables, and whole grains, and removed sugary drinks and unhealthy snacks. "The school district even lost a little money for a while," reported *The Wall Street Journal*, "But we just decided it was in everybody's best interest," said the food-service director.<sup>44</sup> School curricula began to include nutrition, exercise, and activities, such as voting in taste tests. Afterschool programs added yoga, dance, and soccer, and at home, parents were armed with healthy recipes, safe walking routes to school, and other resources.<sup>45</sup>

SUS soon grew beyond the Tufts intervention and its collective impact approach spread to "a constellation of systems-level changes."<sup>46</sup> Curtatone said, "The mottos were: eat smart, play hard, move more. I used this as a lens to look at the entire city." The city worked with restaurants to designate healthier foods and more reasonable portion sizes; installed bike racks; started gardens and farmers markets that accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits; organized health fairs and fun runs; and offered gym membership reimbursements to city employees.<sup>47</sup> The mayor's involvement remained strong; Economos quipped, "It was like, where's Joe? He was reading to kids in the cafeteria, running a road race, we were addressing the community together. . . . He was a real partner and believed we could do something unique."

After CDC funding ended in 2005 and Economos secured some bridge funding, Curtatone hired SUS's director at city hall. In 2007, the initiative's results were published: the intervention had made a

difference. According to a metric called the body mass index (BMI) z-score, after two school years “fewer Somerville children were obese or overweight” as compared to control groups.<sup>48</sup> While the BMI z-score reduction was modest at 0.06, Economos said it was still significant, as the children were also growing during the study period.<sup>49</sup> After the study, the city continued to monitor and contextualize the data, in part because of changing demographics. “Lower income and communities of color bear the disproportionate burden of obesity . . . [and] If a community becomes more racially diverse over time, as is the case in Somerville, obesity rates would be expected to rise,” noted one report.<sup>50</sup> With this in mind, the mayor decided the work would continue.

Curtatone explained how SUS influenced his administration: “Now with other complex issues, we try to break it down from the front line to the heads of agencies and see how we can build something that makes things better.” Economos said that as the champion of SUS, Curtatone was “a thoughtful and an innovative leader who understands how to piece together different systems to engineer a community that provided healthy opportunities for children to grow.”

When President Obama was elected in 2008, First Lady Michelle Obama looked to tackle childhood obesity, and SUS came to her team's attention. When she launched her federal program “Let's Move!” in 2010, Curtatone was invited to present SUS's work at the White House (see Appendix 2 for a photo).

By 2019, SUS director Lisa Robinson said the program's main objectives were working towards health equity with community-based system approaches to improve healthy and affordable food access, and to support safe, active play and mobility. She said, “You look around and see the legacy and work that has happened over almost twenty years. Not just in the schools, but with parks and open space, a more walkable community, arts, sustainability, it's been so far-reaching.”<sup>51</sup>

## Aiming Higher

In 2006, five months into Curtatone's second term, Somerville was lauded by *The Boston Globe* as “the best-run city in Massachusetts.”<sup>52</sup> The article gushed, “Tiny Somerville . . . is chockablock with cutting-edge ideas, from a city hot line to computerized tracking of city services to performance-based budgeting. Its openness to change and willingness to use technology are turning around the city often derided as ‘Slumerville.’”<sup>53</sup> Curtatone recalled that was when “People started paying attention to Somerville and not just about how it delivers services but how it takes on big, complex issues.” While the recognition was motivating, he said, “It's not easy being a learning organization. There's a risk to it. Innovation is expected of us now.”

## ResiStat

Curtatone felt Somerville residents were hungry for hyperlocal data, and he knew that data was even more valuable when combined with the community's voice. In 2007, the city piloted ResiStat, a grant-funded outcropping of SumerStat, to engage the public in data-informed decisions.

ResiStat meetings occurred twice a year for each of the seven wards (see Appendix 3 for a photo). The meetings held data-centered discussions on themes such as public works, parking, and safety, updates of concerns raised previously, and other neighborhood issues. A police captain, a city planner, a DPW employee, and other staff regularly presented. Hadley, who started with the city as a part-time ResiStat coordinator in 2010, said that the mayor would be disappointed if he missed even one



meeting. “The mayor was always more honest and transparent than anyone at the meetings,” said Hadley, who remembered an instance when he was new and felt he had to paint city hall in the best possible light in response to a complaint. “The mayor heard the complaint and stood up and said, ‘That’s messed up . . . we really need to do more about that.’”

