



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & UNIVERSITY RELATIONS COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETINGS

~ MINUTES ~

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

3:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

The Economic Development and University Relations Committee will hold a public hearing with the City Solicitor and the Community Development Department, Economic Opportunity Division, to discuss concerns with vacant store fronts and commercial properties in Cambridge, and prior efforts and possible options such as new policies, taxes, and/or fines to reduce the number of vacant store fronts and commercial properties in Cambridge.

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Marc C. McGovern	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sumbul Siddiqui	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Paul F. Toner	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ayesha M. Wilson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3:03 PM

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Economic Development and University Relations Committee was held on Tuesday, March 11, 2025. The meeting was Called to Order at 3:00 p.m. by the Chair, Councillor Toner. Pursuant to Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023 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 McGovern – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Councillor Siddiqui – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Councillor Toner – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Councillor Wilson – Absent*

Present – 4, Absent – 1. Quorum established.

***Councillor Wilson was recorded as present and in the Sullivan Chamber at 3:03p.m.**

The Chair, Councillor Toner offered opening remarks and goals for the meeting. Chair Toner noted that the Call of the meeting was to hold a public hearing with the City Solicitor and the Community Development Department, Economic Opportunity Division, to discuss concerns with vacant store fronts and commercial properties in Cambridge, and prior efforts and possible options such as new policies, taxes, and/or fines to reduce the number of vacant store fronts and commercial properties in Cambridge. Present at the meeting were City Solicitor, Megan Bayer, Director of Economic Opportunity and Development, Pardis Saffari, Senior Economic Development Manager, Allyson Allen, Interim Assistant City Manager for the Community Development Department (CDD), Melissa Peters, and Assistant City Manager for Finance, Claire Spinner. Panelists that were present at the meeting were Michael Monestime, Executive Director for the Central Square Business Association, Jason Alves, Executive Director for the East Cambridge Business Association, and Denise Jillson, Executive Director for the Harvard Square Business Association. Councillor Nolan was present and remote via Zoom.

The Chair, Councillor Toner opened Public Comment.

Erin Muirhead McCarty, 119 Windsor Street, Cambridge, MA, Community Art Center, offered comments on the importance of art in the community and shared what the Community Art Center offers.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Pardis Saffari and Megan Bayer who gave a presentation titled “Vacant Storefront Discussion”, which was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet. The presentation included information on current vacancies and City efforts, and previous Policy discussions. City staff were available to respond to clarifying questions brought forward by Committee members during the presentation.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who had clarifying questions around enforcement and how often the fees are paid or unpaid. Megan Bayer explained that the City must follow State law and would be able to impose a \$300 a day fine by ticket for each violation. Megan Bayer added that the City also has other codes and ordinances that could also be used towards vacant store fronts, such as sidewalk snow removal. Megan Bayer noted that those who chose not to be in compliance with the fee would have to go to Cambridge District Court for their violation.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Nolan who had clarification on what the City can do legally for vacant store fronts, noting that the City cannot force a property owner to lease their property. Megan Bayer affirmed that the City cannot force someone to lease, but can act when there is concern for public health and safety. Megan Bayer added that what the City is trying to accomplish is to make the business districts look more attractive by adding artwork to the storefront and create requirements for owners to register their vacant properties. Councillor Nolan noted that there was a previous Policy Order asking the Law Department to investigate an easier way to collect fines and asked if that would be relevant to this discussion. Megan Bayer shared that the Law Department is looking into Chapter 40U of MGL, but the violations in the Vacant Storefront Ordinance would not fall under it.

The Chair, Councillor Toner asked Megan Bayer to clarify what authority the City has as it relates to vacant properties and if the City can require property owners to show that they have been trying to rent their vacant space. Megan Bayer explained that the City cannot fine a property owner just on the basis that they have not rented their property, and their space is vacant. Megan Bayer shared that she can look further into what the City’s authority is as it relates to requiring the providing of information. Councillor Toner asked if it would be possible for the Council to file a Home Rule Petition to authorize the City to fine a property owner who has shown no efforts that they have tried to rent their vacant space. Megan Bayer indicated that the State Legislature would probably not approve that.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who noted that he had filed an Ordinance related to vacant storefronts in the past related to upkeep, vacancy, and fines. The Vice Mayor pointed out that asking property owners to add artwork and posters into their windows is not a hard ask. The Vice Mayor added how vacant properties impact different communities in Cambridge and it is important for the City to think creatively on how to address these issues. The Vice Mayor asked if the City would be able to fine property owners based on a percentage of the property value. Megan Bayer explained how an Ordinance would have to be rational, and the City may not be able to fine based on property value.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Siddiqui who shared that there have been similar discussions on this topic in the past and shared how Arlington has a similar program on what is being proposed today which has been successful. Councillor Siddiqui shared that she would be supportive of having a registry for vacant storefronts and finding a solution to work with property owners to create a better-looking space in the business communities.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who asked how often the City conducts assessments for commercial properties. Claire Spinner shared that all commercial properties are updated on an annual basis and provided an overview of the tax collection process.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Wilson who asked if municipal buildings would be included in the proposed Ordinance. Pardis Safari pointed out that the decision would have to be made by the City

Council and what they would like the language to be. Megan Bayer added that the City Council can make the decision on how they would want to define vacant storefront and what buildings would be exempt.

