

**MINUTES OF THE CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL
FINANCE COMMITTEE
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 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 Wednesday, February 25, 2026. The meeting was Called to Order at 2:00 p.m. by the Co-Chair, Councillor Nolan. 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, 2nd Floor, City Hall, 795 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA and by remote participation via Zoom.

At the request of the Chair, Interim City Clerk Crane called the roll.

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

Present – 6, Absent – 3. Quorum established.

*Councillor Simmons was present and remote at 2:34p.m.

*Councillor Flaherty was present and remote at 2:35p.m.

Co-Chair Nolan offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to receive a status update on Federal Grants (including ARPA) and the Federal Grant Stabilization Fund, as well as a discussion on establishing future Budget Priorities. Present at the meeting was City Manager, Yi-An Huang, Deputy City Manager, Kathy Watkins, Assistant City Manager for Fiscal Affairs, Claire Spinner, Budget Director, Taha Jennings, and Director of Administration and Operations, Matt Nelson.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Claire Spinner and Matt Nelson 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 recognized Councillor Zusy who had clarifying questions related to the \$88.1 million funding. Matt Nelson responded by providing a more detailed overview of the last ARPA slide, slide 10, to further explain ARPA funding. Claire Spinner explained that as ARPA funding ends, the City faces an “ARPA cliff,” where programs funded during the pandemic could stop. To avoid service cuts, the City added funding in the FY26 budget to continue key programs, including afterschool services.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Mayor Siddiqui, who expressed strong support for how ARPA funds were allocated based on City Council priorities. She noted the positive feedback received on programs funded, including equitable bike access. Mayor Siddiqui spoke in support of continuing these efforts and exploring additional priority areas in the future.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Co-Chair Al-Zubi who asked for further clarification regarding the ARPA funding Councillor Zusy had previously questioned. Matt Nelson responded and shared that remaining ARPA funds that are shown are already allocated to existing programs, but have not been spent yet, adding that the funding must be used for what it was originally allocated for and cannot be reallocated to different programs. Co-Chair Nolan shared that by September 30, 2026 all funding will need to be spent.

Co-Chair Nolan opened Public Comment.

Robert Winters, Cambridge, MA, spoke in support of being cautious with the budget and offered suggestions on how to move forward with projects such as municipal broadband and RiseUp.

Co-Chair Nolan provided an overview related to the next part of the discussion, Budget Priorities. Co-Chair Nolan shared that she and Co-Chair Al-Zubi submitted a memo to the Finance Committee related to the budget, which was included in the Agenda Packet. Co-Chair Al-Zubi added that the discussion is a starting point to help the City Council and City staff to work collaboratively to identify priorities.

Co-Chair Nolan read from the following statement (not verbatim) related to Council priorities:

So before you all you have a memo from the Finance co-chairs that we reviewed with City staff and the Mayor. It outlines a process by which we try to navigate a prioritization effort and make significant progress on a few council priorities this term. I hope you have all had a chance to review it - but I want to take a quick look at the accompanying slides because they are a visual representation of much of the memo.

Notes on slides :

- Two different charts here - both from the budget book that outline spending priorities and what we are currently investing in.
- Pie chart (FY26 operating budget by service types)
 - Out of a \$992mil operating budget:
 - Note of course that the plurality of our budget goes towards education

- The second chart is a consolidated spending chart categorized by council priority - this chart includes operating and capital budget contributions, so it's not a direct dollar to dollar comparison, but when someone is curious about what things are prioritized in our budget, this is one way to look at it.
- The next three slides are a visual representation of a process we are trying to outline today for how we get to a place where we can make significant progress on 2-3 items this term.
- The bottom line we are trying to make here is that all of our spending and future priorities should be in the context of what we are already doing. We can and should build on the great success we've had in implementing great social services. We can no doubt make improvements in many different areas over the next few years, but in order to best prioritize staff time, we will need to spend time identifying a few (2-3) goals that we should push towards for this council term that we can work with city staff on to implement in future budget cycles (FY28 and beyond). This conversation is separate from our budget this year (FY27), but we need to be thinking long term in order to best and most effectively accomplish these goals within a limited budget capacity.