While the main thrust of ResiStat was to deliver data to residents, the information gathered by the city at ResiStat meetings was equally important. Hadley explained that while certain city staff, like city planners, often met with residents, “Other bureaucrats could probably go five years without talking to a single one, if they wanted to. This really made us face the consequences of our actions—sometimes good, sometimes bad.” Still, it was just one piece of engaging with citizens, not the whole picture. “Like with 311, where their data is biased towards the perspectives of people who think to contact city hall, ResiStat is biased towards people who can spend a few hours at a stat meeting,” Hadley reflected.

In 2014, the ResiStat program moved under the city’s communications department, and by 2019, there were still fourteen ResiStat meetings per year. Presentations could be accessed online, residents could receive ward-specific updates, and its monthly newsletter was sent to thousands of residents.

### *SomerVision 2030*

In 2009, during Curtatone’s third term, he called for a comprehensive city planning document, a first for Somerville. The plan took three years (equivalent to a term and a half) to complete, as the city took time to engage with residents, businesses, nonprofits, and public officials to gain invaluable insights around demographics, economics, housing, land use, and transportation. This work spurred a series of research reports on each topic, which were again workshopped with the community. After thousands of volunteer hours—including those of a sixty-person planning committee, surveys, presentations, and interactive events—the 183-page master plan, called SomerVision 2030, was adopted by the planning board in 2012.<sup>54</sup>

George Proakis, the planning division director at the time (who became the executive director of the office of strategic planning and community development in 2018), said, “I really spent time working with the mayor . . . to make sure it was *his* plan, one he could rely on, believe in, build the entire rest of what he was trying to do around. . . . that the plan had lasting power.”<sup>55</sup> It described “584 values-driven goals, policies, and actions” related to housing, open space, jobs, and other topics, and it surfaced values such as diversity, unique city character, accessibility/public transport, sustainability, and innovation.<sup>56</sup>

In 2018, the city kicked off SomerVision 2040, and by 2019, it had released a SomerVision 2030 progress report, presenting how the city had performed in relation to its 2011 goals. For example, the city had set a goal of 125 acres of new open space, and it had secured fifteen; of its goal for 30,000 new jobs, it had created roughly 7,600; the plan for 6,000 new housing units (1,200 of them to be permanently affordable) resulted in 1,917, of which 387 were affordable.<sup>57</sup>

SomerVision 2030 also helped spur an award-winning zoning-ordinance overhaul. In addition, the coalitions that the SomerVision 2030 process engendered helped pave the way for another signature project of Curtatone’s tenure: the addition of five subway stations in Somerville, known as the Green Line Extension—a project that had been stalled for generations.<sup>58</sup>

## *The Happiness Survey*

In the mayor's fourth term, the SomerStat team approached him with an idea inspired by Bhutan, a small country in the eastern Himalayas. The team wanted to survey residents on their happiness, something never attempted in a U.S. city. Tara Acker, the SomerStat director at the time, and Hadley "[pored] over reports from professors, pundits, and politicians" and kept the mayor apprised of their findings regarding happiness and policymaking.<sup>59</sup> They also reached out to the happiness expert, Professor Daniel Gilbert, who agreed to help. Gilbert proposed three questions to gauge the city's happiness: 1) "How happy are you right now?" 2) "How satisfied are you with life in general?" and 3) "How satisfied are you with Somerville?" The city also benefitted from a pro bono polling consultant who advised on administering phone surveys inhouse, and "311 operators were put to work asking local residents about their wellbeing."<sup>60</sup>

In response to why the mayor was interested in collecting happiness data, he said, "I don't rely just on the financial numbers . . . [That] doesn't tell you why your family decides to stay here."<sup>61</sup> He later wrote, "It may seem odd for a city government to ask people how happy they are. . . . Yet what is the purpose of government if not to enhance the well-being of the public?"<sup>62</sup> Gilbert said, "The data may show nothing of interest, or they may hold big surprises—you just can't tell until you collect them . . . But given that it costs nothing to add some questions about happiness to a census that is already going out, why wouldn't you?"<sup>63</sup> When the results were in, residents rated their happiness at 7.5 out of 10.