The Chair, Councillor Toner shared that he would like to hear from the Business Associations.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Denise Jillson who shared that she would not be in favor of this proposed policy. Denise Jillson shared her experience with property owners who make efforts to rent out their space and noted that there are some spaces in Harvard Square that are limited to what type of business an owner can rent to. Denise Jillson shared that different property owners in Harvard Square have used their vacant spaces for a pop-up store or have displayed artwork. Denise Jillson noted the importance of being transparent and looking at zoning that requires new development to have first floor retail, which would be adding more storefronts in the City.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Michael Monestime who shared that he agreed with comments made by Denise Jillson and provided examples of how the Pandemic negatively affected ground floor retail and restaurants. Michael Monestime added that he would not support the proposed policy as it is presented today, pointing out that there are a lot of factors that keep storefronts vacant, and urged the City to be creative about motivating commercial space use. Michael Monestime added that he believes the fees should not be equally imposed and that municipal properties should be included.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Jason Alves who shared concerns about what is being proposed and stressed that smaller property owners should not be categorized with large property owners as it relates to fees. Jason Alves noted how zoning changes also affect reasons why properties stay vacant.

The Chair, Councillor Toner shared that with this policy they are asking property owners to prevent the property from looking abandoned, and by doing so the City is asking for property owners to add artwork or brown paper to their windows and information on how to lease the property, as well as registering their vacant property. Jason Alves shared that it would not be a burden to have your property look nice, but there are expenses associated with that. Michael Monestime agreed and shared he would not be in favor of the \$300 fine. Pardis Saffari added that property owners who put leasing signs up are usually willing to engage with the City to see what support can be offered and shared how the City collects storefront data. Michael Monestime asked if grants that help support businesses will be cut by the Federal Government. Pardis Saffari shared that there has been discussion with City leaders about what can be done if there are cuts.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who pointed out that several issues have been raised that relate to property owners and their vacancies. The Vice Mayor shared that he would support a policy such as the language that was presented today and would work through the details. The Vice Mayor shared he appreciated the property owners who cooperate and business leaders who help support businesses in their districts. The Vice Mayor added that the City is willing to help and support businesses and there should be further conversations on this topic.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Councillor Wilson who shared that she appreciated the conversations and highlighted how important it is to have a thriving business community. Councillor Wilson provided suggestions on what the next steps could look like and asked if a fee was imposed, would it have to be the same for all or could it be on a sliding scale. Megan Bayer provided a brief overview of how the fees would have to be enforced with the registration fee and within the Ordinance. Councillor Wilson added how important it is for safety and sanitary issues should be addressed around the vacant properties, so they do not cause harm to the community. Chair Toner indicated that the goal of the City is not to overly penalize property owners and offered suggestions on how the City can reach out to owners.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who shared that he would be fine with asking the Law Department and the City to come back to the Committee with language, so it is easier to discuss changes. Pardis Saffari advised that it would be helpful to have clarity on the language.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized a member of the audience for Public Comment.

MJ Pullins, 2 Ellery Street shared their experiences as a tenant leasing a space to run their business and the challenges that come with owning a small business.

The Chair, Councillor Toner made a motion to close Public Comment.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Toner – Yes

Councillor Wilson – Yes

Yes – 5. Motion passed.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who made a motion that the Economic Development and University Relations Committee recommend to the full City Council that the City Manager is requested to direct the appropriate City Departments to draft language to create an ordinance to insure that vacant store fronts and commercial properties keep their properties in safe and clean conditions, including but not limited to placing clean paper or artwork in the windows, placing leasing contact information if vacant, and registering the vacant property with the City, and report back to the Economic Development and University Relations Committee before the summer recess.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Toner – Yes

Councillor Wilson – Yes

Yes – 5. Motion passed.

The Chair, Councillor Toner recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Toner – Yes

Councillor Wilson – Yes

Yes – 5. Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 4:53p.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.granicus.com/player/clip/973?view_id=1&redirect=true

A communication was received from Pardis Saffari, Director of Economic Opportunity and Development, transmitting a presentation related to vacant storefronts.