The goal for today is for the Council to discuss the priorities candidly and in dialogue w/ the City Manager and finance staff in order to prioritize, combine, and roughly work out some of these priorities.

I then want all of your input on a process for prioritization. Our suggestion:

- (Today) We speak candidly today and try to combine/analyze/discuss
- (Next week) Then we circulate a non-binding survey to inform the conversation
- (Late March) Finance chairs and the Mayor will consider the conversations here in committee and the non-binding survey results and come back to this committee with a draft projected path - which we can then decide to move forward with, as a whole body. This will provide a rubric for a series of committee meetings/check-ins/or working groups that will help us move forward those 2-3 priorities in a streamlined way over the next two years.

Again, as we mentioned in the memo - importantly, narrowing our focus is not meant to exclude, diminish, or eliminate other goals, all of which will continue to be part of conversations between City staff, City Council, and community members. Rather, it reflects the practical need to concentrate staff capacity and financial planning. It's not to eliminate the possibility of other items moving forward over time, but to prioritize a select few and to institute a process by which we ensure that this Council works with City staff over the course of the next term to make demonstrable progress on 2-3 priorities. Because none of us want to wake up at the end of this term and say that we couldn't

The message we are trying to make clear is that we all have priorities, but the only way we can guarantee that a few of them end up scoped and progressed is to prioritize a select few. Not to say that others of these items won't be progressed through other internal processes or committee discussions or private partnerships, but to guarantee that 2-3 will have a clear and collaborative process forward. We think (hope) that by reframing that we can get better buy-in from the entire council.

And also want to note – we keep using the “2-3” number, so I think it should be stated probably that it depends on the size and scope of which 2 or 3 priorities the council chooses whether it’s actually 2 or 3 items. I think dialogue w/ City staff will need to inform that.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who asked when the non-binding survey results become binding. City Manager Huang responded by explaining the process is still being worked on and that different factors will help with decisions, such as project scope and City Council consensus. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler emphasized the need for a more binding decision-making process and asked how often prioritization would occur. City Manager Huang shared that the idea is that the process would occur over multiple years, with some projects beginning sooner depending on the timing and conversations with the City Council. City Manager Huang added that it is unclear now if this is something that would be done on an annual basis and budget constraints and priorities would also need to factor into the timeline. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler shared his support for the idea but stressed that there needs to be a clear timeline and process to reach goals and have meaningful outcomes.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Mayor Siddiqui who asked for more information on how much room would be available within the budget to help the City Council make prioritization decisions. Claire Spinner pointed out that there is limited financial flexibility because of the current economic restraints and added that decisions should be made based on goals rather than starting with a specific amount of money. City Manager Huang added that even though there is limited funding that may be available, the exact number of what is unknown at this time, but the City would have a better understanding once City Council priorities are decided on. Mayor Siddiqui shared concerns about the City Council having an unclear understanding of what the budget would like to look for priorities and stressed that there needs to be a clearer definition on funding and priorities moving forward.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor McGovern who echoed the same concerns related to the unclear budget flexibility related to priorities. Councillor McGovern noted that it would be beneficial to have more guidance on what funding is available and what potential trade-offs may look like. Councillor McGovern noted that there are many strong priority ideas and emphasized how important it will be for the City Council to prioritize carefully and not to limit current services, especially services that support vulnerable residents. Councillor McGovern also highlighted the need to understand where funding for new priorities would come from, including the potential for tax increases or service reductions, and stressed the importance of balancing new initiatives while continuing to support current services.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Zusy who emphasized the need for having clearer funding estimates to help the City Council make prioritization decisions and suggested having targeted investments, such as funding for a community land trust. Councillor Zusy shared concerns about federal funding continuing to decline and highlighted how important it is to invest in infrastructure, supporting nonprofits, and maintaining existing services. Councillor Zusy shared that three of her priorities include workforce housing, transportation planning, and exploring partnerships and alternative funding sources.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Flaherty who highlighted the importance of practicing careful financial decision making while considering and discussing new priorities. Councillor Flaherty added that it is also important to review spending decisions to be mindful of the budget constraints.