Acker explained SomerStat's aim: "We want to see what the baseline data tell us and then expand . . . Is there a correlation between happiness and open space or green space? If we see low levels of satisfaction correlated to low levels of income, perhaps we want more programs aimed at low-income people."<sup>64</sup> Hadley said that the team had found correlations in the data between happiness and city features such as tree density and aesthetics, among others.<sup>65</sup>

By 2019, the city continued to conduct its happiness survey every two years and had collected five datasets, with average happiness fluctuating between 7 and 8 on a 10-point scale.<sup>66</sup>

## *Rodent Action Team (RAT)*

There was no issue too taboo to "stat." After the winter of 2012, in the mayor's fifth term, complaints to 311 for rat sightings jumped 65 percent in a year.<sup>67</sup> Curtatone quickly tasked SomerStat with leading an effort to control the rodent population, which helped convene the RAT, made up of analysts, public health professionals, and staff from the inspectional services department and DPW. The team used 311 and health inspection data to map high-complaint areas and found the hotspots aligned with food supplies. Armed with this data, RAT encouraged city inspectors to increase trash citations and lobbied for more inspection staff.<sup>68</sup> SomerStat also analyzed the city's trash output based on tonnage data and observations of random streets on trash day, and this supported a decision to purchase uniform sixty-four-gallon trash cans for every residence to reduce overflowing bins.<sup>69</sup>

Curtatone said in a statement posted to the city's website, "These new initiatives . . . will allow us to tackle this problem from nearly every angle. With the participation of the community, Somerville will lead the way in municipal integrated pest management."<sup>70</sup> While Hadley was the first to admit that they didn't have a control group with which to compare the results, he did compare Somerville's

rodent data to “an excellent counterfactual”: Boston.<sup>71</sup> “After implementing our new programs,” Hadley wrote, “calls dropped by an estimated 40 percent.”<sup>72</sup>

By 2019, the city had created an environmental health coordinator position within Health and Human Services tasked with using data to control rodents. Biologist Georgianna Silveira filled the role, which she said was sometimes described as the “rat czar.”<sup>73</sup> Over two years, she had run two rat studies, one on lethally trapping rats (where she found a relationship between multiple trash violation tickets and rats) and one on the effect of construction sites on rat activity using motion cameras. “Everyone’s interested in rat data,” she said. “Honestly, these can be highly charged emotional situations. Sometimes people just want someone to listen and care. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution.”

## Back to the Future of Somerville in 2020

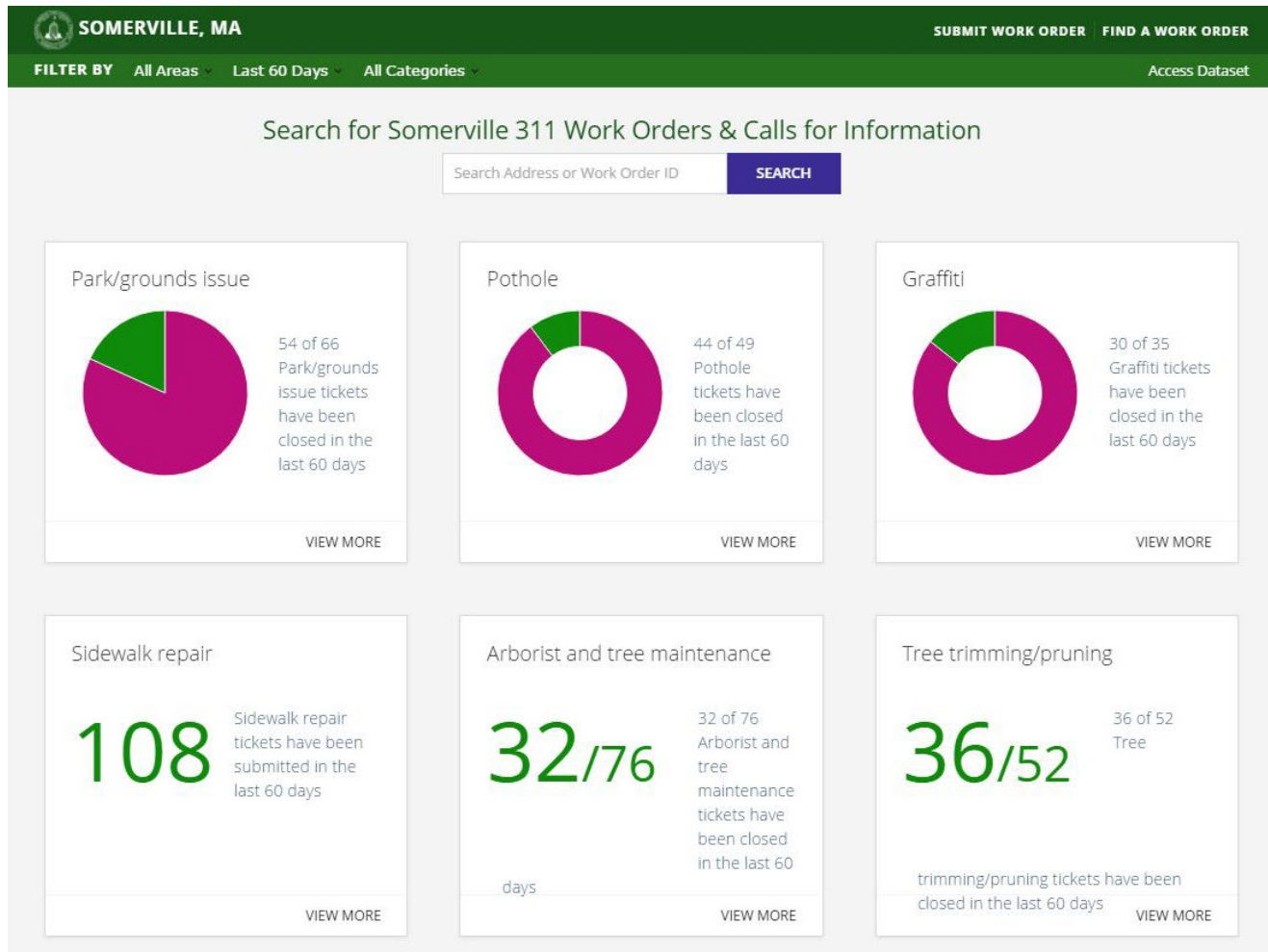
Throughout that January day after his 9th inauguration, Curtatone reflected on what his next term demanded and what the next mayor would need not only to build on past successes, but to forge new ones. He thought about how the city’s progress had been “a constant evolution of how we deliver services, how we perform, and how we manage, measure, observe, and make adjustments,” he said.<sup>74</sup> “We don’t just do something and ignore it and see whether it worked. . . . every day you’re measuring expectations and goals. You’re trying to understand on a real time basis, are we hitting our goals? Are we moving in a way that we expected to be? And if not, how do we adjust it?”<sup>75</sup> These were the questions that poured forth from a foundation of curiosity that Mayor Curtatone did not want his city to lose. Was this what Hadley had called “Joe Power”? And if so, would it remain when he left the mayor’s office?

