

2025 State of the City Address – FINAL
Tuesday, February 25, 2025
City Manager Yi-An Huang's Prepared Remarks

Introduction

Thank you so much Mayor Simmons. I'm so honored to share the stage with you tonight and I'm so grateful for our partnership.

You are a powerful voice for our community. You are an advocate for those who have not historically been heard. And you are a tireless fighter for greater equity and justice in our society. Thank you for your passion, wisdom, and leadership!

Lieutenant Governor Driscoll, Mayor Simmons, Vice Mayor McGovern, City Councillors, School Committee members, state representatives and senators, distinguished guests, and fellow residents: Thank you for being here in this moment.

I recently passed my 900th day serving as City Manager and as I look out at this room, I see the strength of our community.

We are in a moment – where the state of our country and the state of the world is troubling and uncertain.

We don't know what the path forward holds, yet I remain hopeful and optimistic because we know the path that we have traveled. And we know who we are.

I would echo the Mayor's words: We are resilient, unbowed, and strong.

Our strength is not because we have agreed on every issue. In fact, quite the opposite. We have debated and disagreed and dissented. We have reviewed proposals, brought forward data and analysis, and developed different options to weigh before coming to final decisions.

We have challenged one another and found compromise and consensus.

And we have kept moving forward – because the challenges we are trying to solve cannot be addressed without action.

To the City Council, I'm grateful for your trust and for the privilege of serving in this role. I have endeavored to live out our local democracy – to follow the direction of this body and to bring forward the professional expertise and advice of City leaders and staff to best serve our community.

And the path we have traveled over this last year gives me confidence in this amazing community.

Compromise and Consensus

Just two weeks ago, the City Council passed the Multi-Family Housing Ordinance that we have been debating for the last year, eliminating single family zoning, increasing allowable height and density, and reducing dimensional requirements.

Housing costs are the number one priority for Cambridge residents year after year and this is a major step toward increasing housing production and creating more affordable homes.

Thank you Lieutenant Governor Driscoll for being here, and for the commitment that you, Governor Healey, and Secretary Augustus have made on housing – including setting an ambitious goal of building 222,000 new homes in Massachusetts over the next decade. It took decades to get into this housing crisis and it will take all of us working together to solve it.

Just last Friday, the Governor's Unlocking Housing Production Commission released its final report to lay out a roadmap – and the topline recommendation?

Eliminating single family zoning.

Thank you to Councillor Azeem and Councillor Siddiqui, our Housing Committee Co-Chairs, for your leadership. Thank you to the City Council for all of the work that was done over the last year and passing this historic overhaul of our residential zoning. And thank you to everyone in our community who made your voices heard.

The local level is where so much change needs to happen to solve the housing crisis. It's the meetings in school cafeterias, City Halls, and Council chambers just like this one...And Cambridge is leading the way.

This was not an easy path. Over the last 12 months, we have had rigorous and, at times, difficult debates. Hundreds of residents spoke at community meetings, committee meetings, and Council meetings. Experts provided testimony. Data and analysis and methodology was dissected. Compromises were reached in order to achieve consensus.

This is our strength. As I reflect on what makes Cambridge special, it's the challenging and beautiful process of working out differences to find a path forward.

And I can point to more examples.

BEUDO, our leading Climate building emissions ordinance that set a 2035 net zero target for large commercial buildings went through more than a year of intense debate, discussion, and compromise before passing.

Zoning for the Alewife Quadrangle, the last major area for commercial development, went through an 18-month moratorium and a renewed push for community process before we

adopted final zoning that included higher housing commitments including affordable homes, more retail and mixed-use space, and earlier delivery of key infrastructure.

And of course, we have had difficult conversations about bike lanes as we have sought to balance transforming our streets to be safer for cyclists with reductions in parking. This was a challenging debate over 2024 but we have made changes that have preserved our commitment to the Cycling Safety Ordinance, including a longer timeframe for implementation, expanding regulations for shared parking use, and pursuing options for returning Garden Street to two-way traffic.

This is the hard but beautiful work of democracy that makes us special – and it stands out especially in these times.

Getting Things Done

In Cambridge, we are also a community that gets things done.

In September, we launched the Cambridge Preschool Program – the culmination of years of City Council prioritization and planning to roll out universal pre-Kindergarten. Today, every Cambridge four-year old and prioritized three-year olds are able to access free and high quality preschool – a major step toward closing the achievement gap, investing in our next generation of learners, and supporting families struggling with the high cost of childcare.

