

**MINUTES OF THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, RULES,
AND CLAIMS COMMITTEE
Thursday, January 29, 2026**

**GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS,
RULES, AND CLAIMS
COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler, Chair
Vice Mayor Azeem
Councillor McGovern
Councillor Nolan
Councillor Simmons

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Government Operations, Rules, and Claims Committee was held on Thursday, January 29, 2026. The meeting was Called to Order at 10:30 a.m. by the Chair, Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler. Pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2025 adopted by Massachusetts General Court and approved by the Governor, the City is authorized to use remote participation. This public meeting was hybrid, allowing participation in person, in the Sullivan Chamber, 2nd Floor, City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA and by remote participation via Zoom.

At the request of the Chair, Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor Azeem – Present/Remote
Councillor McGovern – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
Councillor Nolan – Absent
Councillor Simmons – Absent*
Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Present – 3, Absent – 2. Quorum established.

*Councillor Simmons was present in the Sullivan Chamber at 10:36a.m.

The Chair, Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to discuss City Council Rules for the 2026-2027 term. Present at the meeting was City Manager, Yi-An Huang, City Solicitor, Megan Bayer, and Deputy City Solicitor, Elliott Veloso. Also present were Councillor Zusy and Mayor Siddiqui.

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler opened Public Comment.

John Hawkinson urged the City Council not to weaken public comment right after the new Charter takes effect and offered suggestions for running more efficient business meetings.

Heather Hoffman, 213 Hurley Street, Cambridge, MA, spoke in strong opposition of the proposed changes towards public comment.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Megan Bayer who reviewed the Law Department's proposed revisions to the City Council Rules (Attachment A). Megan Bayer and Elliott Velloso responded to clarifying questions brought forward by Councillor Simmons and Councillor McGovern related to Councillors exercising their Charter Right and what type of remarks are allowed and not allowed from speakers during public comment. Megan Bayer shared she would revisit the public comment language to ensure the City is in compliance with a recent Supreme Court decision.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler opened the floor for Committee discussion related to the proposed Rule changes that were submitted by Councillors. The proposed changes were provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler explained that discussion would follow in order of how the proposed changes were listed. The Chair shared that the first topic of review and discussion would be holding the business meeting for regular City Council meetings and public comment in two separate meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons who spoke in support of dividing the meeting to two separate meetings. Councillor Simmons pointed out that when meeting discussions get pushed back to later in the evening due to long public comment, Council discussions may not be as efficient due to staff and Councillors being tired, and she raised concerns about City staff being held late at meetings. Councillor Simmons noted that by having public comment held on a different day, this would allow the public to be more engaged and for business meetings to end at a reasonable time. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared he would like to hear feedback from the City Manager related to possible meeting changes and how that would impact staffing schedules and operations.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who shared he would be in support of trying two separate meetings as a pilot to see if it works well. Councillor McGovern echoed similar staff concerns raised by Councillor Simmons and questioned how this may impact departments. Councillor McGovern shared he would like to also hear from the City Manager and if the City had no objection of having public comment on Monday's and the business meetings on Tuesday's, he would support a pilot run.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who shared she would be open to the idea of two separate meetings but would like to understand more the impact it would have on staff and input from the City Manager. Councillor Zusy offered similar comments as Councillor Simmons related to business discussion beginning late due to long public comment and how that may impact Council discussion. Councillor Zusy pointed out that with having meetings on two days it may limit the time that is available for Committee meetings and would also take more time away from staff. Councillor Zusy offered suggestions based off how other communities run meetings and emphasized the importance of finding a happy – medium, with business meetings and public comment.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Mayor Siddiqui who shared that she would be open to trying two separate meetings and acknowledged the concerns that were raised by Committee members related to late meeting discussions and staff impacts. Mayor Siddiqui questioned whether there would be other ways to shorten Monday nights and still have productive meetings, such as the Council's own roles and participation that could improve efficiency of how the meeting is run. Mayor Siddiqui added that if the meeting were separated, she would not want Tuesday sessions to become lengthy and reiterated the City Council looking at their own structural changes before making decisions.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons who pointed out that public comment would not require the City Manager or many City staff to participate in the public comment session. Councillor Simmons added that City staff also have the option to review the recordings if they wish to listen to public comment and this would allow for more time to prepare for the Tuesday meeting.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared he agreed with what has been said and emphasized the need for staff and City Clerk feedback related to the logistics and type of support that is needed for meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized City Manager Huang who noted the importance of having intentional conversations on the City Council Rules. City Manager Huang shared that he would be open to the idea of having two meetings but pointed out that the City should understand the extent of the change before anything is implemented. City Manager Huang agreed that late meetings do affect staff in many different departments, but also raised concerns about the impact two meetings may also have on staff. City Manager Huang noted the challenges around public comment and the importance of having the full community feeling heard and suggested ways on how public comment could improve, such as better incorporating written comments and adjusting time limits. The City Manager highlighted that having a balanced meaningful meeting will produce better deliberation and equity.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared that he would be open to separating public comment from the business meeting and having a pilot approach to the idea to help evaluate how it works for the City Council, staff, and the public. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler noted that before anything was implemented, further discussion would be needed on logistics.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who asked the City Manager if having two meetings would have a large impact on staff related to operations and department head schedules. City Manager Huang shared he would need to have discussions with department heads before providing a final answer, noting that there would be tradeoffs and impacts if separate meetings for public comment and business meetings were implemented. Councillor McGovern spoke on the impacts and tradeoffs, agreeing that Council efficiency could be part of the solution. Councillor McGovern added that with the City Council interested in holding more Committee meetings, having business meetings during the day on a Tuesday would limit

