

## **State of the City Remarks Cambridge Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui**

**April 27, 2022**

City Manager DePasquale, Vice Mayor Mallon, Honorable Councilors, Department Heads, Friends, Family, and Fellow Cantabrigians; good evening!

I want to thank you all for joining us tonight to discuss the State of the City of Cambridge. This month marks the beginning of the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic; the third year of our city showing resilience in the face of adversity; and the third year of collective anxiety about health and safety. With that in mind, please join me for a moment of silence for the 163 residents we have lost due to the pandemic.

We have set up a COVID-19 Remembrance Memorial at the main entrance of the Cambridge Cemetery as a place of peace and reflection, and I hope everyone takes the time to go visit. Thank you to Maryellen Carvello from the Manager's office and DPW for working closely with my office to create this space.

Tonight, amid these challenges, we pause to reflect on the simple question: what is the State of our City?

We just heard in the City Manager's remarks about the ways in which we responded, and continue to respond, to the extreme conditions that the last two years have brought to our city and our world. Our city employees never stopped providing world class service for our residents and I speak for my colleagues and residents across Cambridge when I say we are forever grateful for their efforts. Can we please give a big round of applause to the over 3,000 city employees who never stopped serving our community?

I also want to recognize our City Manager, who has kept the state of our finances, infrastructure, and city services secure during the darkest years in memory. The City Manager's long tenure will be coming to an end in a few short months, and I ask you to join me in another round of applause to recognize his nearly half-century of service to the City of Cambridge.

At the City Council Inauguration this year, which we can agree will forever hold the record for the coldest inauguration in Cambridge history, I said that what makes Cambridge unique is our

passion for confronting seemingly insurmountable challenges. We recognize when progress is made, but we will not rest while inequities persist. We hold ourselves to a high standard and we are not easily satisfied; this drive is what often puts Cambridge at the forefront of change.

We must celebrate our successes and acknowledge that Cambridge is the envy of cities across the country and the world. And yet we remain unsatisfied, because our charge is to keep working until every inequity in our city has been addressed. We will not rest while there is still work to do.

The pandemic showed us that we can act quickly and with authority to bring needed change faster and pushed us to do more to address the other crises we face. The housing crisis; the mental health crisis; the epidemic of gun violence; the climate catastrophe; the education gap that persists in our schools; the income inequality. These problems all existed before the pandemic, but they have been exacerbated, and we as a Council must treat them with the same heightened urgency.

I want to acknowledge former Mayor and City Councillor E. Denise Simmons for all her work and leadership on addressing gun violence in our community. She will be hosting a Safe Streets meeting tomorrow evening for community members to hear from representatives from both Cambridge and Somerville. Gun violence is not isolated to Cambridge, and we must work both as a community and a region to protect our youth and solve this crisis. We must be proactive, not reactive to this violence, and I thank Councillor Simmons for her efforts to bring the community together on this challenging issue.

We say all the time in this body that addressing the housing crisis is the most pressing matter that this Council deals with. Year after year it stands out on the resident survey as the issue that residents identify as the biggest problem facing Cambridge. Residents come to my office almost every single day inquiring about wait times, looking for housing opportunities, fearing eviction; we must continue to find innovative solutions to this housing crisis.

Over the last 2 years, I have been inspired by our progress. We continue as a city to make remarkable investments in preserving and growing our affordable housing stock. There are more

than 800 new affordable units under development this fiscal year, with other projects in the pipeline as well. In one of the most significant affordable preservation projects in decades, Cambridge successfully maintained the affordability of the Fresh Pond Apartments. The Rindge Towers is where I was raised and where my family had a stable foundation for opportunity and growth. I know how meaningful every single one of the 504 units is to the community, and there is no question that voting for that appropriation was the most important vote I've ever taken. Working with Rindge Associates, the City Manager, and City staff to move this process forward was deeply meaningful and I remain thankful for everyone who worked on that project.

Additionally, just last month, Homeowner's Rehab Inc. reached an agreement with Lesley University to purchase a historic Mass Ave property with funding from the City's Affordable Housing Trust. That property will be turned into affordable housing units, and I am grateful to Lesley, HRI, and the team at CDD for their work finalizing this project.

Solving the housing crisis and building our affordable housing stock will take more than just funding: we need to be creative about policy as well. As we address the legacy of redlining and historic exclusion, we need to be thoughtful about ways to get more affordable units online throughout our city. The Affordable Housing Overlay was a great first step, and I want to congratulate Just-A-Start for moving forward with their New Street project. It will be the first one under the overlay, which will provide 107 affordable units next to green space, groceries stores, and public transit.

