

**MINUTES OF THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL  
FINANCE COMMITTEE  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026**

**FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Councillor Al-Zubi, Co-Chair  
Councillor Nolan, Co-Chair  
Vice Mayor Azeem  
Councillor Flaherty  
Councillor McGovern  
Councillor Simmons  
Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler  
Councillor Zusy  
Mayor Siddiqui

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Finance Committee was held on Tuesday, February 3, 2026. The meeting was Called to Order at 3:00 p.m. by the Co-Chair, Councillor Al-Zubi. Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2025 adopted by Massachusetts General Assembly and approved by the Governor, this public meeting was hybrid, allowing participation in person, in the Sullivan Chamber, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA and by remote participation via Zoom.

**At the request of the Co-Chair, Interim Clerk Crane called the roll.**

Councillor Al-Zubi – Present/In Sullivan Chamber  
Vice Mayor Azeem – Present/Remote  
Councillor Flaherty – Absent  
Councillor McGovern – Present/In Sullivan Chamber  
Councillor Nolan – Absent\*  
Councillor Simmons – Absent\*  
Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/Remote  
Councillor Zusy – Present/In Sullivan Chamber  
Mayor Siddiqui – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

**Present – 6, Absent – 3. Quorum established**

\*Councillor Nolan was present in the Sullivan Chamber at 3:10p.m. and assumed the Chair.

\*Councillor Simmons was present in the Sullivan Chamber at 3:18p.m.

Co-Chair Al-Zubi offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to review and discuss the Operating Budget in advance of the FY27 budget season. Present at the meeting was City Manager, Yi-An Huang, Deputy City Manager, Kathy Watkins, Assistant City Manager for Finance, Claire Spinner, Budget Director, Taha Jennings, and Director of Assessing, Gayle Willett.

Co-Chair Al-Zubi recognized Claire Spinner who gave a presentation titled “FY27 Budget Planning Amid Economic Headwinds”. The presentation was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet.

Co-Chair Nolan reviewed the purpose of the upcoming budget discussions ahead of the budget season.

**Co-Chair Nolan opened public comment.**

Ming-Tai Huh, 259 Washington Street, Cambridge, MA, spoke in opposition to the proposed tax increase on restaurants and retail businesses.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Mayor Siddiqui who asked for an update on how the process has been working with different departments to meet budget saving goals. Taha Jennings shared that conversations have been going well with departments and that a variety of approaches have been discussed within each department. Taha Jennings added that this is also an opportunity for departments to review their budget needs and how they efficiently align with department priorities. Mayor Siddiqui asked if there may be a hiring freeze in the future due to budget cuts. Claire Spinner explained that the City is currently going through a job vacancy review rather than starting a hiring freeze, noting this will help determine if vacant positions need to be immediately filled or reevaluated through the budget process.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Zusy who had clarifying questions related to future property value trends. Gayle Willett shared that the Assessor's Office continues to review trends through data collection and analysis but cannot confidently know what to expect in the upcoming years. Gayle Willett acknowledged the economic challenges, such as high vacancy rates, but noted that Cambridge may not see some of the worst impacts due to Harvard and MIT, and the many innovative companies, that are present in the City. Councillor Zusy shared concerns about the projected tax increase and questioned if the City should move forward with additional budget cuts to limit the increase. City Manager Huang shared that it will be important for the City and the City Council to continue having ongoing conversations related to economic trends and adjusting the budget when needed. Councillor Zusy acknowledged the comments made during public comment and agreed that it is important for the City to support restaurants and small businesses to keep Cambridge a vibrant city.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor McGovern who emphasized that the City would have to make difficult budget related decisions in the upcoming years and added how important it is to have community engagement so the residents understand what the future impacts may look like. Councillor McGovern asked if the budget and financial projections have been shared with the School Committee. Claire Spinner shared that she and the City Manager recently attended a School Committee meeting where they presented similar information and were available to respond to questions from the School Committee. Councillor McGovern noted that the appendix explaining Proposition 2 ½ and the tax levy limit is important information for the public in order to have a better understanding of taxes being raised.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Simmons who thanked staff and appreciated the ongoing conversations with the School Committee related to the budget. Councillor Simmons asked if there have been conversations with teachers' unions making them aware of future budget impacts. Councillor Simmons also raised concerns about "free cash" being relied on too much as a funding source. Councillor Simmons highlighted the need to include interpretation services and childcare

