

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE CLIMATE COMMITTEE

December 19 2025

City Manager Yi-An Huang
Deputy City Manager Kathy Watkins
795 Massachusetts Ave
Cambridge, MA 02139

VIA EMAIL: citymanager@cambridgema.gov, kwatkins@cambridgema.gov

CC: Julie Wormser, Susanne Rasmussen, Nikhil Nadkarni

Subject: Comments on the City of Cambridge Net Zero Action Plan (NZAP) FY2025 Report

Dear City Manager Huang and Deputy City Manager Watkins,

The City of Cambridge's Climate Committee is tasked with overseeing the City's Net Zero Action Plan (NZAP) and assessing progress on an annual basis. This letter addresses the Plan's status, progress in FY 2025, and makes recommendations on the Plan's content and implementation.

We appreciate Cambridge's ongoing commitment to the urgency of climate change. Despite significant setbacks to federal funding and regulatory support, Cambridge continues to implement programs and policies that are models for municipal climate action. Standout examples are:

- Building Energy Use Disclosure Ordinance (BEUDO) performance requirements
- Fossil-Fuel-Free Demonstration Program Ordinance for new buildings
- New and renovated municipal buildings with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions

FY 2025 Progress

In FY2025, the City made progress on the NZAP in several areas. We highlight these two as significant:

- Action 2.1 Electrification in New Construction. Since the Fossil Fuel Free Pilot Demonstration program started in 2024, nearly all new construction in the City has been subject to the no-fossil-fuel requirements (59 buildings so far).
- Action 2.3 Municipal Buildings. The construction of new electric and efficient buildings (the most recent example being the Tobin Montessori School/Darby Vassall Upper School), and similar improvements to existing municipal buildings,

has reduced municipal building emissions by about 38% since 2008 (Action 2.3, Figure 1). The City had originally targeted reducing municipal emissions by 30% (with a 35% stretch goal) from 2008 to 2020, and hit the stretch goal in 2019.

NZAP Status

2026 will be the first emission reduction compliance year for the largest BEUDO-covered buildings. The Climate Committee is impressed with the work the City has done to develop the implementation regulations and to support businesses to achieve a 94% reporting compliance rate. However, the NZAP FY25 Report expects challenges in 2026 around administering the first year of emissions reduction compliance.

2026 will include the NZAP 5-year update. The overall goals of the NZAP are for the City to achieve a 50% reduction in building emissions vs. 2015 levels by 2030 and a 100% reduction (net zero) by 2050. (Cambridge Net Zero Action Plan Five-Year Update, 2023 Version, Introduction). Are we on track to achieve the 50% goal in the next 4 years?

Although all of the actions listed in the FY25 Report are important, the graph of emissions reduction potential at the beginning of the report shows that the BEUDO targets, grid emissions, and low-carbon thermal actions are the most impactful.

Staff have indicated that the NZAP has **74 activities proceeding simultaneously**. Although continued progress on all of these activities will be important, **the Climate Committee recommends a concentration on the big three - BEUDO, reducing electric grid emissions, and low-carbon thermal networks. In addition, the Committee recommends that staff highlight affordability/financing initiatives and outreach/capacity building across ALL NZAP actions.**

Priority Recommendations

With the above issues in mind, the Committee recommends the following three priorities for FY26.

Financing Program and Energy Affordability for Residential Buildings. The Committee's FY24 NZAP letter (attached) emphasized the need for a funding and financing program to accelerate the retrofitting and decarbonization of residential buildings. We continue this comment in our FY25 NZAP letter because of its significance as a barrier/opportunity to support decarbonization, because the Mass Save program may be under threat, and because much more progress needs to happen to achieve this goal.

The Committee understands that City staff are working on issuing a request for proposal (RFP) to explore the development of a “Decarbonization Utility” for the City of Cambridge, or other innovative financing strategies. This could be a rate-based way to finance both building decarbonization and participation in the Community Solar program. We urge moving forward with this innovative idea as soon as possible.

Energy affordability has become a crisis because of large increases in electric and gas utility costs. The Mass Save program has taken some blame in the press for this, even though it has been shown to save ratepayers more money than it costs. (Boston Globe, Dec. 6, 2025, “Skyrocketing energy costs have shocked Massachusetts residents. Here’s what happened.”) There are many ways that green energy can save money. For example, Cambridge’s Community Aggregation “Standard Green” (50% renewable) electric rate has been LESS expensive than standard Eversource rates. We recommend continuing to emphasize the affordability benefits of renewable energy, wherever possible, in all of the City’s communication with residents about energy.

