

2025 State of the City Address – FINAL
Tuesday, February 25, 2025
Mayor E. Denise Simmons' Prepared Remarks

Good evening.

Tonight, we gather in this chamber not just to mark another year gone by, but to take stock of who we are as a city—where we've been, where we stand, and where we're heading. Cambridge is a city of ideas, of action, of progress, and above all, *of people*—people who care, who challenge, who push us forward.

A Historical Moment and Shared Purpose

Thirteen months ago, I had the privilege of being sworn in for my third term as your mayor. As meaningful as that was to me at the time, today it takes on a much deeper resonance: having a senior, Black, female member of the LGBTQ+ Community serving as the public face of this City at a time when Washington is seeking to denigrate, invalidate, and erase our differences is a powerful symbol. It speaks to Cambridge's unwavering resistance against the forces of division and intolerance—an unshakable declaration that we will not be silenced, diminished, or forced to conform to ANYONE's narrow or hateful vision of America.

From the very start of this term, we've been tested – at the inauguration, protests erupted in this very chamber—as voices were raised in concern over global conflicts and local issues alike. Balancing the sacred right to free speech with our commitment to public safety demanded thoughtful, sometimes difficult, decisions. Working alongside the City Manager and our Police Commissioner, we navigated these challenges with respect, collaboration, and thoughtfulness. These moments, while fraught, reminded us of Cambridge's unique spirit: a community that does not shy away from complexity but instead leans into it, determined to find a reasonable path forward.

This term allowed us to welcome some new faces in this chamber – and this term also presented us with moments of great sadness, such as when we mourned the loss of one of our members, City Councilor Joan Pickett. We have grieved, we have been tested, and we have continued to do the important work of serving the people of this great community.

The State of Our City: Resilient and Forward-Moving

The challenges we faced in 2024 tested our resilience, yet they also revealed our strength. Tonight, I am proud to report that the state of our city is resilient, unbowed, and strong. Through moments of joy and hardship, we have stayed true to our values: inclusion, innovation, and community care. These values form the foundation upon which we continue to build, even as we face fresh challenges. Our financial footing is sound, our social fabric is vibrant, and our commitment to equity and fairness remains unyielding.

And while there are no easy answers on how to address each new challenge we face, we can take comfort in knowing that Cambridge has many strengths to draw upon. I'd like to share just a few stories of how we've approached these moments in the first half of this term.

Housing: A Right and a Priority

Of all the significant challenges we faced over this past year, the need for inclusive, affordable housing remained one of the most persistent. That is why, in 2024, we continued taking bold steps to address this issue head-on.

Housing isn't just about buildings and numbers – it's about the very foundation of our community's future. As of July 2024, Cambridge contained 8,931 affordable units, adding 340 new units. While significant, we know this is not enough to meet the profound need in our community. Every week, my office hears from residents struggling to stay in the city they love, from seniors hoping to age in place, to young families dreaming of putting down roots here. We know that the waiting lists for the CHA alone are hovering around 10,000

people, and nearly half that list is comprised of people who *already* live here and are struggling to hang on.

- Our approach has delivered real results. The strengthened Linkage Fee program exemplifies our commitment—rising from \$4.58 per square foot 12 years ago to \$33.34 today, a sevenfold increase. This growth directly supports our ability to preserve and create permanently affordable homes.
- Another watershed moment, the enhancement of our Affordable Housing Overlay, has removed critical barriers to affordable housing development. This isn't just about building more units – it's about creating opportunities in every corner of our city.
- Through our Housing Liaison's Office, we've transformed how our city responds to housing challenges, creating a crucial lifeline for residents facing displacement from their homes.
- And just this month, the Council passed legislation allowing four-story buildings by right—and up to six stories if the upper two floors are 100% affordable. We are taking bold steps to increase housing supply, promote equity, and create a more inclusive community. These reforms not only encourage new housing construction but also establish a more just and forward-thinking approach to zoning across the city.

While other cities debate the housing crisis, *we're taking strong actions to try to solve it*. As we look to the year ahead, we do so with both determination and hope. The challenges are significant, but our resolve is stronger. Every new affordable unit represents a family's stability, every zoning reform opens new possibilities, and every policy innovation brings us closer to our goal: a Cambridge where everyone has a place to call home.

Of course, a city is more than the homes we build—*it's the communities we create*. Safe, thriving neighborhoods are just as essential as affordable housing, and that's why our commitment to public safety remains just as strong.

Public Safety: Building Trust, Ensuring Well-being

Cambridge takes a multi-pronged approach to public safety that is built upon enforcement, trust, collaboration, and innovation. In 2024, we continued the Safe Streets, Safe City initiative, fostering stronger partnerships between law enforcement and the community. In these conversations, we've discussed:

- Our work to create improved street lighting and enhanced security at MBTA stops.
- Our expanded mental health response programs, ensuring that care and compassion are at the center of our approach.
- Our investment in a new Fire Department Headquarters on Broadway, providing our first responders with brand new, state-of-the-art facilities to serve our community.