committee time. Councillor McGovern emphasized that everything should be reviewed before making final decisions.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons who shared her support for trying separate meetings and suggested that the City Council focus more on Committee meetings, roundtables, town halls, and neighborhood meetings to engage with the community.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who shared support for the comments made by the City Manager related to public engagement and the idea of alternative opportunities for residents. Councillor Zusy noted that having the business meeting separate from public comment would make discussions more productive. Councillor Zusy added that a town hall type of meeting would allow for more engagement and interaction with the community and City staff. Councillor Zusy agreed that the City Manager should have further discussion with staff to understand the impact there may be on having two meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the second proposed update related to public comment structure.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Vice Mayor Azeem who shared he wanted to make a brief comment on the previous topic of separating meetings. The Vice Mayor noted that it may be beneficial but would like to hear back from the City Manager after he discusses the idea with staff. Vice Mayor Azeem added that separating meetings could provide more space for public input. The Vice Mayor agreed that Council work may not be as productive as it could be when the meetings run late and having a structural change could improve deliberation. Vice Mayor Azeem emphasized the importance of residents' feelings being heard during public comment, especially on controversial issues, and would be willing to review ways to increase or incentivize participation.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who pointed out that public comment is not the only form of engagement, and that City Councillors receive input through emails, phone calls, and social media. Councillor McGovern offered the suggestion of having representatives of organized group to consolidate public input, rather than many people speaking and using the same talking points. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the proposed public comment changes and clarified information related to time limits. Councillor McGovern shared that he would not be in favor of having a strict time cap on public comment which may produce disadvantages to some people and provided suggestions on ways to improve efficiency, both in Council and Committee meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared that he welcomes proposed structural changes related to public comment and would take that feedback and work with the Law Department to create language.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who shared similar concerns about extending public comment at Committee meetings because it may limit the Committee to have a productive discussion with staff. Councillor Zusy added that public comments are important and

that written communication is an available tool for residents to provide feedback. Councillor Zusy stressed the importance of finding a good balance between public participation and sufficient time for deliberation.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the next proposal which was updating the public comment sign-up cutoff time to coincide with the start of public comment.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who questioned how significant an issue it is of individuals signing up to speak after the meeting begins. Councillor McGovern added that it may be important to maintain flexibility for members who arrive late at the meeting and wish to speak. Clerk of Committees Erwin explained how the impact varies depending on the topic. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler noted that this rule change would help with predictability on how long public comment will last, and if additional speakers are signing up after the meeting begins, the meeting could extend significantly.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the next proposal which was setting a time limit per Councillor on a given agenda item or a number of questions limit for meeting efficiency. The Chair noted that limiting the number of questions per Councillor is current practice, and adding a time limit would be a new addition that would need to be planned out with staff.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who spoke in support of a two-question limit. Councillor McGovern added that it is important for the Councillors to work internally to decide what items should be pulled for discussion, and not pulling items to receive minor information or asking questions that could be discussed offline, noting it would help create a more efficient meeting.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons who spoke in support of the two-question limit and having a time limit per Councillor. Councillor Simmons added that by having a time limit, it would help with fairness and efficiency. Councillor Simmons pointed out that an updated training course on Robert's Rules would also help. The Chair noted that training is being planned.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who shared support for a time limit per agenda item idea and suggested that City Councillors self-monitor their own speaking time.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the next proposal which would allow written public comment to be added to the agenda until Monday and asked the City Clerk's Office whether there are logistical constraints or internal cutoff times that would prevent this.