For years, the City Council has discussed the need to overhaul our zoning and create more opportunities for housing Citywide. There have been countless conversations in the past about the need for more multi-family housing, more transit-oriented development, and more housing types, but we have not been satisfied with the progress. With that said, I am confident that this Council will be the one to finally initiate comprehensive zoning reform and create more housing opportunities in every neighborhood.

Our housing crisis also impacts our homelessness crisis. While we have made progress in recent years, the fact remains that we have yet to scale effective solutions to the necessary extent and

we have done little to stem the tide of people newly becoming homeless. While we have created effective housing and service solutions that change the lives of those who receive them, the systemic failures remain. The result is on any given night, more than 500 of our neighbors have no home, and a disproportionately high percentage of those experiencing homelessness in Cambridge are people of color.

Last year, I convened an Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness, with a goal of crafting policy to address this problem. I am grateful to former Mayor and Councillor McGovern, who works closely with our unhoused population, for Chairing the working group and for his persistent leadership on this issue. This working group was thoughtful and diligent, and in the coming year we will be acting on their recommendations. Our deepest gratitude goes to those unhoused individuals who offered their time and expertise through focus groups and participation on the Ad Hoc Working Group. We will never end homelessness until those who are closest to the problem—those with lived experience of homelessness—are fully included in creating the solutions.

As Mayor, I also have the privilege of being the Chair of the School Committee. As a product of the Cambridge K-12 education system, I know education is the path to equal opportunity. I have the honor to address issues of equity and access while working alongside Vice Chair Rachel Weinstein, Members Akriti Bhambi, Fred Fantini, Jose Luis Rojas, David Weinstein, Ayesha Wilson, and our incredible student representatives Anais Killian and Nuriel Vera-Degraff. I want to congratulate our student representatives for graduating this year and both getting into Harvard. Anais is here with us tonight and Nuriel is busy winning track meets. We are so grateful for their thoughtful approach, their contributions to the Committee, and their desire to make sure student voices are heard.

We have been lucky to have strong leadership during this difficult year of transition. Thank you to Superintendent Dr. Greer and Deputy Superintendent Turk and to our deeply committed educators for all they do for our students and our district. I also have to recognize my former guidance counselor, Larry Poirier, who is here this evening and continues to do incredible work for our students.

We are always thinking of ways to create more equitable access in our schools. While creating the budget for fiscal year 2023, we ensured our students' voices were represented and that our outcomes lead to student success. We must systematically address the equity gaps exacerbated during the pandemic. Grade 3 achievement remains below 50 percent for students performing at grade level. We are making it a priority in our schools to address the achievement gaps and aim to hire additional Math & ELA interventionists in each elementary school to strategically deliver individual intervention for lost learning time due to the pandemic.

There is a substantial increase in social, emotional, and mental distress reported by students in recent years which has led us to use the funds to hire a Social Emotional Learning director and an additional social worker in the high school to enhance the support our students need from the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

The School Committee is committed to listening and passing policies based on what we hear from our students. We worked with CRLS Title IX Auriella Advocates to update the Title IX policy to redefine language used to identify sexual harassment and create clear processes for reporting sexual misconduct and filing a formal Title IX complaint. Some of the Title IX Auriella Advocates are with us this evening, so please join me in celebrating Anna, Abigail, Molly, Kaelyn, Morgan, and Nasra!

We will be doing a full review of all policies in the months ahead, something the School Committee has not taken on in many years. We are also working with students who advocated for free Charlie Cards. Many of our students take public transit to get to school and the cost of getting to school should not be a burden for our families or students.

Creating equitable solutions for our students is what drives our work on the Committee. This led us to creating the Early College Pilot in partnership with Lesley University. The Early College Pilot will have twice as many students participating next year which will result in many more students graduating high school with college credit and college ready skills. This pilot creates an opportunity for students who are historically underrepresented in college to get an earlier start and be able to graduate college a year sooner, helping them avoid the student loan crisis most college graduates of color face.

As we discuss ways to have free college initiatives in our district, I am confident that we will also make progress on Universal Pre-K, allowing all students in Cambridge to receive free and high-quality preschool. I would like to imagine a community in which financial barriers did not result in education barriers. While the City scholarships for low-income families have helped, the only real solution is to make it universal. All caregivers deserve to send their child to preschool for free. I will be forming a joint ad-hoc of the City Council and School Committee that will meet through the year to ensure that we are moving forward towards free, high quality, universal Pre-K for all our students.

We need to center equity in our education, and the launch of Liberation Libraries earlier this month helps us to do that on street corners throughout the city. Liberation Libraries will serve as a free “giving library,” stocked with an intentional selection of books written by Black and Brown authors for all ages. I want to give a big shoutout to Tony Clark, Ty Bellitti, and the whole team at My Brother’s Keeper, who led this initiative and do an enormous amount of work for our City. Please join of me in a round of applause for them!

