



GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, RULES & CLAIMS COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETING

~ MINUTES ~

Wednesday, May 21, 2025

3:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

The Government Operations, Rules, and Claims Committee will hold a public hearing to discuss whether the City Council can be removed from the process of approving/denying curb cuts, whether abutters should continue to be part of the process of approving/denying curb cuts and if abutters remain part of the process including renters in definition of “abutters,” and to prepare draft Ordinance language.

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Burhan Azeem	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Marc C. McGovern	<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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Catherine Zusy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

A public meeting of the Cambridge City Council’s Government Operations, Rules, and Claims Committee was held on Wednesday, May 21, 2025. The meeting was Called to Order at 3:00 p.m. by the Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern. 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, Deputy City Clerk Crane called the roll.

- Councillor Azeem – Present/Remote
 - Vice Mayor McGovern – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
 - Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
 - Councillor Toner – Absent
 - Councillor Zusy – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
- Present – 4, Absent – 1. Quorum established.**

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to discuss whether the City Council can be removed from the process of approving/denying curb cuts, whether abutters should continue to be part of approving/denying curb cuts and if abutters remain part of the process including renters in definition of “abutters,” and to prepare draft Ordinance language. Present at the meeting was Department of Transportation Commissioner, Brooke McKenna, Department of Public Works Commissioner, Kathy Watkins, and Assistant City Solicitor, Franziskus Lepionka. Also present at the meeting were Councillor Siddiqui, Councillor Nolan, Councillor Wilson, and Mayor Simmons. In advance of the meeting, Councillor Nolan sent a letter to the Committee and Council members with proposed recommendations related to the curb cut process for the Committee to consider (Attachment A).

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Brooke McKenna who gave a presentation titled “Curb Cuts”. The presentation was provided in advance of the meeting and included in the Agenda Packet.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern opened Public Comment.

Regis Shields, 173 Hancock Street, Cambridge, MA, shared frustrations about past curb cut approvals and offered changes to the proposed suggestions.

Patrick Magee, 877 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA, shared reservations about a fully delegated process which was proposed in the presentation.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Councillor Azeem who had questions related to the criteria used to approve curb cuts after the delegation process and if the current criteria would work, or if changes need to be made. Kathy Watkins noted that current criteria were established through zoning, and there were no recommended changes at this time. Councillor Azeem shared support for clear and consistent standards and protocols that are uniformly applied over a case-by-case process. Councillor Azeem shared concerns about neighbors being against each other. Councillor Azeem added that he would be in favor of a process where staff handles both the initial and final decision, and that the City Council could revisit the process if and when standards need to be revised.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler who offered comments that were in favor of the delegated process and asked for clarification on the legal authority on the delegation of curb cut approvals by City staff. Franziskus Lepionka explained that curb cut approvals are usually looked at with a combination of zoning and municipal regulations and added that the City Council has historically approved curb cuts, but delegation to City staff would be allowed if the process is done correctly. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler asked if City Council approval would be required in every case or just certain scenarios. Franziskus Lepionka shared that by delegating curb cut approval to staff through Ordinance or a Policy update, the City Council could also provide language to help guide staff decisions and added that having clear standards would reduce any legal problems, especially if or when a denial occurs. Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler stressed how important it is to streamline this process and offered the suggestion of changing the definition of “abutter” in this process.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Councillor Zusy who asked for clarification on how many parking spaces were required to get a curb cut. Kathy Watkins confirmed that only one is required. Councillor Zusy questioned if curb cut applications have increased in recent years. Kathy Watkins explained that the number of applications has been very consistent, with Inspectional Services looking back to records from 2019. Councillor Zusy shared concerns about previous curb cut locations that were approved, noting that the locations seem problematic. Councillor Zusy provided suggestions for the application process, such as clearer criteria, site visits by the City Council and staff, and more involvement with Neighborhood Associations. Councillor Zusy spoke in favor of hybrid approach.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern shared that he would be in favor of expanding the definition of “abutter” and shared concerns about how curb cut approval or denial has the possibility to be influenced by residents. Vice Mayor McGovern added that it is important for a more consistent and equitable process for decisions with a clear criteria. Kathy Watkins agreed that the criteria within the application need to be very clear so that applications are viewed the same for everyone. The Vice Mayor offered comments related to the involvement of Neighborhood Associations and suggestions on how to reach out to immediate abutters.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Councillor Nolan who agreed that the curb cut process should be guided by clear and objective criteria. Councillor Nolan shared concerns about how granting curb cuts privatizes public property and provides additional value to the residential property. Councillor Nolan provided an overview of the proposed suggestions outlined in the letter she submitted to the Committee. Kathy Watkins responded by asking the Committee for clear guidance on their goals and policies related to this moving forward to create the appropriate curb cut process and language.