Co-Chair Nolan noted that the list of priorities that was provided in the memo reflects ideas that have been discussed over the last several years, but it will be important to discuss which items to move forward with as a priority, rather than supporting all the items. Co-Chair Nolan offered comments related to the current budget constraints and how important it will be to create long-term timelines for implementing the different initiatives. Co-Chair Nolan pointed out that funding new priorities would require having trade-offs, such as taxes or reallocating existing funding resources. Co-Chair Nolan emphasized the need for more City Council involvement with the budget to move forward with a collaborative decision-making process with City staff.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Simmons who shared concerns about senior citizen services, such as meal programs, not being included in the priorities and highlighted how important it is to continue to support seniors. Councillor Simmons suggested that City Councillors added that there should be more community outreach so seniors, and residents, have a better understanding of future budget decisions. Councillor Simmons suggested that City Councillors identify potential funding resources when discussing and proposing new initiatives instead of relying on unclear funding from the City. Co-Chair Nolan acknowledged the comments made by Councillor Simmons and shared that this would be the time to identify any missing priorities. Co-Chair Nolan added that moving forward it will be important to identify how to save or reallocate resources as part of the prioritization process.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor McGovern who highlighted the importance of having guidance from City staff when it is time to evaluate programs, pointing out that the City Council may not have all the information that is needed to assess how effective a program is. Councillor McGovern shared concerns about making budget cuts within programs without understanding how it will impact the residents who rely on those services. Councillor McGovern added that moving forward it will be important for the City Council to have more information related to the budget to help work through the prioritization decision-making process.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized City Manager Huang who shared the City staff and departments will help lead the reviewing of programs and added that efforts towards managing capital spending are already happening to better align with the overall budget. The City Manager added that even though staff will help determine what programs are efficient and how to fund priorities, decisions will also depend on goals and feasibility.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Simmons who requested additional information related to senior meal programs and if they would continue to be funded, emphasizing how important it is to continue to support seniors, especially those with food insecurities. City Manager Huang shared that the City is committed to serving seniors, but funding decisions are still being reviewed due to changes with nonprofit partners. Councillor Simmons shared concerns about losing partnerships and urged the City to continue finding ways to fund programs seniors rely on.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor McGovern who shared concerns about funding cuts and provided suggestions on how to prepare for future needs of existing programs rather than starting new programs. Councillor McGovern recommended combining initiatives, such as the Albany Street Shelter projects, to help improve planning and financial feasibility.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Councillor Zusy who shared similar concerns related to senior services as Councillor Simmons and suggested reviewing data to understand how many seniors that are using services are Cambridge residents. Councillor Zusy acknowledged how difficult it is to make decisions and reassess programs, but noted cuts may be necessary across all departments to manage programs and resources.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Co-Chair Al-Zubi who emphasized the need to have additional meetings to continue the discussion and review survey results, timelines, and existing programs. Co-Chair Al-Zubi added that having feedback from the community is important during the decision-making process.

Co-Chair Nolan recognized Mayor Siddiqui who highlighted the importance of continuing to support vulnerable residents both short term and long term. Mayor Siddiqui added that having partnerships to help fund initiatives is important to support community needs.

Co-Chair Nolan provided additional suggestions for priorities, such as long-term planning for City owned property, noting how long-term efforts are part of the broader financial planning discussions. Co-Chair Nolan reviewed what the next steps are moving forward, such as reviewing results from the non-binding survey and scheduling additional meetings to continue priority discussions.

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

Councillor Al-Zubi – Yes

Vice Mayor Azeem – Absent

Councillor Flaherty – Yes

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 3:57p.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/376345>