The Solar Assistance Program (a.k.a. Community Solar) was just launched in 2025. It presents a tremendous opportunity for renters (**66.3% of residents!**) and multifamily building residents to save money on electric bills by selling solar power to Eversource. The Community Solar and Community Aggregation programs also help reduce Cambridge’s electric grid emissions. Little direct outreach was done in FY25 to promote Community Solar. Enrollment in the Cambridge Community Solar subscription program is very low (only 5 requests in 2025). We understand that Community Solar would be helped by both consolidated billing (Community Solar appearing on the Eversource bill) and implementing the “Decarbonization Utility” and “green bond” financing concept. However, the Committee encourages more outreach about this important project, even while these improvements are in progress.

Engagement: From Communication to Capacity Building. The Committee suggests a range of communication strategies tailored to different groups.

The FY24 NZAP letter recommended developing a “One-Stop-Shop” engagement strategy for all residents and business owners. Electrify Cambridge is a great one-stop-shop program, but staff acknowledge that communication and getting the word out have been challenging. The FY25 NZAP Report notes that engagement in Electrify Cambridge has been shrinking and was well short of its goal. The Committee understands that a strategic shift is underway to make the Cambridge Energy Helpline the central connection point for residents (both homeowners and renters) and small business owners. We support this shift, as well as the new website for Community

Energy Programs, which will help residents and business owners to more seamlessly find and connect with programs.

The Committee also recommends programming for where people are - for example, in community groups, churches, workplaces, and schools. Find leaders in underserved communities, and connect through them. Could the Cambridge Climate Leaders Program help with this? Your letter to the City Council for the December 8th meeting (CMA 2025 #286), has excellent examples of outreach that the Office of Sustainability is doing (with DPW and the Fuel Assistance Program) on energy affordability. The Committee encourages more efforts like these, and would like to discuss this more.

The FY25 NZAP Report indicates that the BEUDO Resource Hub has been delayed, because a \$20 million federal grant was revoked, and coordination with a statewide resource hub is ongoing. The Office of Sustainability's BEUDO website offers technical guides, a checklist, and one-on-one advice for BEUDO property owners. However, the direct in-depth consulting envisioned for the Resource Hub could be a significant jump-start for newly affected property owners. Completion of the Resource Hub, along with outreach to the property owners, is a recommended priority, if it is not already.

Thermal Energy Networks. Low-carbon thermal energy, especially thermal energy networks (NZAP Action 3.1), has significant long-term promise for replacing fossil-fueled heating, reducing energy costs, and reducing the need for peaking electric power plants for both heating and cooling. We are pleased that the FY25 NZAP Report states that a feasibility study for a thermal energy network in Cambridge was started in FY25.

We are also excited to see that the Boston Green Ribbon Commission has proposed a Boston Area Clean Thermal Study where Cambridge, Harvard, and MIT are listed as potential partners. The Committee recommends that the City participate in this study, and work with Harvard, MIT, and other large building owners to become anchor tenants for a thermal energy network. We encourage the City, Harvard, and MIT to avoid working in silos on thermal energy network feasibility studies, but instead form a working group to share technical and economic expertise.

Additional Recommendations

The Committee understands that for the City to achieve the ambitious goals of the NZAP, we also need the support of our state government. Areas where we can work together to advocate to our state representatives for helpful legislation are:

- Mass Save - more funding for conversions to electric heating/cooling/appliances;
- Restricting/banning predatory 3rd-party electricity providers;

- Consolidated billing on a single Eversource statement for Community Solar subscribers; and
- Municipal Voices Bill (for negotiating gas pipeline repairs with Eversource).

Although not strictly in the purview of this FY25 review letter, the Committee also has thoughts on issues worth considering for the NZAP 5-Year update:

- Coordinate NZAP goals with the Resilient Cambridge Plan goals, where applicable. For example, encouraging the installation of electric heat pump (“mini split”) systems not just for energy efficiency and emissions reduction, but also for public health by providing cooling in increasingly hot summers.
- Should the goal of 5.5 MW of Community Solar in Cambridge by 2030 be increased?
- As recommended in the FY24 NZAP letter, continue to update the outcome metrics to focus on impact. For example, could heat pump installations be tracked? Could the greenhouse gas emissions benefits of the increased participation in the Community Aggregation program be calculated? Is there a metric for equity?
- Youth engagement. Include an action and a metric for the Green Jobs initiative.

Request

We respectfully request a meeting soon between the two of you and a few members of the Climate Committee to further discuss the issues and recommendations in this letter. We believe such a meeting would be mutually beneficial, like the one between you, the City Manager, and a few of our Committee members in early 2025, regarding the Committee’s NZAP FY24 Letter.

Thank you

We deeply appreciate you and City staff for your time and dedication to meeting the City’s decarbonization goals equitably and urgently. We look forward to seeing the progress the City will make in the next year towards implementing BEUDO, helping residents with energy affordability and funding retrofits, engaging and supporting residents and businesses, and advancing thermal energy networks.

Sincerely,

Steven Nutter, Chair
Joel Nogic, Vice Chair
On behalf of the Cambridge Climate Committee

Attached: Cambridge Climate Committee FY2024 NZAP Letter