This has been one of our largest funding commitments over the past two budgets and we have more than 800 children participating, with forty percent from low-income households.

This has been an incredible effort with leadership from the Office of Early Childhood.

Thank you to the City Council for your commitment to this initiative.

Thank you to Ellen Semonoff, our Assistant City Manager of Human Services, our first Executive Director Lisa Grant who set us up to succeed, and our new Executive Director, Cheryl Ohlson who comes to us with deep experience having run Washington D.C.'s preschool program.

Thank you as well to Interim Superintendent Murphy and Karen Feeney at Cambridge Public Schools who have been a fantastic partner with the City.

I'm excited as we plan for how we can strengthen and improve this amazing program going forward.

Last summer, we also launched our Community Assistance Response and Engagement (CARE) Team, an unarmed alternative response to emergency 911 calls. This initiative started through the City Council's actions in June 2020 and I acted early in my term to hire a Director, Liz Speakman to turn this vision into a reality. I've been grateful for her leadership, passion, and persistence, and for the close collaboration with Emergency Communications and the Police Department. CARE started responding to 911 calls this past summer and has served more than 200 911 calls. The stories I hear from residents have been inspiring and we are working toward expanding hours and call codes over the coming year.

And there is so much more that has been accomplished:

- We have almost 1,000 units of affordable housing under development – the result of the City committing more than \$40 million per year to expand affordable housing. I'm also thankful to the fantastic partners we have in the Cambridge Housing Authority, Just-A-Start, HRI, and the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority.
- The City has also been more aggressive in acquiring new properties for affordable housing, a long-time Council goal. I'm especially excited about the 96 units of permanent supportive housing that will open this year for people transitioning out of homelessness. Thank you to Vice Mayor McGovern who has been a consistent advocate for our unhoused community and where there is more for us to do.
- We have invested in new solar and wind projects that will come online in some of the dirtiest grids in the country, pulling carbon out of the atmosphere and moving us closer to our municipal net zero goals. Thank you in particular to Councillor Nolan who chairs our Health and Environment Committee and has been a key partner on the City's Net Zero Action Plan.
- We have undertaken major sewer and water infrastructure projects that add millions of gallons of stormwater capacity and have dramatically reduced flooding in the Port and Alewife neighborhoods – events that were common as recently as 2014.
- We have made renewed investments in Central Square, where we are seeing a revival, with 12 new businesses opening this quarter. Thank you to Michael Monestime with the Central Square BID for your leadership, partnership, and the work that we are doing together with more intentional investment and curation in the heart of our City's civic and cultural district. And thank you to Police Commissioner Elow and our police department. She has been a leader in the important work of restoring a sense of safety and community that emphasizes both compassion and accountability.

- We also continue to partner with all of our Business Associations to create diverse ecosystems celebrating all that Cambridge has to offer – thank you to the Chamber of Commerce, the East Cambridge Business Association, the Harvard Square Business Association, the Kendall Square Association, and Cambridge Local First for everything you’re doing.
- Citywide our commitment to the Small Business Community continues to be a priority and I have valued our partnership with Councillor Toner who as Chair of the Economic Development Committee has been a strong and tireless advocate for our vital and vibrant small businesses. Since 2020, the City has provided over \$8 million in financial relief to small businesses, in addition to the flagship small business grants and technical assistance we provide every year.
- Investing in job training and workforce development is a critical part of how we support our community through the Community Learning Center, Cambridge Works, the Cambridge Employment Program, and our many community partners. Thank you to Councillor Sobrinho Wheeler for his advocacy in this area, and particularly his work on starting the process for establishing a Jobs Training Trust that could draw more future funding for this important work.
- Transportation infrastructure continues to be a major concern as we experience significant congestion around the City and we are building stronger partnerships with the MBTA and state agencies to advocate for our priorities such as the BU bridge rotary, Grand Junction, the Alewife Garage redevelopment, and more. Thank you to Councillor Zusy for your advocacy on these regional transportation issues and bringing greater focus to them.
- We have started a new initiative on Supplier Diversity that is opening up our procurement process to new businesses who want to work with the City – including a new partnership with the City of Boston on certification of Minority, Women, and Veteran-owned businesses. Thank you to Councillor Wilson for your advocacy and voice on this issue!
- And finally, we know that afterschool is both important support for learners and critical for working families with young children. We have redesigned the lottery to prioritize low income families who need after school the most, but also over the last two years, we have created two hundred and fifty new after-school seats and increased our total offers by over 20%.