The Chair, Vice Mayor McGovern recognized Councillor Siddiqui who agreed with comments made by the Vice Mayor, Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler, and Councillor Nolan. Councillor Siddiqui pointed out that in larger cities, curb cuts are not handled at the Council level. Councillor Siddiqui shared concerns about the City Council’s role and purposes within these decisions, noting that there could be added pressure between involvement and delegation.

The Vice Mayor and Committee members discussed how they would like to move forward with the discussion of curb cuts and the options available. The Vice Mayor added that Councillor Toner did write to the Chair with

his suggestion and opinions related to curb cuts, pointing out that he wants a process that is clearer. Kathy Watkins explained how staff could move forward with language and have a broader conversation on the two proposed options in the Ordinance Committee in the future. Franziskus Lepionka added that looking back at Law Department records, conversations like this have been happening every few years since the 1990's. Franziskus Lepionka shared this process will take time and legislation will need to be figured out, with many factors to consider.

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

Deputy City Clerk Crane called the roll.

Councillor Azeem – Yes

Vice Mayor McGovern – Yes

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Yes

Councillor Toner – Absent

Councillor Zusy – Yes

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

The Government Operations, Rules, and Claims Committee adjourned at approximately 4:37p.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/1035?view_id=1&redirect=true

Attachment A – Letter from Councillor Nolan to the Government Operations, Rules, and Claims Committee

A communication was received from Brooke McKenna, Commissioner of Cambridge Department of Transportation, transmitting a presentation relative to curb cuts.

A communication transmitted from Yi-An Huang, City Manager, relative to Awaiting Report Item Number 24-54 , regarding a review of Curb Cut Policies



CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

Patricia Nolan
City Councillor

May 21, 2025

Re: Proposed Amendments for Curb Cut Process

Dear Colleagues,

As I am not on the Government Operations, Rules & Claims Committee, I wanted to submit my thoughts in writing to the committee for this meeting on curb cut processing in order to help push the conversation forward.

Essentially, curb cuts privatize a public good and public property. They are a transfer of value to property owners. That is why I take our authority to approve curb cuts seriously: it is a transfer of public property to a private owner and can have significant impact on neighborhoods, including reduction of permeable open space and access to on-street parking. Oftentimes, curb cuts are uncontroversial, when they are adjusting the parameters of an existing curb cut, when many residents have driveways, when on-street parking access is not at a premium, and when the amount of on-street parking is not affected. When curb cuts are controversial, it can have a divisive impact on the neighborhood and can negatively impact abutters.

Although a number of departments review curb cuts before they reach the City Council, those department reviews by ISD, the Clerk's Office, the Historical Commission, DPW, and Transportation are technical reviews and those departments are not charged with the impact on the neighborhood. The reason for City Council approval is to include resident input and consider the potential impacts on the neighborhood. No other city department does that. It is our job, which means if we delegate responsibility, which I support, we should include clear criteria that takes into account residents and the neighborhood.

I recommend the following changes to the process:

- Currently, abutters are defined as the properties on each side of the applicant. Interested parties should be defined more broadly. Notice should go to all residents within 500ft that

share a street frontage with the applicant. This definition will better reflect the whole of the impacted neighborhood.

- Currently, abutter approval and disapproval signatures are mailed to the applicant for submission to Inspectional Services. This process has the potential to create a conflict of interest for the applicant, who may not accurately submit disapproval signatures, as has been alleged in a recent curb cut application (APP 2025 #10). The signatures should be submitted directly to Inspectional Services for processing, either by pre-stamped envelope or by online submission within a designated time frame. At that point, Inspectional Services shall determine the percentage of abutters who approve of the curb cut.
- When determining the percentage of abutters who approve of the curb cut, Inspectional Services shall take the number of “approval” signatures and divide it by the whole number of noticed residents, as defined above. A curb cut applicant stands to improve their property value by tens of thousands of dollars by the transfer of the public curb to private property and the addition of a driveway, and so there should be an onus on the applicant to work with neighbors to obtain the requisite number of signatures. ISD may grant a curb cut only if more than 50% of abutters approve of a curb cut. I would recommend a standard of 60% to ensure that the neighborhood is in agreement.
- If, after a certain amount of time, the applicant cannot obtain the requisite number of approval signatures, due to lack of responsiveness, the applicant may appeal to the City Council. The City Council shall then review the curb cut application and consider the impacts on the neighborhood before approving.
- One additional idea to consider: should a curb cut be approved for only one parking space? I am not sure if this idea makes sense, but it should be discussed.

Access to off-street parking and specifically a driveway adds tens of thousands of dollars of value to a property and is a direct transfer of public space to private parties. This can impact a neighborhood in very tangible ways. This kind of tradeoff should require an appropriate level of neighborhood engagement from the applicant who seeks to benefit from a curb cut.

I look forward to discussing with you all this afternoon.

Sincerely,

Patricia Nolan
Cambridge City Councillor