The Chair introduced the proposal to allow written public comment to be added to the agenda until Monday and asked the Clerk's Office whether there are logistical constraints or internal cutoff times that would prevent adding materials close to a meeting. Interim City Clerk Crane explained that each time new material is added to the agenda, the entire agenda packet must be regenerated, which can take time. Clerk of Committees Erwin added that with the new legislative

system, there may be an option that allows members of the public to submit comments directly to the agenda, noting that this feature is currently on pause during the system rollout. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler acknowledged the logistics involved.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the next two proposed items, whether to include a formal land acknowledgement at the start of the meetings, recognizing the Indigenous people whose land the meeting takes place on and whether to continue the practice of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at City Council meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Vice Mayor Azeem who shared that he was fine with keeping the current practice and is more interested in supporting changes if they impact the Council's ability to conduct business and improve meeting function.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons who shared she had mixed feelings regarding land acknowledgement and emphasized the importance of being thoughtful and intentional towards the history of Indigenous communities and not to be perceived as tokenism. Councillor Simmons spoke in support of continuing reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who shared he would like to understand more about the intent on the proposed land acknowledgment and agreed it should be thoughtful and intentional. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler noted that Mayor Siddiqui was no longer on the Zoom and she may be able to follow up with more context.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared similar concerns about tokenism in general, adding that similar questions could be raised regarding the Pledge of Allegiance. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler noted he would continue to support the Pledge of Allegiance in the beginning of meetings, adding that actions can speak louder than ceremonial words.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the next three proposals which were updating the number of roundtables per term, in-person attendance at Regular City Council meetings, and notifying the Chair in advance if you will be absent from Council or Committee meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern and Councillor Simmons who supported having a minimum number of Roundtables established to reflect in the Rules and having flexibility on when Roundtables are scheduled during the week. Both Councillor McGovern and Councillor Simmons noted the importance of having joint Roundtable meetings with the School Committee.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Simmons, Councillor McGovern, Councillor Zusy, and Vice Mayor Azeem who shared support for Councillors being in person at City Council meetings. Councillor Simmons added that if a member is remote, their camera should be on for transparency. Interim City Clerk Crane pointed out that when Councillors are remote it is important to have cameras on so the Clerk can confirm if there is a quorum with remote and in-person members. Councillor McGovern emphasized that Councillors have a responsibility to be

physically present when able and suggested this could be a formal rule or best practice. Councillor Zusy shared that engagement and stated that discussions are stronger when members are in person, including Committee meetings. Vice Mayor Azeem agreed with the expectation to be in person on Monday's, but having all members in person for Committee meetings could create quorum challenges and suggested that more thoughtfulness goes into scheduling committee meetings.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized City Manager Huang who suggested trying a block scheduling for Committee meetings which would allow time windows for meetings to help improve attendance and scheduling efficiency. Councillor Simmons shared support for this suggestion. Councillor McGovern shared concerns and noted the importance of having flexibility for staff and suggested the Chair poll members for scheduling purposes. City Solicitor Bayer added that polling members for scheduling purposes would not violate the Open Meeting Law.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who shared support for members to notify the Chair if they are going to be absent from a meeting to help ensure a quorum.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the practice of making announcements at the end of the meeting and moving them to the beginning of the meeting before public comment. Councillor Simmons spoke in support of this change, noting that more members of the public are listening during the beginning of the meeting versus late at night.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed the final proposal from Councillor Zusy which was limiting public comment to Cambridge residents.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor Zusy who explained this was being proposed to reduce volume, noting it could exclude nonresident experts and prioritizing residents. Councillor Simmons questioned if the City could legally restrict public comment to residents only. Megan Bayer shared that the Law Department would investigate further and follow up with an opinion. Councillor McGovern shared concerns, noting that nonresidents who work in Cambridge or own a business can be impacted by policies and have an interest in agenda items. Councillor McGovern suggested reviewing data to see how many nonresidents are speaking during public comment. Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler shared support for reviewing data.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler reviewed what the next steps would be, sharing that he would be working with staff and the Law Department on draft language based on the discussion. The Chair shared that the language could go before the Council or be discussed in Committee at a future meeting.

Chair Sobrinho-Wheeler recognized Councillor McGovern who made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor Azeem – Yes

Councillor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Nolan – Absent
Councillor Simmons – Absent
Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes
Yes – 3, No – 0, Absent – 2. Motion passed.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 12:30p.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/373578>