Brad Rawson, the director of mobility, said, “What I am worried about is the next person in that office not having the courage to act on the data, to make the hard decisions, wanting to kick the can down the road and say, ‘Oh, well what we really need is another year of analysis.’ We need a mayor and a staff who will [. . .] use data to communicate transparently and improve residents’ lives.”<sup>76</sup>

At the end of Curtatone’s current term, his tenure would be eighteen years. If he stepped down, would the city’s capabilities endure or languish? Would future leaders also be as obsessed with learning, improvement, and innovation? And what could he do *now* to ensure his nearly two-decade investment would continue to pay dividends to the people of Somerville?

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Sample of a Publicly Accessible City Dashboard



Source: City of Somerville

**Appendix 2** Mayor Curtatone and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, 2011 Award from Dept. of Health and Human Services for Healthy Living Innovations after the city's "Shape-up Somerville" program was recognized for influencing First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" Program



Source: US government photos provided by the Department of Health and Human Services and the White House, courtesy of City of Somerville

**Appendix 3** Mayor Curtatone at a ResiStat Neighborhood Meeting



Source: City of Somerville

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Mayor Joseph Curtatone are derived from an in-person interview conducted on July 30, 2019 and a videoconference interview conducted on March 3, 2021 by the case writers.
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- <sup>12</sup> In-person interview with Alexander Shermansong and Neil Kleiman, who both teach at NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, conducted on February 19, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Steve Craig are derived from a case writer video conference interview conducted March 18, 2021.
- <sup>14</sup> In-person interview with Alexander Shermansong and Neil Kleiman, who both teach at NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, conducted on February 19, 2020.
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- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Jonas, "Hard Times, And Now a Hard Fight, For Kelly Gay," *The Boston Globe*, July 20, 2003, accessed via Factiva in 2019.
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<sup>33</sup> Robert O'Neill, "On the ground: HKS in Somerville," Harvard Kennedy School, January 16, 2015, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/research-insights/policy-topics/cities-communities/ground>, accessed March 2020.

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<sup>43</sup> Tara Parker-Pope, "As Child Obesity Surges, One Town Finds Way to Slim," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117876338912198027>, accessed April 2021.

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