Persistent issues such as shootings, gang activity, drug-related offenses, and homelessness have also captured our attention, with Central Square serving as a key example—a space rich with potential yet still being held back by these visible struggles. Thanks to our partnership with Mike Monestime and the Central Square BID, we continue to make REAL progress in tackling these issues, and restoring Central Square to the vibrant hub of our city.

As part of this commitment, the Cambridge Police Department is rolling out a surveillance camera pilot program in Central Square to help curb criminal activity and improve safety. This initiative, alongside expanded outreach services, stronger collaboration with law

enforcement and social service providers, and deeper partnerships with local businesses, represents a comprehensive approach to fostering a safer and more vibrant public space.

Looking ahead, we will continue building on our past accomplishments by prioritizing community policing, enhancing emergency response capabilities, and investing in citywide initiatives that make every neighborhood in Cambridge safer and more welcoming.

Celebrating Our Culture and Heritage

In 2024, Cambridge also continued to celebrate its diversity, resilience, and creativity through a number of public celebrations. These included:

- The 30th anniversary of Cambridge Carnival, which brought thousands together to honor our Caribbean heritage, while the City's annual Juneteenth observance continued to grow in prominence, deepening public awareness and reflection on this pivotal moment in American history.
- The story slam and photo exhibits that marked the 20th anniversary of same-gender marriage both helped capture the spirit of that historic night in May 2004 when Cambridge became the first city in the nation to issue same-gender marriage licenses.
- And the Cambridge Museum of History and Culture continued to build momentum, starting with the unveiling of a reimagined Ackermann Room, finally realizing Mayor Vellucci's 43-year-old pledge to honor Cambridge's trailblazing women. We also hosted impactful exhibits for Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and the inaugural Cambridge Mosaic Oral History Project screening at the Brattle Theater.

Education: Investing in the Next Generation

In 2024, the City's schools maintained a top priority, as we sought to ensure that every young person, no matter their background, is given the tools they need to succeed in life. As Chair of the School Committee, I have made it a priority to not only celebrate our successes but to meet our challenges head-on, with a focus on equity, access, and excellence.

Our investment in our public schools have gained national notice. This past year, two of our schools received prestigious honors: Morse Elementary was named a 2024 National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education, with Principal Yung accepting the award in Washington, D.C. And Tobin Montessori earned the 2024 DESE School of Recognition Award for high achievement and growth. And Adrian Davis, a 6th-grade student at the Amigos School, recently won First Place in the NABE 2025 Bilingual Student Essay Competition, a national contest celebrating bilingualism. His achievement highlights the strength of our multilingual education programs. These are just three examples of how Cambridge has worked to be a true leader in providing a world-class education to our students.

Our commitment to these ideals was further exemplified by last year's launch of the City's universal pre-kindergarten program, which provides *free pre-kindergarten education* to all four-year-olds in the city, regardless of income, and which has benefited 800 children in its first year. The program has been a huge success, and we're already looking ahead to finding ways to expand this program to include all *three-year-olds* in the future.

That same commitment to equity and opportunity also shaped the difficult decision to close the Kennedy-Longfellow School. By reassigning students to schools with stronger resources and more stable enrollment, we are ensuring that these young people have access to the kind of learning environment where they can thrive. *And we are committed* to making this transition as smooth as possible for every student and family affected.

And at a time when Washington is issuing cruel and regressive directives that target the most vulnerable among us, it is more critical than ever for local leaders to stand as a shield for ALL our students. That is why the School Committee took decisive action by adopting a new policy to strengthen protections and support for transgender and gender-nonconforming students in our schools. This policy is more than just a measure—it is a declaration that every student in Cambridge deserves to be seen, valued, and affirmed, and on this, Cambridge will NEVER BACK DOWN.

Strong schools require strong leadership, and last year we saw a major transition in our district's leadership. With the departure of Superintendent Dr. Victoria Greer, we appointed Interim Superintendent David Murphy to lead Cambridge Public Schools through this critical period. His leadership has helped bring stability to our district, and as we move forward in the search for a permanent superintendent, we remain focused on finding the person who will uphold our shared vision for academic excellence, racial equity, and student-centered learning. The process for finding a permanent superintendent is currently underway, and I remain confident that we will find the right individual to meet the moment.

At the heart of all this work are the educators who show up every day to guide and inspire our students. I am proud that we successfully negotiated a new contract with the CEA, which includes raises totaling 18.8% over three years and which increases instructional time for K-8 students. This work ensures that our educators are compensated fairly and have the working conditions they need to do their best work. *Investing in our teachers is investing in our students*, and this agreement reflects our deep respect for the work they do.

The past year has been one of transition and progress, of challenges met and opportunities expanded. And through it all, we have remained steadfast in our belief that Cambridge Public Schools must not just be good schools—but truly great ones, where every student, in every neighborhood, has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Working For Our Seniors & Community Outreach Efforts

On the other end of the spectrum, 2024 shined spotlight on our senior community with our Senior Town Hall Meeting, held last September. This meeting covered everything from public safety, to transportation, to the need for more accessible public meetings. This was a tremendous opportunity for City leaders to hear **DIRECTLY** from the people who hrel made this community what it is. One clear takeaway was the need for assistance in helping those in our senior buildings remotely participate in our City Council meetings, and I'm proud to say we are working on bringing that to fruition this year.

