



# HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

## COMMITTEE MEETING

~ MINUTES ~

Monday, April 14, 2025

2:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

**The Health and Environment Committee will hold a public hearing to review and discuss regulations to encourage the use of solar energy systems and protect solar access for Registered Solar Energy Systems. POR 2025 #7.**

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Burhan Azeem	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Patricia Nolan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sumbul Siddiqui	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ayesha M. Wilson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council's Health and Environment Committee was held on Monday, April 14, 2025. The meeting was Called to Order at 2:00 p.m. by the Chair, Councillor Nolan. 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.**

Councillor Azeem – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Councillor Nolan – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Councillor Siddiqui – Present/Remote\*

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber

Councillor Wilson – Absent

**Present – 4, Absent -1. Quorum established.**

\*Councillor Siddiqui went from remote participation to in person at 2:32p.m.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan noted that the Call of the meeting was to review and discuss regulations to encourage the use of solar energy systems and protect solar access for Registered Solar Energy Systems, Policy Order 2025 #7. Present at the meeting was Acting Assistant City Manager for Community Development, Melissa Peters, Director of Zoning and Development, Jeff Roberts, Deputy Climate Chief, Susanne Rasmussen, Cambridge Energy Alliance Director, Megan Shaw, and City Solicitor, Megan Bayer. Present via Zoom was Chief Climate Officer, Julie Wormser. Also present was Vice Mayor McGovern and Councillor Zusy. Councillor Nolan introduced panelist Liz Byron, Co-Founder of CARE Housing.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan offered opening remarks and read from the following statement (not verbatim).

As the call of the meeting suggests, we are here today to consider ways in which we can protect existing solar energy systems that may be inadvertently impacted due to neighboring development.

Per the policy order, which we passed on April 14 of this year, the Council recognized that increased development height allowed in residential neighborhoods as part of the multifamily zoning petitions may adversely affect residents who have solar panels and have invested in renewable energy. For new buildings, efforts through the adoption of the specialized stretch energy code and the fossil fuel free pilot will ensure that new buildings will be sustained using clean electricity. Additionally, through the green roof requirements, new buildings will have requirements to utilize rooftop areas in a sustainable manner. We are also supporting larger solar energy efforts through community solar efforts, which the Office of Sustainability is working to expand.

Although this may impact only a small number of houses, we still have a responsibility to those residents to understand the concerns they have about losing their access to renewable energy and consider ways to protect them. The city and the state have been encouraging residents to make personal investments in renewable energy as part of our overall sustainability goals, and solar energy systems on residential housing is a part of that. By not relying on the larger grid, users with access to localized renewable energy help take away from demand loads at the grid level, which ensures that we do not need to burn additional fossil fuels to power electrical plants.

So one of the questions we need to ask today is: what can we do to protect existing solar arrays from adverse effects - either through zoning, through regulations, or through other means. And another question is what will the tradeoffs be if we decide that we need to afford solar energy systems additional zoning protections? If we are going to consider bulk plane restrictions or additional setbacks, we need to understand what kind of effect that will have on multifamily housing development. As always, there are competing priorities, so we need to have this conversation to understand the scope.

We should look to other communities around the country who have prioritized renewable energy and how they have navigated that issue - short research points to Ashland, OR, Boulder, CO, Ridgecrest, CA. We'll need to understand how those communities compare to our own in terms of building stock, lot sizes, and commitment to increasing solar energy production.

The goal for this meeting is to review the presentations by both the community advocates as well as City staff, discuss possible approaches, and consider next steps. The importance of this meeting is to understand the lay of the land in order to determine what we can do to protect residents who have made this important commitment to renewable energy production.

With that, I'd like to introduce Liz Byron who will deliver the first presentation before going to public comment.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Liz Byron who gave a presentation titled "Zoning to Protect Buildings with Solar". The presentation was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet.

**The Chair, Councillor Nolan opened public comment.**

Maureen, Franklin Street, Cambridge, MA, spoke in favor of solar panels and shared concerns about the proposed changes for residents who have solar panels.

Simon Williams, 23 Orrin Street, Cambridge, MA, shared support for zoning protections related to solar.

Gordon Moore, 9 Rutland Street, Cambridge, MA, spoke in strong support for solar energy and offered suggestions towards planning.

Patrick Britton, 500 Green Street, Cambridge, MA, shared concerns about zoning changes affecting their purchase of solar panels.

Carol Lynn Alpert, 99 Cushing Street, Cambridge, MA, urged the City to protect rooftops to allow residents to continue forward with solar installations.

Sara Nelson, 17 Rockwell Street, Cambridge, MA, pointed out that the lack of solar protection will prevent homeowners from purchasing solar panels.