for community budget meetings. City Manager Huang shared that unions and school leadership are interested in having collaborative negotiations and pointed out that “free cash” should be used as a one-time resource and not long-term funding. Taha Jennings shared that residents could request language assistance for meetings through outreach materials and added that meetings are held at various times, and families are welcome to attend. Taha Jennings noted that community meetings are a way to improve transparency and engagement from residents.

Co-Chair Nolan pointed out the importance of having fiscal responsibility and being smart with spending and financial flexibility. Co-Chair Nolan emphasized the need to prioritize projects while still being able to provide services to residents. City Manager Huang noted that discussions have already been happening across departments as part of the budget process on achieving ways to be more efficient with the budget. The City Manager agreed that with the current budget, projects will need to require prioritization. Taha Jennings added that departments are reviewing if programs and services can be delivered in a more efficient way, and that the goal is to try and find a balance to meet priorities and goals. Co-Chair Nolan shared that the goal is not to reduce the quality of service, but to find more cost-effective ways to provide those services. Co-Chair Nolan had a clarifying question related to property sale price and value. Gayle Willett provided a brief overview of how assessors analyze and apply market changes to properties.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Co-Chair Al-Zubi who asked about presentation slides related to federal grants and how risk levels were determined. City Manager Huang shared that risk levels can increase, such as from low risk to medium risk, because projections in the future are uncertain. The City Manager added that because some federal programs are involved in litigation it creates more uncertainty related to funding. Co-Chair Al-Zubi asked what plans were in place if federal funding was reduced or eliminated completely and if “free cash” or stabilization funding would be available to fund programs. City Manager Huang shared that free cash could help to address emergency situations, but many of the federal programs would be difficult for a municipality to completely fund. The City Manager added that if federal funding cuts were to happen the City would work closely with the City Council and the state to respond to impacts it funding loss would have on residents.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor McGovern who shared that free cash should not be used as a permanent funding option for programs. Councillor McGovern asked if free cash would be replenished at the same rate in the future while considering the economic changes. Claire Spinner provided a brief overview of how free cash is accumulated, noting that some years it is used to help support budget needs. Claire Spinner pointed out that there has been a small decrease in free cash in recent years related to the excess levy capacity and economic changes. Claire Spinner added that some free cash has recently been transferred to the federal stabilization fund to prepare for potential federal funding impacts.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Zusy who asked for clarification on the new growth factor that was in the presentation and where the revenue increase would come from. Claire Spinner explained that slide was a hypothetical situation based on real numbers and provided an overview of how Proposition 2 ½ and the tax levy grow. Councillor Zusy provided suggestions on how the City may be able to create additional revenue, such as increasing parking permit fees, or providing tax relief for some residents based off income and property. Gayle Willett explained

that property tax exemptions fall under state law and property owners cannot be taxed at different rates.

Co-Chair Nolan offered closing remarks and highlighted the importance of understanding property tax revenues and the tax levy process, pointing out that property taxes contribute to a good amount of the City's revenue, which is why it is important when discussing the operating budget.

**Co-Chair Nolan recognized Co-Chair Al-Zubi who made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Interim City Clerk Crane called the roll.**

Councillor Al-Zubi – Yes

Vice Mayor Azeem – Yes

Councillor Flaherty – Absent

Councillor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Nolan – Yes

Councillor Simmons – Absent

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Zusy – Yes

Mayor Siddiqui – Yes

**Yes – 7, No – 0, Absent -2. Motion passed.**

**The Finance Committee adjourned at approximately 4:50p.m.**

**Clerk's Note:** The City of Cambridge/22 City View records every City Council meeting and every City Council Committee meeting. The video for this meeting can be viewed at:

<https://cambridgema.v3.swagit.com/videos/373903>