We know that when we engage our young people and seek ideas from our students, great things happen. One of my priorities has been bringing climate education to our youth. This month I have had the opportunity to visit several classrooms to discuss climate change, teach students how to properly recycle and reuse, and hear ideas that students have for combating this crisis. Just today, the forestry team from DPW and I were at the Baldwin School, teaching first graders how to plant a tree and why trees are so important for our city. Feeling the energy and passion that our students have about climate change work is inspiring and should push us all to work harder on this issue.

The Council is committed to addressing this crisis and heightening the urgency, which is why I formed the Climate Crisis Working Group last fall which was chaired by Councillor Nolan. We have fallen short on our climate goals, and we need to take aggressive action if we are going to meet our own standards. The charge of the Working Group was to increase the urgency of our climate actions and the impact of that work by providing guidance on how Cambridge can better address the climate crisis. I am pleased to say that the report the Working Group released earlier this month increases the urgency and provides a map for how we can reach the goals we know

we must hit. I want to recognize Councillor Nolan for her work chairing this group, and for her efforts to push us toward stronger climate policies.

We all believe Cambridge can and should be a leader on climate action and climate justice, and with each passing day, it seems we learn that our timelines and goals are not where they need to be if we are going to avoid massive climate disruptions to our planet. We need to do more, and we need to act faster. Not just to reduce emissions in Cambridge, but to serve as an example to cities across the country and world. This is the impetus for making amendments to BEUDO - the Building Energy Use Disclosure Ordinance. I want to thank Councillor Zondervan and Councillor Nolan who introduced these amendments to speed up the timelines and create accountability, and once the amendments are finalized, they will make a big difference in helping Cambridge reach our net-zero goals.

We also won't be able to reach our climate goals until we make Cambridge a city with safe and environmentally friendly transit options. We are making steady progress, but we have a long way to go in making non-vehicular travel options more widely available. I had a blast last weekend at the Mayor's Bike Bonanza that we hosted, where over 100 residents came to join us on a bike ride to four local businesses. But the fact remains that too many Cantibridgians are scared to bike, and we must work hard in the coming months and years to build infrastructure that reflects the priorities of a green city.

We also need to make public transit more efficient and accessible, and it is with both of those goals in mind that I convened the Fare-Free Working Group earlier this year. As we look to emerge from the pandemic with an equitable and efficient transit system in place, free bus pilots could serve as an effective first step. I appointed Councillor Azeem as chair of this working group, and I am grateful for his work. We will be moving ahead on a fare free bus pilot in Cambridge.

As we gauge the State of our City, we must acknowledge that the Council is tasked with hiring a new City Manager in the coming months. This process started last year, and I have to recognize the phenomenal work of Vice Mayor Mallon, who chairs the Government Operations

Committee, for leading the most thorough community engagement process that I have ever seen. With citywide and employee town halls, 20 small focus groups, and thousands of comments registered, the feedback we received from residents helped to develop the job description for the next City Manager and will guide the Council when we make a hiring decision in June. In the coming weeks, the Initial Screening Committee will screen applicants and select three finalists. I also want to recognize Councillor Toner and Councillor Simmons on their work on the City Clerk and City Auditor searches. The City Council is also responsible for hiring the City Clerk and City Auditor, and both Clerk Wilson and Auditor Monagle will be leaving their positions in the coming months. Please join me in a round of applause to recognize their service to the city.

One of the most gratifying aspects of the last two years, during times of fear and anxiety, was seeing the commitment that Cambridge residents have to their fellow residents. It was not isolation that defined the pandemic in Cambridge, but generosity. Over and over again, I watched as our community jumped at the opportunity to take care of their neighbors and keep others safe. This was evident within the first month of the pandemic, as hundreds of residents and Cambridge institutions made donations to the Mayor's Disaster Relief Fund. The fund collected over \$5 million dollars that served as a lifeline for residents and small businesses during the pandemic.

There is perhaps no better example than Starlight Square and the work of the Central Square BID to turn a parking lot into an outdoor center of art and community engagement. From comedy shows to Popportunity shops featuring our newest small businesses, this space has served as an example of what is possible when you give Cambridge residents a chance to shine. We continue to support Starlight and celebrate the impact it has had on our city. Thank to you Mike Monestime, Nina Berg, and Matthew Boys Watson who are here tonight and deserve a round of applause for all their work.

The same is true of work that residents have taken on since the pandemic began to address inequities in our community. One example that I love is Cambridge Bike Giveback, which was launched in August 2020 by Lonnell Wells and friends in reaction to the murder of George



Floyd. Lonnell has led the effort to fix hundreds of old bikes and distribute them to people in the community who need one.