Sophie Higgs, 19 Hutchinson Street, Cambridge, MA, asked the City to protect rooftops to allow residents to continue forward with solar installations.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Jeff Roberts who gave a presentation titled "Zoning Protections for Rooftop Solar". The presentation was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Councillor Azeem who offered comments that were in favor of supporting solar investments. Councillor Azeem shared concerns about proposed changes affecting new zoning changes to Multifamily Housing and offered suggestions on how the City could possibly assist current owners of solar panels not through zoning, such as a buyback program. Megan Bayer shared concerns about the suggestion, noting that part of zoning is that changes will affect everyone in different ways, and it could create the issue of having to compensate future people for future zoning impacts. Councillor Azeem stressed the importance of finding a non-zoning solution rather than changing zoning for the entire City if only a portion is impacted.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who asked if there would be the possibility to apply potential protection to buildings based on their unit count. Megan Bayer explained that what impacts a neighbor with solar is the size of the building, not how many units are inside the building.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan pointed out some of the concerns that were raised in public comment, noting that it is important for solar protection and asked if it would be worth conducting a future study relative to dimensional limitations. Jeff Roberts responded by agreeing that a study would be helpful as well as guidance from the Council to understand what the full impact would be, pointing out that as always, a study provides a rough estimation. Councillor Nolan explained that a quick analysis would be helpful to begin with. Julie Wormser added how different areas of the city will be impacted differently which could create some challenges within a study. Julie Wormser noted that staff have been working hard to create a solution to help those with existing solar panels. Councillor Nolan shared how important it is to find a balance between two critically important goals, emission reduction and housing, and shared that it would be a small number of homeowners that are affected as it relates to solar panels. Councillor Nolan asked the City in what direction they are looking to move forward with protection goals. Jeff Roberts explained how CDD can work with the urban design team to evaluate and work through development review related to solar access. Jeff Roberts shared that with working the design team there could be the possibility of revising zoning language and thinking about guidelines that would be recommended. Councillor Nolan suggested looking at design guidelines from other cities and towns across the country.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Councillor Zusy who shared that she had reached out and asked questions to Eversource related to solar. Councillor Zusy read the responses from Eversource to the Committee. Councillor Zusy noted how important it is to encourage more green roofs for new developments. Councillor Zusy asked what the implications would be for protecting solar across the city. Jeff Roberts and Megan Bayer explained zoning rules, noting that a concern that has been raised is that the zoning would have to apply everywhere which could potentially decrease housing development. Councillor Zusy asked if there could be a requirement that developers pay off the balance of a neighbor's panels or pay for the removal of panels if they will no longer serve their function due to no sunlight. Megan Bayer explained that it could be problematic and would investigate it further.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Vice Mayor McGovern who shared that it is an important issue to help those who already have solar power and to think about helping those who will have future solar panels. The Vice Mayor suggested working with developers and that it is also important to receive feedback from developers. Vice Mayor McGovern pointed out that it is a complicated situation and provided suggestions and possible solutions to discuss how it can be approached, noting that it is important conversation to continue to have.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Councillor Siddiqui who shared that she was in agreement with comments made by the Vice Mayor and Chair Nolan. Councillor Siddiqui added that having more data would be helpful in the decision-making process.

The Chair, Councillor Nolan asked City staff if they had enough direction to move forward or if they would need a Policy Order. Melissa Peters shared that the direction the Committee has given is great and she provided a brief overview of what the study may look like. Susanne Rasmussen emphasized the importance of finding the right tools that will allow a broader analysis. Julie Wormser suggested separating the two issues, current homeowners with solar and future solar, when thinking about next steps.

**The Chair, Councillor Nolan recognized Councillor Siddiqui who made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.**

Councillor Azeem – Yes

Councillor Nolan – Yes

Councillor Siddiqui – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Wilson – Absent

**Yes – 4, No – 0, Absent – 1. Motion passed.**

**The Health and Environment Committee adjourned at approximately 3:58p.m.**

**Attachment A** – Communications from the public.

**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/999?view\\_id=1&redirect=true](https://cambridgema.granicus.com/player/clip/999?view_id=1&redirect=true)

**That the City Manager is requested to work with relevant City departments to develop zoning recommendations, pursuant to M.G.L. c.40A §9B, for regulations to encourage the use of solar energy systems and protect solar access for Registered Solar Energy Systems that have been in existence for one year, per Ordinance Ch. 22.60, specifically on structures over 4 stories.**

**A communication was received from Liz Byron, CARE Housing, transmitting a presentation related to zoning and solar energy.**

**A communication was received from Jeff Roberts, Director of Zoning and Development, transmitting a presentation related to solar energy.**