We also heard from seniors who lament the loss of parking spaces due to the development of bicycle infrastructure. I believe in finding a balance that accommodates both critical bicycle safety and the needs of our seniors and those with mobility issues, and I continue urging the City to find what I call “the unhappy middle” on this matter. Rather than competing groups of residents looking for a zero-sum solution, we need to find a way that takes a more global, more holistic resolution.

We must strive to ensure that our senior residents can live here with dignity, respect, and support. The Senior Town Hall meeting was one way that we demonstrated that we DO value their input and their voices. A city government is strongest when it listens to and engages with the people it serves. And that is why we are striving to build a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to community engagement—one that meets residents where they are, that fosters open dialogue, and that strives to ensure that EVERY voice has the opportunity to be heard. We recognize that this work is ongoing, and we are committed to strengthening outreach across all city departments, expanding access to information, and creating more meaningful opportunities for residents to help shape the policies that affect their lives. Our goal is to make city government more accessible, more responsive, and more reflective of the diverse perspectives that define Cambridge. This is something that I look forward to continuing working on with my colleagues on the Council and the City Manager on throughout this term.

Looking Forward: Challenges and Opportunities

I must note that as I've been going around the community in recent weeks, speaking with residents, I've heard about a newer set of challenges that have many of us feeling unsettled and on edge. Indeed, some of the most immediate challenges facing our city will be coming *from Washington*. The national landscape is shifting in troubling ways, with federal policies increasingly targeting cities like Cambridge—cities that stand firm in their progressive values. The White House has already signaled its intent to punish Sanctuary Cities, threaten legal consequences for those who resist its directives, and undermine our commitments to diversity, inclusion, equity, and the safety of our immigrant community. Even in these early weeks, we've seen an escalation of chaos and unpredictability, sending shockwaves that could disrupt critical funding, programs, and policies that directly impact our residents. Make no mistake: the road ahead will not be easy.

But let me be clear: Cambridge will not waver. We are already mobilizing to meet these challenges head-on. We are strengthening partnerships with advocacy groups, securing resources to protect our most vulnerable residents—including our immigrant population—and ensuring that our local policies remain strong, adaptable, and unshakable in the face of federal threats.

As we brace for what's to come, we will:

- Defend our status as a Sanctuary City and expand protections for our immigrant communities.
- Push back against federal overreach, ensuring that Cambridge remains a place where local leaders—not Washington—set the course for our future.
- Shield our residents from harmful policy changes, from cuts to social services to efforts that undermine civil rights and personal freedoms.

Cambridge has never been a city that backs down in the face of adversity. We will meet these challenges with the same resolve and moral clarity that have always defined us—because standing up for our values isn’t just what we do. It’s who we are.

Acknowledgments and Gratitude

The work ahead, as always, requires collective effort and a cast of thousands. The success of the City is truly a team effort, and nothing we do would be possible without the tireless dedication of our city employees, the vision of our community leaders, and the passion of our residents. City Manager Yi-An Huang has provided exemplary leadership, and our incredible department heads and city staff bring dedication, creativity, and professionalism to their work every day. My colleagues on the City Council and the School Committee also deserve our recognition and gratitude – these are challenging times, and each of these individuals have brought their passion, expertise, and talents together for the betterment of our entire community. I thank you ALL for working with me to meet the moment.

I also wish to acknowledge my own staff in the Mayor’s Office, and our collaborator Ms. Stephen in the City Council office. Long ago, Hillary Clinton titled one of her books “It takes a village,” and each of you bear out the truth of that sentiment, every single day.

A Call to Action

While Cambridge may be a city of 120,000, we DO still maintain that sense of being a village. Tonight, I call on all of us to remain *engaged* in that village: attend council meetings, volunteer in your neighborhood, support local businesses, and DO YOUR PART in shaping our shared future. But as we do so, let us always approach one another with civility and respect. Our disagreements may at times become passionate and heated, but we can all agree that we want to live in the safest, strongest, and most welcoming community possible. We must always strive to channel our passions to the shared purpose of creating a Cambridge that not only dreams boldly but achieves greatly—a city that leads with its heart and inspires with its actions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Cambridge is more than a city—it's a beacon. Here, in the shadow of centuries-old universities and the glow of tomorrow's innovations, we're proving that a community can be both progressive and pragmatic, ambitious and accessible. As mayor, I've seen our challenges become catalysts and our diversity become our strength. Standing at this midpoint in our council term, I know this truth: Cambridge doesn't just embrace the future—we shape it. Block by block, voice by voice, we're building a city that matches the boldness of our dreams with the brilliance of our actions.

As we all know, Cambridge has a bilateral government: the Mayor and City Council set the policies and oversee governance, and the City Manager oversees the day-to-day operations of the city, serving as our chief executive. He and his staff work hard to ensure the City works as a well-oiled machine, and now I know we look forward to hearing his remarks in just a moment. Thank you.