It also never ceases to amaze me at how committed residents are to improving public open space and increasing accessibility. I celebrated Earth Day at Jerry's Pond this past weekend with Alewife Study Group and Friends of Jerry's Pond, and I am inspired by the work that neighbors are doing to take care of the area with seasonal clean ups and community events. Eric Grunebaum and Friends of Jerry's Pond have also been working hard for years to push for a vision that would transform the area, and I look forward to working with them on fulfilling that potential. Open space must be a priority in our city, and I want to acknowledge Councilor Carlone for his work to expand open space and increase its accessibility.

We know when we invest in Cambridge residents, great things happen. When we provide opportunities and uplift Cambridge residents is when we see our city at its best. It is that concept, investing in our residents, that birthed one of the initiatives that I am most proud of from the last year - Cambridge RISE, our guaranteed income pilot for single caretakers that gave out its first monthly cash disbursements to families last September.

Research shows that guaranteed income projects have resulted in lower poverty, higher earnings, and longer-term savings. Guaranteed income has proven to be a key tool in improving economic mobility and advancing racial and gender equity, but we have a long way to go to address the disparities that exist in our city. A 2021 Cambridge Community Foundation report, showed that 1 out of 8 residents is food insecure, and the average household income for our bottom 20% of earners, about 24,000 people, is just \$13,000 dollars a year. Of those families with children, nearly 70% are headed by a single caregiver.

We have been fortunate to see RISE make a small but meaningful dent in the inequality that exists in Cambridge by investing directly in those in our community who are working two and three jobs, but still not making a living wage, and giving them an opportunity to thrive. I am happy to say that we are joined by one of the RISE recipients this evening, Porchia and her daughter Rose. RISE has been a stabilizing force for Porchia, and since last fall, she has been

taking classes to become a medical assistant. RISE has helped her cover expenses for class, transportation, childcare, and more. Just recently, she passed the final exam to receive her medical assistant certification and will be finishing the program in June. Please join me in welcoming Porchia this evening and thanking her for sharing her powerful story. Congratulations on your upcoming graduation!

RISE was a true community effort, and was made possible by many partners, including Cambridge Community Foundation, Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee, Just A Start, Uptgether, the Cambridge Housing Authority, as well as Vice Mayor and Councillor McGovern.

RISE showed that when we work together, we can create opportunity. This initiative was only possible with leading investments from our local universities, Harvard and MIT, the Cambridge Community Foundation, and so many others - from real estate, life sciences, business, philanthropy, and generous residents. Many of these donors are here with us in-person or on zoom tonight. I want to thank each of you, too many to name, who are the reason we were able to implement RISE.

I have to give a special shout out to Michael Tubbs, who is with us virtually on zoom, and whose organization Mayors for a Guaranteed Income spurred this pilot and many others across the country. I also want to recognize Jackie Dabo, RISE's program director, for ensuring that this pilot has run smoothly and that all the participants have their needs met. Please join me in recognizing Jackie!

It is our obligation to do everything we can to give residents a chance to get ahead. We are a better City, a stronger City, when residents have stability. RISE helped to provide that stability, but RISE was only ever meant to be the beginning.

Our commitment has always been to find a way to expand this work, ensuring that other families living in poverty in our beloved city would similarly receive cash assistance, particularly in light of the ongoing economic effects of the pandemic which we know disproportionately affect low-

income residents and residents of color. We know the scale of need in our community far exceeds the current scope of this program. As I said earlier, we will not be satisfied with the state of our city until everyone has their basic needs met.

That is why I could not be more excited to announce that the City of Cambridge will be allocating close to 22 million dollars in American Rescue Plan funding to build on the work of RISE and provide direct cash assistance, in the form of \$500 dollars a month for approximately a year and a half, to every single family under the federal poverty level in the City of Cambridge.

This is the exact type of initiative that makes us all proud of Cambridge: a unique, forward-thinking anti-poverty program that will hopefully serve as an example to cities everywhere. While there are now cities around the country that are piloting direct cash assistance programs, this will be the first of such programs that is able to provide the assistance to every family that is eligible. The impact that RISE has had on 130 families in Cambridge - the life-changing, stabilizing impact - will be magnified.

While the details of the program are still being fleshed out, I look forward to working with our community partners to ensure the best possible implementation. We are confident that this appropriation will be a huge force in our recovery from the pandemic and in our efforts to address the inequities that exist in Cambridge.

I want to close by saying thank you: Thank you to my family and my loved ones with whom I could not do this work without. To my team in the Mayor's Office who are committed to serving the residents each and every day and once again to all of our City Employees. And, of course, I want to thank the residents of our beloved city, who make Cambridge the best city in the world.

The state of the city is strong, resilient, and a work in progress. Let's celebrate all we have accomplished in the face of adversity and the ways in which Cambridge continues to lead. And let's not rest while inequities persist.

Thank you.