To the City Council, thank you for your leadership across all of these important initiatives.

To the City leaders and staff who are making these projects happen and managing the day-to-day operations, I'm so honored to be working together. It is your professionalism, expertise, collaboration, dedication, and passion that keeps Cambridge running. Everyone who works for the City of Cambridge, together, make Cambridge a better place for us all.

Just to highlight one of our amazing workers, Carrine Bury is our lead Outreach Coordinator with Human Services. She works closely with families, especially recent immigrants, to navigate City and school programs. We are a Welcoming Community – and especially now, Carrine is on the front lines building trust and relationship with people in our community who need, not a hand-out, but connection and empowerment. Thank you Carrine for the work that you do every day!

Path Forward

The path we have traveled fills me with confidence, optimism, and hope. But there are also major challenges ahead.

Economic Environment

The first is a changing economic environment and the impact on the City's financials.

Thank you to our Assistant City Manager of Finance Claire Spinner, our Assistant Finance Director Michele Kincaid and our Budget Director Taha Jennings for their leadership.

Thank you as well to Councilor Nolan and Councilor Toner who have chaired the Finance Committee, as well as the late Councilor Joan Pickett who was a valued and trusted partner and colleague before she passed last summer.

Over the last ten years, we have seen incredible economic growth in Cambridge and that has funded so many of the initiatives that we are so proud of. In addition, federal pandemic dollars gave us unprecedented flexibility to make investments in our community to tackle important and critical needs.

But looking forward, we are entering a time of lower growth, flat valuations, and tremendous uncertainty in federal funding.

Our City's financials are stable but the responsible approach to preserve all the programs that we have built is to moderate our budget growth. We cannot spend on new initiatives in the way we have over the last ten years. Working with the City Council and the community, we will need to plan and prioritize our major projects going forward.

I'm looking forward to these conversations as we face a long list of good ideas – from municipal broadband, a potential successor Rise Up program, expanding preschool and

afterschool, affordable housing and support for the unhoused, major capital needs for municipal buildings, school renovations, and so much more.

As we plan for the FY26 budget, we are entering a different era – one where we will continue to be ambitious, but must also plan more carefully and prudently.

Federal Administration

This is especially true given the second major challenge ahead, which is the chaos we are seeing in the new federal administration. After only one month, we are finding our institutions stretched and straining. We are seeing attacks on science and innovation, attacks on public servants, attacks on our values of diversity, equity and inclusion, and attacks on the most vulnerable among us, especially those in our trans community and refugees who are searching for a better life.

I'm grateful for the leadership of Mayor Simmons, Vice Mayor McGovern, and the City Council as we chart a path through this new reality.

We will not compromise our values. We know who we are.

We are committed to the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which is not about identity-based politics but about creating a real meritocracy where everyone has a chance to succeed and lead.

We will remain a Welcoming Community that supports everyone in our City – and I'm so proud of the work that Carolina Almonte, our Executive Director of the Human Rights Commission and the Commission on Immigrant Rights and Citizenship has done in these early weeks to support our immigrant community.

We will join the fight with our state partners and we have had tremendous support from the Governor and Lieutenant Governor.

We have a proud Cantabridgian in Secretary of Economic Development Yvonne Hao, who is helping to coordinate a response on the federal administration's misguided and dangerous proposed funding cuts to the research and innovation that powers our local economy and strengthens our country.

And I'm grateful that we have an incredible leader in Attorney General Andrea Campbell who has been a clear voice speaking out against federal overreach.

We are also in close connection with our local partners and stakeholders. We have started reaching out to nonprofits and stakeholders to share information, stay aligned on what they are experiencing, and managing our collective response.

And finally, the City will act to support our local community. During the pandemic, we faced uncertainty and challenge together, and this moment will be the same.

Take a moment to look around you.

In this room, I see the strength of our community and the state of our City is resilient, unbowed, and strong.

We have accomplished so much in the last years – to live out our values, tackle complex problems, and support each other through difficult times. I know that we will continue in the same way, together, as a Cambridge community.

Thank you all and good night.